



# Representing teachers' voices: An ethnodrama of Mauritian teachers under times of curriculum reform

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## Abstract

This article emphasises the motivation for a methodological representation choice that captures teachers' voices in a Small Island Developing State context during the introduction of a curriculum reform. The diverse voices of teachers as they inhabit a context that gears towards compliance and managed intimacy demands are explored through the representational choice of an ethnodrama. Narrative inquiry led to an ethnodrama representation that protected the anonymity and confidentiality of participants and simultaneously revealed multiple forms of agencies in entangled spatial and temporal dimensions. The findings foreground teachers' choice of agencies and representations that serve different interests influenced by whom they dialogue with in specific spaces. With a fictionalised future enactment of the ethnodrama at the end, this article closes with teachers negotiating their agency and opening reflections for future research in new normal Covid-19 spaces.

**Keywords:** teacher agency, teacher voice, ethnodrama, methodological representation

Maya: But are all of these policy documents not the same? Why read these bulky documents? Sorry, but if you were working at my school—a school that emphasises work, work, and work—you'd know that it's a waste of time to read these! I have more important things to do! (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021, p. 117)

## Introduction: Teacher agency under scrutiny

Hearing teachers' voices is a recurring interest in recent research literature. This concern to present the worldviews of teachers, to hear their interpretations of their contextual spaces, and delve into their work challenges and opportunities is perhaps a response to the declining status and lack of respect from the general public about the daily trials facing the teaching profession, globally (Jansen & Farmer-Philips, 2021). Researchers have become conscious of their responsibility to present these silenced voices (Biesta et al., 2017; Singh-Pillay & Samuel, 2017). A notable trend within present research is a celebration of teachers' voices with an emphasis on the influence of external ecological forces on their choices and enactment of agency. Furthermore, this research agenda tends to explore an interpretation of teacher agency within the struggle for political voice in macro-systemic environments—either in large democracies within oppressive regimes, or in institutional spaces that cast teachers as servile technicians of other agendas (Pantić, 2015; Ryder et al., 2018; Toom et al., 2015). This research trend, whilst affirming teachers' voices, unfortunately reinforces the caricaturing of teachers as agents of others rather than as autonomous decision-makers (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017; Tao & Gao, 2017; Themane & Thobejane, 2018). Teachers are perhaps unintentionally depicted as struggling s/heroes without internal, individual, agentic capacities.

Additionally, a feature of this “affirmative research” trend is that it tends to ignore whole groups of teachers who are not usually in the foreground of world attention, namely, those in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Small contexts are afforded scant attention in mainstream research. Moreover, the relationship between the smaller contexts and their broader global, larger contexts is not adequately dealt with in teacher development literature. This article redresses that gap and aims to trigger questions about how researchers choose to engage with the representation of their teacher participants' voices. Rather than foreground propositional content about how teachers activate their agency (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021), this article highlights how researchers choose to represent their findings and accent the voices of the participants from the field. The article focuses on a methodological agenda exploring the role of researchers in the representation of silencing or foregrounding their research participants' voices. Two central questions underpin this exploration:

- Are researchers complicit with the agenda of downgrading teachers' complex presence and operational participation in their worlds?
- Do researchers underplay the complexity of being a professional teacher while constructing their research reports?

The article argues that the representational messaging that accompanies research depictions from the field is as much a part of the broadening of *listening complexly* to the voice of

teachers. How we tell the stories of the teachers (*representation*) is as important as what stories need to be told (*the propositional content*).

The specific milieu within which this reflection is conducted looks at the spaces where teachers of one SIDS context were being drawn into the agenda of implementing a national curriculum reform in which they had limited direct influence. The observations made in this article emanate from a study of teacher agency in Mauritius (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021). As the reform was being introduced, a multiplicity of teacher voices expressed their fear of embracing something new, and their confusion or enthusiasm regarding a changing structure. The purpose of this study was anchored in understanding the phenomenon of teacher agency as interpreted and exercised in varied ways by teachers. An interpretivist paradigm was adopted alongside life history and narrative inquiry in order to prioritise teachers' voices and experiences. The voices and agency of teachers surfacing during data production revealed the complexity of teacher agency within shifting temporal and spatial dimensions. To capture the entangled forms of agency in embedded spaces, an ethnodrama was chosen as mode of representation. Merging the researcher and participant voices in this mode of representation, the ethnodrama captured the nuances of experiences and agency in a SIDS where teachers' voices were consciously or unconsciously stifled in some spaces. The ethnodrama provided an opportunity to reflect on where and how the suppressed voices of teachers became active.

This article will first outline the shifting traditions of SIDS research, noting the specific cultural context of the Mauritian society. The contestable view of managing intimacy within small contexts is explored here. Secondly, the article outlines the motivation for the methodological construction of an ethnodrama to include the diverse, contradictory, and complex voices of teachers in this space. The third section reveals the entangled nature of teacher agency in voice and representation in varied spaces. The argument reinforces teachers as agentially choosing their representation of themselves to serve different interests to varying audiences and for different purposes. The article closes with a fictionalised future enactment of teachers in new evolving circumstances in a Covid-19 pandemic context. This constitutes projections beyond the earlier terms of reference of the original study (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021) but opens reflections about how to conduct research in new normal spaces. Like Maya, one of the emblematic teacher's voices of the ethnodrama depicted in the epigraph to this article, much work has to be done and perhaps the fetish with policy prescriptions is only one force of influence on teachers' agency and action.

## Researching Small Island Developing States

Within traditions of qualitative inquiry, the unique nature of a data production site is considered as having significant influence on the nature of the data yielded. The smallness of the location of Mauritius offered new ways of looking at teacher agency. After analysing the raw data, the complexity of teachers' personal and professional experiences and spaces as entangled within the context of the reform initiatives being introduced was revealed. Challenges arose about the choice of framing to represent the specific research study and its

context. Furthermore, one had to acknowledge that SIDS research trends too, have been undergoing recognisable shifts in research emphases.

SIDS have been theorised as a group of small islands with “similar characteristics” (Crossley, 2016, p. 10) such as the need to improve access to education and the quality of education, or even the need to tackle economic vulnerabilities. SIDS was conceptualised differently across three generations of research traditions (Mariaye, 2016). The first-generation approach to researching SIDS contexts emphasised demographical features of smallness and vulnerabilities because of geographic, environmental, and economic isolation—categorising SIDS as marginalised communities with little to offer the wider world of research. The second generational research tradition further accented deficiencies in relation to larger and advanced social systems, suggesting that research from these contexts was confined to imitating traditions developed elsewhere. The third, affirmatory generative approach was directed towards the distinctiveness and strengths of small states. These research trends about how to frame the agenda of SIDS research itself may influence how researchers choose to depict teachers’ conceptions of agency differently. For instance, the emphasis on marginalisation and deficiencies during the first and second generational research may indicate an inferiority position of submissiveness and lack of confidence whereby teachers follow policy unquestioningly. Meanwhile, the emphasis on strengths during the third SIDS generation may trigger questions about policy implementation and the need to prioritise the uniqueness of the nation during policy-making and implementation.

This article aims to contribute to research within the third generation SIDS research agenda that highlights the need to explore the nuances and complexity of “lived experiences of SIDS institutions, individual and nations, and their collaborating partners” (Mariaye, 2016, p. 15). Furthermore, the agenda is influenced by a need to hear the silenced voice in complex and contradictory ways and offer interpretations of creative and imaginative research approaches that span beyond SIDS contexts. The site of data production was Mauritius, a SIDS with a 1.3 million population and a relatively rapidly changing contextual educational policy landscape that is responsive to shifts in local and global discourses about curriculum reform and the professional development of teachers to sustain these transformation agendas. Mauritius becomes a researchable laboratory where smallness can enable bigger states to better understand macro issues as teachers negotiate their roles and agency within a layered spatial and temporal space with nationalistic agendas, colonial heritage, global recognition, and evolving cultural trends such as digitalisation.

### **The Mauritian sociocultural context: Managed intimacy and portrayal of technicians of compliance**

This article draws from a broader study that reviewed how teachers came to assert their conceptions of agency in contexts that were largely expecting teachers to be compliant public servants of state agendas (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021). Indeed, what was revealed during the data production was the impact of relational and entangled spaces on teacher-participants’ representation of their voices in public and private spaces. For instance, teacher-participants demonstrated a constant need to reinforce compliance to national state agendas. However, at

other times, these same teachers showed manifestations of rebelliousness. Bray (2020) offered a possible explanation: that there is a deeply rooted Mauritian cultural practice that does not question officialised systems. Drawing on Lowenthal's concept of *managed intimacy*, he commented:

Small state inhabitants learn to get along . . . with folk they would know in myriad contexts over their whole lives. To enable the social mechanism to function without undue stress, they minimise and mitigate over conflicts. They become experts at muting hostility deferring their own views and containing disagreement and avoid dispute in the interest of stability and compromise. (Lowenthal, 1987, as quoted in Bray, 1991, p. 512)

Regarding this politeness culture, Samuel and Mariaye (2016) observed from their studies of shifting historical trends in teacher education in Mauritius, that managed intimacy contributes to a stifling of the voices of teacher-participants who suppress their views and agency in public spaces. Researching teacher voice in such SIDS contexts becomes a problematic endeavour because teacher talk diverges in contradictory and complex ways: altered voices surface in public spaces (such as the public classroom) and in private spaces (such as professional peer reflections in the privacy of staff rooms or with peers during professional workshops). These submerged contextual voices should be read against a common assumption of the general public that Mauritian teachers are seemingly passive. By contrast, teachers in their more private worlds—as depicted by the study's data (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021)—assert a more critical interpretation of their institutions and the wider education schooling system. This raises questions about why teachers choose to present themselves in public spaces in the way they do. It may be argued that, in public spaces, teachers consciously choose to project themselves as victims of a highhanded autocratic regime with limited involvement in national policy-making.

Despite their critique of the official system of education, or overt critique of national examinations-driven school cultures, teachers are nevertheless fully engaged in exercising their roles as implementers of the state's official curriculum. It appears that teachers represent an entanglement of many kinds of agencies, exercising different layers of agentic actions at different points, spaces, and with varied audiences. For example, their verbal resistance to adopting an informational digitalised mode of delivery for the new state curriculum was counteracted by their noted creative practical uses of digital platforms (hardware and software) in their own classrooms.

### Drawing on a theoretical framing to guide methodological representation

Representing this managed intimacy in the varying spaces inhabited by the teacher-participant became a challenging task for the lead researcher (Wedsha Appadoo-Ramsamy) whose initial intention was to tell the stories of the teachers' engagement with curriculum reform in a rapidly changing educational policy environment. Narrative inquiry had been chosen to capture the data from interviews conducted with a range of practising teachers. Drawing on the traditions of life history research to tell the stories of teachers' lives in their

specific contexts (Dhunpath & Samuel, 2009; Samuel, 2015), the study initially aimed to represent the data through biographical narratives, with an omniscient third-person narrator telling their personal stories (Creswell, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2012). But this mode of representation did not appear to capture the complex intertwining spatial and temporal spaces that gave rise to different types of teacher agency. For instance, it was observed that individual teachers defined themselves, not in isolation, but in relation to other members in their communal environments.

The research representation was guided by the overarching theoretical framework of the study, which challenged the limited conception of teacher agency as a simplistic and permanent feature of the character or trait of the individual teacher. Most research on teacher agency to date tends to emphasise particular conceptions of teacher agency as personalistic (Bandura, 2006), focusing on teachers' personal and professional experiences and how these experiences exert forces on teachers' choices and decisions in a changing macro-policy environment. For instance, agency is conceptualised as emanating from personal dimensions of self such as within home, family, and community spaces (Pappa et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2015; Ryder et al., 2018). These research studies constructed agency as a direct outcome of influences at home, teaching strategies of one's teacher, or personal motivation for promotion. However, studies are also showing that professional terrains and institutional spaces exert a dominant force on teacher agency (Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017; Ryder et al., 2018; Themane & Thobejane, 2018). Moreover, these spaces are fluid and evolving (Fullan, 2013; Samuel, 2008; Singh-Pillay & Samuel, 2017). Recent studies on teacher agency have adopted a case study methodological approach to produce data that emphasise the contextual specificities of the phenomenon (Mitchell, 2016; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017; Themane & Thobejane, 2018; Tran, 2018). However, these case studies are mostly limited to the micro-institutional spaces. The interlinks between the micro-contextual worlds and the broader systemic forces activating a growing performativity culture are under-reported. The choice of narrative inquiry in the study reported on was made to capture nuances between macro-global and micro-institutional spaces, and how teachers straddled these multiple contexts. Constructing narratives became a three-dimensional affair of depicting shifting personal experiences and practices of teachers, alongside micro-institutional and macro-national/global landscapes (Clandinin, 2013). The nuances and influences of changing contexts within spatial and temporal dimensions also surfaced during data production. Teachers in the study revealed their entanglement in multiple spaces. These spaces were also shifting over time under the influence of new forces. Consequently, what emerged as dominant in a descriptive analysis of the transcripts drawn from the field was the centrality of different types of spaces that were part of a teacher's reality—personal spaces, the school environment, professional meeting spaces during professional development programmes, staffrooms, and classrooms. For instance, in Mauritius, many teachers provide tuition in a private space, such as their homes, after school hours. This operation is not regulated by the ministry. This phenomenon was described by Bray (2020) as a culture deeply rooted in the Mauritian society. Despite many attempts by the official departmental structures to regulate private tutoring by public-paid practising teachers, or restrict the use of public school spaces to exercise this practice, the phenomenon of private tutoring endures.

Teachers dominate that space with their chosen teaching strategies and selected teaching tools. Parents, moreover, interpret this “shadow education” system as enhancing the potential of their children’s success in the competitive exit schooling certificate examinations (Bray, 2020). While this private space was not observed during the study, the interviews revealed the dominance of the space and the types of agency emanating from this unregulated space, at times, differed from those they exercised at school in a space regulated by policy and the school management. While these spaces were deemed to be significant aspects of the representation, it was difficult to represent them in biographies or autobiographies. The fieldwork showed that teachers’ conceptions of agency were both relational (to context, time, and space) and dialogical (in relation to participants and co-collaborators).

Another challenge in the choice of representation of the fieldwork arose with guaranteeing the anonymity of the participants. Within a small context of about 400 schools and a generally well-known schooling community, this proved to be tricky despite using pseudonyms. The participants, who were subject teachers, met regularly during professional workshops or in managing the national/international examinations. Particular school characteristics could lead to schools being easily identified because of public knowledge of differing schools. It thus became clear that the choice of a methodological representation should resolve ethical challenges to protect the anonymity of participants and reduce their vulnerability and exposure. It would reassure them that they would not be targeted for being assertive or refusing to abide by the state agenda.

The data revealed complex embedded forms of agency emanating from different spaces inhabited by an individual teacher-participant. Consequently, capturing the nuances that explained the different types of entangled agency became daunting. An ethnodrama was therefore chosen as a methodological representation to resolve these issues.

## Selecting a methodological representation

Representation of participants’ narratives is at the core of narrative inquiry and helps explore themes related to the phenomenon under study (Ely, 2007; Mattingly, 2007). The process of representing participants’ stories involved revisiting transcripts and field notes (Polkinghorne, 1995). The first attention to validating the teacher participants’ voices was established via the transcripts of their interviews being sent back to them for member checking. This provided an opportunity for participants to confirm their responses to the interviewee/researcher’s questions. Additionally, the representation should be an authentic interpretation and construction of the participants’ complex life stories (Germeten, 2013). Therefore, selecting the right form of narrative is a crucial analytical component to aptly depict multiple layers of participants’ stories, the spaces they inhabit, and how they choose to represent themselves. Reflections on the mode of representation thus led to choosing the dramatic representation (Ely, 2007; Mattingly, 2007) through which teacher-participants could be fictionalised as emblematic, anonymous characters who would realistically mirror their storied landscapes and experiences in a context of change. The drama format comprised temporal and spatial dimensions as the acts moved from one moment in time to another, and as characters

reflected on past, present, and future dimensions related to their experiences. This multi-layered representation provided a detailed ethnographic depiction of individuals in varied times, spaces, and contexts, interacting with different interlocutors. Each dramatic moment captured a fuller insight into the voices of the teacher participants embedding simultaneously their multi-faceted, coherent, and contradictory elements.

### Constructing the ethnodrama, and its analysis

Drawing on the data set from the study fieldwork, the ethnodrama involved the scripted dramatic representation of interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2003, 2011), fieldnotes, observations (Davis, 2018; Saldaña, 2008), and other forms of data produced during qualitative narrative research. This form of representation is perceived as an attempt to move away from traditional research reports (Davis, 2018; Gallagher, 2007) to include nuanced data with regard to participants' experiences.

Constructing the ethnodrama script is a challenging process that includes a priori and thematic analysis of data generated in the quest of representing a narrative close to lived experiences. During a first level of analysis, thematic categories of forces influencing agency emanated from a priori categories of forces identified in the existing literature review. However, a further process of refining analytical processing included developing codes and categories emerging from the data with minimal a priori expectations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Freeman, 1996). Following the principles of a grounded theory approach to analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Freeman, 1996), the codes and categories were assembled in a data-led, field-sensitive generation of abstraction into themes that explored the phenomenon of the study.

For the last act of the ethnodrama, the original literature and theoretical framework about teacher agency was temporarily suspended in order to resist theory-led analysis and the confirmation of predetermined categories (McAdams, 2012). This comparative engagement between the fieldwork and the original framing lens of the study thus was constituted as a dialogical, iterative, and ever-expanding form of understanding the phenomenon.

The drama was named *The Cockroach*, a title that was inspired by a poem that many participants had referred to during data collection.

#### **The Cockroach**

I watched a giant cockroach start to pace,  
Skirting a ball of dust that rode the floor.  
At first he seemed quite satisfied to trace  
A path between the wainscot and the door,  
But soon he turned to jog in crooked rings,  
Circling the rusty table leg and back,  
And flipping right over to scratch his wings—  
As if the victim of a mild attack  
Of restlessness that worsened over time.



After a while, he climbed an open shelf  
And stopped.  
He looked uncertain where to go.  
Was this due payment for some vicious crime  
A former life had led to?  
I don't know,  
Except I thought I recognised myself.  
(Halligan, 2005, p. 171)

The participants identified with this poem in which the cockroach is confused, experiencing a sudden change, and also unconsciously trapped in repetitive behaviour. Moreover, the title reflects the disruption the teachers underwent—at the levels of teaching practices, beliefs, and even conceptions of professional identity—while exercising agency in changing times.

This constructed ethnodrama, *The Cockroach*, constituted a representation of a narrativised record, which Polkinghorne (1995) in her seminal article referred to as a narrative analysis of the fieldwork data. However, after this first representation of an analysis from the field, the ethnodrama was further analysed to abstract recurrent themes across this narrativised record. This latter form of analysis, Polkinghorne (1995) referred to as an analysis of the narratives (see also McCance et al., 2001; Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001). The analysis of the multidimensional ethnodrama representation brought fresh illuminations (Clandinin, 2007), which revealed the complex interweaving ways in which agency is exercised in times of change.

These complex and entangled forms of agency emanating from a thematic analysis of the ethnodrama led to the choice of an analytical framework—Barad's (2007, 2010, 2014) theory of diffraction—to capture the diffractive multiple possibilities in which an individual may exercise agency. Barad's concept of diffraction captures the complexity of rooted beliefs, especially those countering a simplistic binary structure that orders life and experiences in terms of dichotomous opposites such as self/other, I/we, or black/white. In the same vein, Barad (2010) observed that the concepts of space and time cannot be understood and limited to continuity and homogeneity because there exist multiple possibilities of experiences (possibilities that transcend binary opposites). These possibilities are often intertwined and there is no clear demarcation between them. As Barad (2010) pointed out, "entanglements are not the intertwining of two (or more) states/entities/events, but a calling into question of the very nature of two-ness, and ultimately of one-ness as well" (p. 251) Therefore, she argued, there is a need to look at actions and experiences as part of deconstruction, de-continuity, and multiplicity. At the onset of the fieldwork, data gathering was guided by a theoretical lens that captured the coexistence of three identified types of agency: curriculum making (Lambert & Morgan, 2010; Priestley et al., 2012), deliverology (Ball et al., 2012; Kelly, 2008; Mitchell, 2016; Pring, 2013), and strategic mimicry (Mattson & Harley, 2003). However, the analysis of the ethnodrama revealed a coexisting multiplicity of agentic possibilities and this theory provided me with a lens to understand the multiplicity of

agencies and how these different forms of agency coexist as teachers negotiate their professional selves in changing times.

Therefore, the ethnodrama, along with the chosen analytical framework, allowed the researcher to go beyond the dichotomous representation of agency as being either enabled or constrained.

### The structure of the ethnodrama

The ethnodrama was structured in three acts, which revealed multiple agentic possibilities within different spaces. Act I constituted an introduction to the characters' macro-policy context. Policy documents and the standardised Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) textbook were used as props to present the exploration of agency as an interaction between human (actors) and non-human (objects/texts) elements, thereby capturing the authenticity of teachers' experiences during the reform. The three fictionalised emblematic characters, Sara, Maya, and Veena, came from different types of schools (public and private schools). As teachers within a broader Mauritian educational landscape, they met at a workshop organised for English teachers at the MIE. In line with the reform orientation of new policy imperatives, the MIE, which is the sole teacher education institution in the country, was mandated to oversee the strategy of familiarising prospective implementers with the expectations of the new educational policy. The reform-related workshop was chosen as a common space where these three characters from different school realities met and shared their experiences and enactment of agency. The choice of the MIE as the location was significant because, during the data production phase, it emerged that many participants equated the reform with the MIE, especially given that the institution had produced the related documents and textbooks. Therefore, the location reflected the micro-policy context.

In Act II, as the setting shifted to an informal space, namely the canteen, the characters' discussion moved from the formalised macro-policy structures that enabled or constrained their agency to personal experiences that had moulded their professional selves. They shared, for instance, anecdotes of their student days and the influence of their family members or peer teachers. These anecdotes assisted in understanding teachers' professional identities and choices, which shift across time and space in relation to various sources of influence. The act foregrounded forces emanating from their micro-institutional spaces, suggesting that agency is a complex, nuanced, simultaneous interaction between macro, meso, and micro levels of engagement. By abstracting from the raw data produced in the field, this ethnodrama, like all narrative construction, constituted a level of analysis.

The micro-institutional spaces were highlighted in Act II, after which Act III comprised three scenes with the characters in their classrooms. This representation was constructed based on classroom observations, interviews, and informal conversations with the participants. The scenes juxtaposed contrasting classroom spaces in which the characters were seen enacting agency. In addition to the regulated classroom spaces of formal schooling environments, this act also presented the non-formal practices of private tutoring, which constitutes a parallel kind of schooling/educational system that sits alongside the formal regulated system. Ever-

present knowledge of the force of non-formal schooling emanated from data production where participants reflected on their own classroom practices being driven by the culture of performativity.

### Including the voice of the researcher in the representation

Saldaña (2005) proposed different ways in which the researcher can be made part of the ethnodrama: as a leading character, the character's best friend, a chorus member, an offstage voice, an extra, or a servant. He added that, although reflexivity is an important component of qualitative research, the researcher "could detract from rather than add to the principal participants' stories" (Saldaña, 2005, p. 19). However, the researcher's significance in the co-construction of narratives cannot be denied in narrative inquiry. As noted by Clandinin:

We are not objective inquirers. We are relational inquirers, attentive to the intersubjective, relational, embedded spaces in which lives are lived out. We do not stand metaphorically outside the inquiry but are part of the phenomenon under study. (2013, p. 24)

For the narrative inquirer, the positionality of the researcher is repeatedly redefined as the researcher comes to make sense of the world of those who are participating in their study. As part of the storied landscape, the researcher's narratives (and experiences) blend with those of the participants. Instead of reacting subjectively to participants' lived experiences, the lead researcher allowed herself to be disrupted—questioning her beliefs as an insider, and being more critical as she engaged in an analysis of the understanding of participants' stories. Rather than interpret these disruptions as negative, the listening researcher was more attentively engaging the entry and representation of the world of the teachers. The researcher, therefore, deliberately chose to be part of this drama as a disrupted choral voice offering a synthesis and reflection on emerging common themes. Act IV offered an evaluative analysis and acknowledged the researcher's role as simultaneously data producer and data analyser in this representational product. In this act, the characters—Wedsha (lead researcher), Sara, Veena, and Maya—entered and exited the stage as a representation of the cross-case analysis conducted for the production of thematic categories. The tempo of this act was very rapid to capture the complexity of teacher agency, experiences, and identities in an ever-changing macro-policy context.

Clandinin (2007) observed that, in drama representation,

the substance of the temporal happening, the contextualisation, offers readers layered, nuanced pictures that make sense of often puzzling, complex events—pictures meant to trigger understandings, feelings, and considerations about past, present and future. (p. 590)

Thus, the dramatic representation was seen as a representational form, which captured the teacher's ecology as her agency was impacted by a myriad of influences within the macro-policy and micro-institutional environment.

## Harmonising data, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity

This new representational form of an ethnodrama constituted an abstraction and a form of initial analysis, which cohered the raw data into more cognate processed units that aggregated the social and spatial dimensions of the work contexts within which the participants worked. Aggregation further enabled protection of the participants' anonymity, especially given that any attention to individual specificities of the interviewed participants would easily be identifiable. Yet, the researcher deemed it important to acknowledge the schooling landscapes, which constitute a major influence on teacher agency. Hence, the emblematic characters enabled anonymity and confidentiality but, more importantly, allowed the researcher, as the narrator of the ethnodrama, to foreground matters of immediate contextual believability for Mauritian readers of the study who could see themselves represented in the unfolding spaces of credibly depicted schooling environments.

While the dramatic script involved interpretations of data generated through different tools, some dialogues were verbatim extracts from interview transcripts with minor changes to echo the voices of the participants without giving away their identity. For instance, during the interview, Miriam (pseudonym) had compared herself to a withered plant at school. However, when referring to private tuition conducted in her home (in her personal space), she expressed happiness and satisfaction.

Miriam: I would say er, the school environment, the people that are around you, your departmental er . . . the people in your department, in your group, it plays a very big role in making you who you are as a teacher because your surroundings . . . if your surroundings are not very okay for you, for you it's not even acceptable for you, then whatever happens, you are not going to do well. It's the same as with the plant. You know the plant needs sunshine and water. If you are not going to give this so automatically the plant will wither. So, this, I believe that's exactly what happening to me I am not very comfortable in the school at all. (Interview transcript)

Miriam: I love teaching in fact because when I'm giving tuition at home . . . I feel very very *very* at ease. I can shift to Creole without fearing the fact that someone is standing next to my door to go to report to the office that I'm using Creole to explain. Yeah. . . . The deputy rector, she stands at the door of some teachers and then she is looking, she is not looking . . . she's peeping in the class, what's happening. (Interview transcript)

The ethnodrama therefore not only allows anonymity but also, as discussed by Saldaña (2005), emphasises the complex multi-layered voices and experiences of participants. Following the conventions of drama scripts with italicised stage directions and realistic interactions between participants, the ethnodrama aimed at showing the narratives instead of telling (Saldaña, 2005). Meanwhile, through his exemplars, Saldaña (2005) indicated how the ethnodrama can be used to create an artistic voice for the voiceless. This mode of representation was thus appropriate for the study where the researcher could capture the shifts of politeness within entangled spaces. Besides, this form of representation provided artistic

licence for the creation of emblematic characters (Saldaña, 2005) that were representative of character traits displayed by the participants. These characters were developed by merging verbatim words from participants, similar experiences and agency, and an artistic interpretation of data generated. Despite not celebrating the participants' individual traits and biographical experiences in individual life stories, the aggregation into emblematic characters creatively offered the narrator/dramatist the opportunity to present the intertwining life histories of teachers as they faced similar struggles while negotiating their agency in a changing environment.

Because the ethnodrama comprised emblematic characters constructed from different participants and the researcher's interpretations of their shared stories, to further ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the ethnodrama script was not shared with participants but, instead, member checking was done on their individual interview transcripts.

## Revealing entangled teacher-participants' voices in space and time

### Capturing choices of agency in varied spaces

The choice of spatial contexts in the creation of the ethnodrama allowed the researcher to show that agency is not solely the product of specific spaces within which data was produced—in line with the aim of elevating the fieldwork and locating it in broader theoretical landscapes. These landscapes depicted the worlds that the participants reflected or commented on during data production. They were reimaged in the construction of the drama space to activate a conception of a framing rather than a deterministic environment within which to explore the phenomenon. The teachers' connections beyond the immediate specificities of space during fieldwork were also connected into complex spatial contexts. These multi-layered spatialities (sometimes also spanning different temporal confines), which the ethnodrama flowed in and out of, captured the encircling levels of space that surround teacher agency, experiences, and practices. Constructing an ethnodrama thus entails a creative, elaborative project connecting the (parochial) fieldwork to broader (theoretical) spatialities. It is acknowledged that, although the ethnodrama might at first glance appear to be strongly field-sensitive, it stands as an initial level of analysis, which embeds abstractions at a more theoretical level.

Meanwhile, as foregrounded in this article, the different spaces represented showed an understanding of the dominance of compliance in public spaces and the manifestation of other forms of agency in other spaces. For instance, the raw data from Miriam (in the previous section) were represented through emblematic fictional characters in different spaces. This need to comply with micro-institutional regulations and the different agency expressed in the private space was captured through contrasting scenes with Maya (an emblematic character) in her classroom at school and in her private tuition space at home, as exemplified below. Note that the character of Maya was not a representation of Miriam but

an emblematic character, which reflected the common traits, narratives, and experiences of various participants:

The curtains open with white smoke on the stage signalling a flashback as Maya remembers a day at school. This scene takes place in Maya's classroom with a Grade 8 class of 20 students. The walls are empty: a withering plant, a pencil case, a ruler, her scheme of work, two books, and Maya's smart phone are on her table. Maya is writing on the whiteboard. Students are seated: some are writing in their copybooks and others are fighting (making a lot of noise). Maya does not seem to care and appears mechanically involved in her teaching.

Maya [moves to the middle of the stage and addresses the audience]: No respect, no greetings. Is this called teaching? Teaching is not my dream job . . . I'm not passionate about teaching [pause and feeling dejected]. . . . With pressure from school, time constraints due to the timetable, with a difficult home environment, with changing curriculum and examination pressure . . . [breathing heavily, suffocating, closes eyes]. My personal problems pressurise me further, I'm unhappy at home, unhappy at work . . . [failing voice] I am verbally abused at home, and, in turn, I verbally abuse my students. . . . What am I doing? Why? I'm tired [points at the plant on her table] I'm like this plant. The plant needs sunshine and water, otherwise it will wither. That's exactly what is happening to me! I'm withering in this school and, I must admit, my chaotic personal life is also contributing to my state! How I wish I could work as I do during tuitions at home! [heavy sigh] I'm so free and comfortable at home.

There is a shift from Maya's classroom at school to her private tuition classroom at home. The Grade 9 students take their seats and start working in groups. After some minutes, Maya enters the stage, casually dressed, carrying her laptop and some books. Her phone is still on her table; she puts her books on the scheme of work so that it is no longer visible to the audience. She has a broad smile and seems very happy.

Maya: Hi, everyone.

Students: Good afternoon, Miss.

Neila: How was your day, Miss?

Maya: Oh, as usual—tiring! But, now my day is brightening [smiles broadly]. So, have you done your work? (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021, p. 130)

### The micro-institutional space

Maya's agency varied in different spaces. Her micro-institutional space was dominated by restrictions imposed by the rector who, as what Foucault (1975) termed a *technician of behaviour*, controlled the teachers into subservience. The overshadowing rector's presence

curtailed Maya's actions and behaviour. Although the classroom is a space where the teacher should be free to enact her chosen agency, Maya's agency in that space was regulated by the rector's unexpected but regular inspections. Her choice to deliver and give much class work and homework was a response to the systemic conditioning at school. While during private tuition, teaching was therapeutic, at school she was miserable and continued to teach the way she was teaching prior to the reform. She did not show any interest in the reform and prioritised students' performance because she was answerable to the school management. The burden of accountability constrained her agency. Maya was thus presented as a bird with clipped wings—experiencing suffocation, which arose from a strict school culture privileging results. The dramatic representation, therefore, brought out the coexistence of multiple types of agencies by the same individual as exercised in different spaces.

### The officialised macro space

Teachers inhabit officialised spaces regulated by forces emanating from the broader macro-policy and micro-institutional environment. They often feel trapped in an uncontested terrain where they are expected to practise managed intimacy and adhere to policy dictates. For instance, the dominance of compliance within a conditioned context is captured in the following lines in the ethnodrama.

Veena: I'm sure there are so many other things that influence our way of thinking, but we can't deny that the school and especially this exam-oriented structure controls the way we act, behave or think!

Maya: We have to embrace changes. I don't think we have a choice. And, my school still functions in the same way. I don't expect it to change unless the management changes! We continue to teach the way we have been teaching. But, yes, I'm investing a lot of time in my tuition. I need to prepare my students for their national examinations *and* the Cambridge examinations! At least there I can teach the way I want to teach . . . no restrictions, no strict scheme of work, no "Maya you can't do this or you can't do that." . . . Well, at work I can't go against my rector, I still need my job!

Veena: Sometimes we prefer not to voice our thoughts to rectors or deputy rectors, because we choose to stay in our comfort zone and because some of us have financial commitments. (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021, pp. 137–138)

Instead of being empowering, the school environment is dominated by an examination-oriented culture that echoes the sociocultural reality. While, during workshops, some teachers expressed a strong intent to innovate and devise new strategies to participate in curriculum-making, school realities often counter these tendencies with expectations of compliance to standardisation and accountability structures (Erss, 2018; Ryder et al., 2018).

## Beyond active and passive teachers: Agentic presentation of self

The multiple forms of agency exercised in different spaces are mainly strategic and deliberate in response to personal and stakeholders' expectations. An independence of self may, however, be observed as teachers consciously exercise agency in specific ways. For instance, aware of expectations within a socially, politically, and economically bounded space regulated by macro-policy forces, some teachers deliberately put up compliance for fear of losing their jobs or being tagged a "bad" teacher. Although their dissatisfaction surfaces when talking with colleagues (in the staffroom or during workshops), they give in and adhere to a performance-oriented system. Thus, these teachers consciously choose a representation of self and cannot be categorised as docile or as agentic. Nor can it be deduced that a docile teacher is passive and withholds from challenging educational structures. Instead, compliance and resistance, including potential rebelliousness, are various forms of agency that may emanate from the same individual.

Moreover, while literature on teacher agency acknowledges the influence of accountability and varied autonomy on agency (Erss, 2018; Tan, 2016), the helplessness of teachers who are compelled to comply is not emphasised. Compliance is not a choice but a norm, as seen in Maya's reflections on her agency.

Maya: I've been working in a school, which functions like a form of dictatorship. We don't have a voice, we can't question anything, and we are always reprimanded. So, that's sometimes discouraging. Besides, the load of work and being scolded because you are *supposedly* responsible for students' failure . . . *yes*, your place of work makes a difference. *But* I don't think it's only the school. Look at me, I'm aware that my personal problems are frustrating me and I can't give myself fully to my work. It's not just the school. (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021, p. 137)

Ethnodrama enabled the researcher to present the complexity of teachers' choices. Despite being part of a managed intimacy guided by a politeness culture, their compliance emanates from various relational sources such as personal commitments and problems. The three-dimensional structure of the ethnodrama allowed for a realistic depiction of teachers negotiating their roles, identities, and agency in spaces moulded by various influences (such as personal, micro-institutional, and macro-policy contexts).

## The final act of the ethnodrama: A fictionalised interaction about pandemic times

While the ethnodrama enabled the presentation of the nuanced and complex ways in which teacher agency is exercised during curriculum reform, ending it with a fictional act was a means of emphasising the dynamic changing spaces that constantly influence agency.

The closing act of the study was located two years after the introduction of the new reform (data were collected when the reform had been introduced). This movement in time



showcased the evolving roles, identities, and agencies of teachers. Another change, namely the Covid-19 pandemic that is impacting the social and temporal dimensions inhabited by the teacher, was introduced in this fictionalisation. This inclusion highlighted the fluidity of experiences and how the teacher's context is influenced by both internal (new challenges as teachers reconsider teaching practices) and external forces (exerted on the macro- and micro-policy contexts by the pandemic and other changes). Also, by including another space (that of the examination workshop) and a new change in the dramatic landscape of the closing act, emphasis was laid on the fluidity of social, cultural, and political influences. The managed intimacy and politeness culture were therefore interpreted as part of a context that is evolving. Despite the prevalence of this dominant capitulating culture in the data production site, participants displayed certain resistance and their desired agency or inner thoughts surfaced during the data production and co-construction of narrative.

Hence, the closing ethnodrama act underscored evolving teacher's roles, identities, and agency, as seen below.

Maya: By the way, how was teaching during the confinement?

Veena: Tiring! It was such a mess at the beginning! It was difficult for some students to cope with Zoom, Teams. . .

Maya [interrupting Veena and sounding annoyed]: Difficult? It was horrible! Some students had no access to Internet. Fortunately, I already had WhatsApp groups for some students. At a point, I started enjoying it, but then we had to report regularly to the rector.

Sara: Poor you! It wasn't easy, but a different experience . . . [lights dim as their voices gradually die down]. (Appadoo-Ramsamy, 2021, p. 219)

Imaginatively, the fluidity of experiences and entanglement of agencies presented in this fictional conversation between the emblematic characters reflect the plurality of agencies and the entangled and evolving experiences. Most importantly, this form of representation of teacher agency was not to proffer a solution to the phenomenon. Instead, it opened doors to future research on teachers' responsiveness to a dynamic personal and professional environment.

## The researcher mediating the co-construction of the ethnodrama

The positionality of the researcher was an important influence on the construction and co-construction of stories. According to Barad (2012), the researcher is part of the diffracted and entangled experiences, and truths that come out of a study as researchers are "part of the world's differential becoming" (p. 77) and there is no "absolute insides or outsides" (p. 9). Hence, the positionality of the researcher is redefined during the analysis, interpretation, and representation. In the ethnodrama, the lead researcher allowed herself to be disrupted and

included her narratives and reflection in Act IV. This dramatic space echoed her immersion in the lives or life histories of the participants who, at times individualised and at times emblematically exercised various forms of agencies while negotiating their roles and identities in a changing landscape.

The co-construction and interpretation of narratives increased subjectivity even if ethical considerations and reflexivity were upheld. The researcher's presence in the lives of the participants as an insider (an educator) and as an outsider (textbook writer and lecturer) may have catalysed the filtering of memories or fear of sharing in the initial stages. As an insider, she was an accomplice in complying with the examination culture despite at times resisting; she had also been conditioned by similar ideologies, which explains the parallel ontological positions of the participants and researcher. Hence, the impossibility of dissociating the participants' and the researcher's experiences was highlighted in Act IV where the researcher's and teachers' voices merge.

## Concluding thoughts

While the different characters reflect different biographical experiences and represent different types of micro-institutional spaces, it is interesting to observe the entanglement of their experiences and how the different life stories fuse into common truths—why they exercise agency the way they do. Theoretically, the ethnodrama allowed the researcher, by adopting Barad's (2007, 2010, 2014) theory of diffraction at a later stage of analysis, to bring out the entanglement whereby a teacher may exercise agency in different entangled ways simultaneously: in regulated and unregulated spaces; in dealing with students, rectors, and parents; and in sharing with peers during workshops and at school. The ethnodrama, therefore, assisted in acknowledging the plurality of agency. While existing literature has explained agency as an ecological and sociological phenomenon, the ethnodrama, along with Barad's analytical framework, reveals the turbulence, complexity, fluidity, and coexistence of diffracted agencies as teachers exist simultaneously in different spatial and temporal dimensions. A closer analysis of the thematic strands of embedded spatial and temporal forces and the impact on agency sheds light on the reasons why teachers exercise agency—not in the simplistic dichotomous way that we started with at the beginning of the study, but through complex and entangled ways.

As a methodological representation, the ethnodrama resolved the challenges of exposing and rendering vulnerable participants in a small island through the creation of emblematic characters. Moreover, the similarities in experiences and forceful compliance in a context of managed intimacy were captured within the three-dimensional structure of the ethnodrama. Also, while the emblematic characters were created to protect the participants' identity, this artistic creation filtered the individuality of participants for the creation of a collective voice. Nevertheless, this does not challenge validity or the representation of truths (Saldaña, 2005) as verbatim lifting from transcripts and creation of settings based on observations and descriptions of experiences during interviews ensured a realistic portrayal of experiences in the ethnodrama script.

The ethnodrama, therefore, emanates as a choice made by the researcher to engage with participants' voices in the co-construction of a representational form that valorises both researcher and participants' voices and interpretations. The argument emphasises the challenges of representing the varied voices of fieldwork activity. Moreover, it suggests that the voices include not just the researcher's interpretations of the fieldwork, but also the multi-faceted worldviews of the researched as well as the potential broader audience of the research. The research space is entangled with varied living present entities and off-the-stage interlocutors. This study challenges the arrogance of researchers who choose to talk on behalf of their participants. Researchers may be considered as patronising or even silencing the voice of the researched when the powerful teller of participant stories chooses to represent the "voice of the voiceless." Sometimes, researchers present their research endeavour as some form of empowerment of those who are placed on the margins. Instead, the ethnodrama as a representational device allows both the researcher and their participants to coexist in an interactive dialogical engagement. This dialogical space allows for both the researcher and the researched to authentically cohere, contest, and even oppose varying views about the phenomenon that is being explored. Furthermore, the representation of a drama format invites an unseen audience into making its own interpretations of the presented unfolding dramatic dialogue. The format celebrates the complexity of shared meaning-makings drawing on multiple interlocutors rather than presenting hierarchically only the voice of the researcher as the prime teller of the tale.

This ethnodrama, therefore, invites a broadening of talking and listening complexly to the voices of the participants in the field. The medium is the message because the ethnodrama attends to how we tell the stories of the participants (representation), which is as important as what stories need to be told (the propositional content). The choice of representation is an essential analytical component, which captures the complexity of the phenomenon as lived and experienced by participants. The drawing of the voices of the specific participants of this study of teachers from a small island context into a world stage of theorising teacher agency is also a celebration. In this way, the ethnodrama medium constitutes not just a creative, imaginative form of entering into the world of the fieldwork of a research study—it is, in itself, a theoretical manifestation.

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