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Re-credentialling experiences of immigrant teachers: negotiating institutional structures, professional identities and pedagogy

June Beynon*, Roumiana Ilieva and Marela Dichupa
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Teachers immigrating to Canada with credentials from non-Canadian jurisdictions are regarded as desirable immigrant professionals because of their high levels of education and yet, nevertheless, are required to redo some or all of their professional training. This research examines sociocultural notions of voice, agency, authorship and identity in considering how a group of 28 teachers with diverse professional and personal backgrounds, and with initial teaching credentials from outside Canada, perceive and respond to the institutional/structural constraints imposed by mainstream ‘gate-keeping’ institutions. Analysis of data from interviews and questionnaires indicates that teachers initially credentialled outside of Canada potentially have much to add to the education of students in Canadian schools. However, to achieve this potential it is necessary that these educators’ encounters with Canadian educational institutions engage rather than silence their voices.

Introduction

I think when I immigrated here [it means] you accept my education, and if you don’t accept my education so [I] cannot immigrate here. I am an experienced teacher; I didn’t expect they would not accept my education [from] China. I wrote a letter to the International Credential Evaluation Service. They say my Bachelor’s and Master’s are equivalent [to Canadian degrees]. The university said ‘... before you take teacher education you have to finish certain credits.’ So I have to start from the very beginning. It is very difficult at my age [40]. It is really unfair and I don’t know if it is the Canadian government’s policy or just a local government policy. Who makes this policy? (Lucy, 14 years of teaching English as a Second Language in China)

Teachers immigrating to Canada with credentials from non-Canadian jurisdictions are regarded as desirable immigrant professionals because of their high levels of

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education. Nevertheless, most Canadian jurisdictions require them to redo some or all of their professional training. This research examines how a group of 28 immigrant teachers, with diverse professional and personal backgrounds, perceive the re-credentialling experiences they have undertaken to meet British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT) requirements for employment in British Columbia, Canada.

After fulfilling the BCCT requirements the recertified teachers can apply for school board employment like any newly-graduated British Columbia (B.C.)-trained teacher. The normative route to employment for new graduates in school districts in the Greater Vancouver area is to apply for school district interviews. Successful interviewees are placed on the Teacher on Call (TOC) lists. Screening processes vary from district to district. In some districts, being on the TOC list is virtually an assurance of future long-term employment, whereas in others TOC work itself serves as an additional criterion in the screening process.

Theoretical perspectives: official discourses, teachers’ voices

Liberal industrial and post-industrial societies commonly construct teachers as key players in an institution centrally located (if not always effective) in transmitting cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and socializing youth to dominant social norms. These ‘state organized or regulated institutions of intentional instruction’ are charged with responsibility for ‘the cultural production of the educated person’ (Levinson et al., 1996, p. 2).

A considerable body of (structural) theory has discussed how these liberal state institutions serve to replicate positioned inequities and hierarchies of gender, race and class (for example, Bourdieu, 1977; McCarthy, 1990; Dei, 1996). In addition, mainstream structural gate-keeping institutions (licensing and credentialling bodies) are authorized to insure that the pivotal professionals in these organizations themselves possess the institutionally defined cultural capital of the dominant society, which they are presumed to transmit.

Sociocultural orientations to culture, voice, authorship, agency and identity (Holland et al., 1998), especially as these are implicated in the lives of people living in diaspora (Hall, 1996), also play an important part in our analysis of how re-credentialling immigrant teachers come to terms with the positions into which mainstream institutions cast them. We outline these structural and sociocultural perspectives in greater detail in the following sections.

Institutional and structural considerations

Numerous structural analyses of immigrants in the Canadian labour force posit that political, ideological and bureaucratic means are activated to position immigrant professionals, especially those from minority backgrounds, as ‘disentitled’ and de-skilled (Fleras & Elliot, 1999; Henry et al., 1995).
... immigrants have long endured racial abuse and discrimination in the field[s] of employment. Licensed occupations, including medicine and dentistry, continue to impose restrictions and deny accreditation, which results in blocking the entry of immigrants with foreign degrees or credentials from outside of Canada. (Fleras & Elliot, 1999, p. 276)

Regarding employment of teachers, we discern that market forces are embodied, represented and brokered in a variety of practices (rules, regulations and discretionary actions) of authorized agencies vested with credentialing (Provincial Ministries or Colleges, e.g. BCCT), professionally educating (university teacher education programmes) and employing (school districts) teachers. These practices are complicated and entail considerable financial and emotional costs for applicants.

Sociocultural approaches

Sociocultural and poststructural theory on discourse, voice (Bakhtin, 1981) and the multifaceted, fluid nature of identity (Hall, 1996), agency, improvisation and authorship in ‘cultural worlds’ (Holland et al., 1998) lead us to consider the ways in which individuals define and creatively negotiate structural/institutional constraints (such as those referred to earlier) that impose on and position them. Sociocultural theorists, reviewing this institutional landscape in relation to human cultural and social biographies, have argued that, although institutional entitlement and/or dis-entitlement forcefully shape perspectives,

... still position is not fate. It is not impossible for people to figure and remake the conditions of their lives. Identity formation must be understood as the co-development of cultural media and forms of identity. (Holland et al., 1998, pp. 44–45 passim.)

Holland et al. pose the question: ‘How do people come to terms with their lot in order to do something?’ (1998, p. 44). Our research seeks to answer this, as well as the following questions: How do immigrant teachers seeking B.C. credentials perceive where they have been positioned and how do they negotiate these [im]positions? How, over time, do they retain and/or reconstruct their positions as skilled, competent teachers? Consonant with a sociocultural perspective, our consideration of teachers’ negotiations with the institutions positioning them concerns how these negotiations engage as well as support or block their identity processes.

Identity

Identity processes are dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981). Our research inquires into the teachers’ [dialogical] engagements with, and appropriations or rejections of, the authoritative discourses thrown in their paths by mainstream regulatory bodies, university-supervised classroom practica and course work and various potential school district employers. Bakhtin (1981) theorizes that people engage and struggle with these voices of authority. In some cases, individuals creatively transform these authoritative voices into ‘internally persuasive’ ones expressive of their own unique experiences and ideas. We are interested in the immigrant teachers’ articulations of
Table 1. Summary of academic and professional education and experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of origin</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years in teaching</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specialty</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status in Canada</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complied with requirements</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time teachers (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on call (TOC) (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to recredential</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appealed BCCT decision</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in a private school, college or university</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not plan to pursue teaching in Canada</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Figures in this category do not equal 28 because two questionnaire respondents did not provide this information.

\(^b\) One of the eight has not yet applied for a teaching position.

\(^c\) One of the successful appellants was not successful in gaining employment.
new, internally persuasive discourses about profession and pedagogy. We wish to
know more about how, through discursive engagement with these authoritative
discourses, they might ‘author’ (Holland et al., 1998) ‘ever newer ways to …’
(Bakhtin, 1981) identify themselves as teachers.

Data collection and results

We held interviews with 16 immigrant teachers and received questionnaire responses
from 12 others. All were identified through networking or through a call for
participants published in the B.C. Teachers’ Federation newspaper. The diversity of
teacher backgrounds is summarized in Table 1. We analysed the teachers’ responses
in relation to three institutional fields (or cultural worlds) of activity, regulations and
practices: regulatory agencies (BCCT), teacher education programmes and employ-
ers.

Respondents recounted a range of experiences in each of the three fields—BCCT,
teacher education programmes and employment—in which identity issues were
implicated. For some, the structures of the various fields negated professional
identity. Others found ways to affirm their identities as teachers while at the same
time finding openings for new dimensions and expressions of identity. In our presentation
of the responses about each field, we begin with experiences where identity was
negated and move to those where individuals found ways to engage their voices
creatively with the new (to them) Canadian educational discourses. In addition to
identity issues, the respondents mentioned other elements implicated in the process of
acquiring certification: finances, family obligations, language and time.

Teachers’ perceptions of BCCT requirements

The teachers reported that BCCT reviews of their documents resulted in two kinds of
requirements: academic course work of a variety of types, and a one-semester teacher
education experience combining educational theory and a classroom practicum
administered by a university teacher education programme. Xuai, an English teacher
from China with two postgraduate degrees and seven years’ university-level teaching
experience in Canada, was distressed by BCCT’s requirements.

When I received [the BCCT letter] I just felt, oh, my god! My education, my teaching
experience, it means zero. They were telling me that I wasted my time. It’s a humiliating
process. I mean this kind of experience does not make you feel you belong to this country.
So no matter if I’ve been here close to 14 years now, even if I have most of my friends who
are Canadian, white. But I still don’t feel that I quite belong to this society because of this
experience of exclusion, because I was born and grew up in a different country I am
subject to all this kind of scrutiny and the denial of opportunities no matter how much I
have done, how much I have accomplished in Canada, so what is the point? So I don’t
feel that I belong to this country. I don’t feel that I emotionally affiliate to it. (Xuai)

Xuai’s words express her strong feeling that her professional identity and her feelings
of belonging to Canada were both negated by her experiences with the BCCT. Her
response was to abandon the idea of becoming a teacher in B.C. Parin, who had a graduate degree and six years of professional experience in India as a special education teacher, expressed similar feelings of identity negation. The BCCT required that she do course work and a practicum to become a ‘regular’ classroom teacher; which was counter to her own view of herself as a special education teacher, a position she had worked towards since the age of 16. As she puts it:

The esteem is gone down the drain ... you’ve given ten years of your life, studying ... obviously you tend to get some respect for yourself because this is what half of my life is heading towards and it just boils down to zero. Right now I keep telling [my relatives back in India] that I am quite worthless in this country. (Parin)

Parin has chosen nevertheless to persistently engage with the authoritative discourse of BCCT and plans to fulfill the necessary requirements when she has secured enough funds.

Some immigrant teachers who have experienced a negation of their professional identity through the recertification process have chosen, nevertheless, to appeal and thus deconstruct and challenge the authoritative discourse of BCCT. However, Tanya, with a Bachelor degree in mathematics and three years of teaching experience in Poland, had no success in her appeal.

Okay, they don’t recognize our education. It’s frustrating ... I appealed ... because I didn’t quite agree with that many courses that I had to take. But they said that because [I am] from a communist country, you know, kind of different system ... different exams, different methods of teaching [I have to do this]. Five years of training ... I took practicums. I had lots of methodology courses and [BCCT] only found 20 credits. For five years of studying I couldn’t believe it. They asked me to do another 32 [credits]. I couldn’t understand that, that’s why I appealed but it was of no use ... maybe they try to say ‘People, if you really want to do something you have to go for it despite of everything.’ I don’t know. I was pretty determined to do it. (Tanya)

Tanya had no room to manoeuvre. However, the obstacles increased her determination to prove the truth of her claims to professional status.

So ... when they said ‘Okay, seven courses’, I said ‘okay, I will do seven courses and I will show you that I can do it’ ... and the lowest mark I got was a B+. Financially it was devastating.

Galya, a very experienced mathematics teacher with two Masters degrees from a US university, successfully appealed BCCT requirements. Galya explained how the BCCT’s initial responses to her application for B.C. teaching certification negated her academic and professional accomplishments. She searched for an opening in the authoritative discourse she faced and successfully negotiated to have her Bulgarian and US academic and professional experiences credited. After a hearing, the BCCT waived the course work and practicum requirements. (However, her lack of a B.C. practicum resurfaced as an impediment when she sought employment; see the section on employment.) Galya, like many others, was nevertheless, in spite of her four years of graduate work and teaching experience at a large public university in the US, still required to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language.
I think that, I just felt they need to ask me to do something ... People think [BCCT] give
time people a hard time ... in the way that they ask people [to do/take] things [applicants]
don’t think they need. (Galya)

Nan, with more than 15 years of experience in classrooms in China teaching English
as a second language, and a Ph.D. in Education from a Canadian university, was at
the time of this interview appealing (with considerable expenditure of time and
emotion) the BCCT requirement to take curriculum design courses at the
undergraduate level that she was qualified to teach at the graduate level in a
Canadian university. She was ultimately successful in her appeal because a school
principal, who wanted to hire her, interceded on her behalf (see section on
employment).

A few of the interviewees found the authoritative discourses of the BCCT internally
persuasive. Veronica, who had only recently completed teacher education in Ukraine,
said:

I am an immigrant to a new country. I don’t know its history or geography or never
worked with children in this country. I can’t expect that I come in and say: ‘I was a
teacher in Ukraine’, ... and that they would say ‘... go ahead and teach’. I think it’s
normal that they ask me to get a Canadian background. I am an immigrant. I can’t expect
people just to open the doors for me, right? I have to work my own ways through the
doors (Veronica).

Habib, with 20 years teaching experience in Iraq and currently a full-time teacher in
science and mathematics in Canada, articulated his understanding of a one-semester
practicum he had successfully completed as follows:

No, I did not do retraining; only thing I did was familiarization with Canadian school
system. I had my training in the old country. But it was very valuable, as this
familiarization introduced me to Canadian version of the educational system. (Habib)

Some individuals chose not to become engaged with the authoritative discourse of the
BCCT. They explained that their decisions not to become involved in re-
credentiailling were related variously to concerns about their English language
competence, length and cost of programmes and expectation of poor chances for
employment in a market where they would be competing against ‘native born’
Canadians.

Nita was an educator with 12 years of teaching and school counselling experience in
Hong Kong. Consider her assessment of her circumstances:

I had been to the College of Teachers 2 months after landing in Vancouver. After talking
to a counselor there, I know that I will probably take 2 years to complete the teaching
certificate. I give up my mind to be a teacher in B.C. because I must support my family.
Besides that, I wonder whether after completing the certification I can easily get the
teaching post because of the cultural differences, competition and language barrier. I can
easily communicate with Canadians, but I should take time to practice classroom
English. Maybe I still have no confidence in speaking fluent English as the native speaker
[does]. (Nita)

Nita also wonders about the ‘Canadian experience’ issue:
I wonder whether principals will not employ me because of no Canadian experience. How can I have the Canadian experience if Canadians don’t give the chances to the newly-landed immigrant? (Nita)

Nita’s perception in fact foreshadows some job seeking experiences of those who did re-credential (see section on employment).

Teacher education

The teacher education demanded by BCCT included both a practicum and coursework. The cultural world of the practicum was one place where immigrant teachers negotiated their professional identities, and in some cases reconstructed their positions as skilled and competent teachers.

For Min, originally from Malaysia, who had 20 years of experience teaching secondary school biology and considerable experience as a curriculum consultant, a negative practicum experience was an occasion to assert her professional identity and to confront her practicum sponsor teacher regarding his racist and sexist discourse. He wrote a negative evaluation of her classroom management skills, reporting that ‘the whole class was in an uproar’. Min responded:

I confronted my school associate. I asked him ‘Do you know me? You talk about me not knowing the kids, but do you know me?’ After I confronted him he backed down a bit. Then he told me to my face ‘You are a woman, you are small in size, I am big and tall, I can command respect. You are small, you are from another country, you speak English with an accent, and therefore you have to be assertive, be firm.’ (Min)

Challenging her sponsor teacher’s approach to classroom management, Min (as did a number of others) worked her way through these difficulties by initiating discourse with the students themselves. If she had problems with particular students, she solicited their suggestions.

I would invite the student to come and talk with me after school and I would get to know them ... get to know their problems and they were finally able to see that we could accept each other. (Min)

Overall, many of the interviewees mentioned the completed one-semester practicum requirement as an opportunity (albeit costly and time-consuming) to gain useful experience in Canadian cultural/pedagogical practices.

Kris, who had taught English for seven years in India, recounted changes in her ways of engaging with students:

I had taught the upper grades in a more traditional style, but once in Canadian classrooms it didn’t take me long to change my approach. My practicum was in a one/two combination so I changed my entire way of dealing with kids. I think that if you are open, if you are willing to take in new things and to change, that’s an advantage. (Kris)

Chen, who had taught mathematics in Taiwan for three years before she came to Canada and is currently a teacher on call, also spoke about being ‘open’, and credited her Canadian university and classroom practicum supervisors with helping her in her practicum:
I am so lucky, ... like they are part of my life ... it is one of the best experiences of my life because when I was in my home country I didn’t really get lots of support from my practicum supervisor or any professor from my department. They can tell me what’s wrong with myself ... but that doesn’t mean I’m not good. That means I have to do something to change. If I have a concern I can say what I am thinking ... and then they give me support. (Chen)

Some interviewees found the practicum provided opportunities to reflect upon selected internally persuasive discourses from educational practices in their countries of origin. Kris reflectively (re-)articulated family cultural/educational practices in relation to Canadian practices and curriculum discourses.

... music was so much a part of Indian life ... Hinduism ... a way of life ... all the chanting. I always heard my mum singing the songs. So I do chanting with my kindergarten students, in ‘whole language’ kind of ways. (Kris)

Tanya’s practicum experience corroborated for her that she was, as she had asserted to the BCCT, already well qualified.

The practicum was fine. I was so happy that I am teaching again. I was not nervous ... I was just teaching. I was preparing unit plans ... and doing report cards. It was really a pleasure for me to go back ... I was so happy that after so many years I am back. (Tanya)

Turning from consideration of practicum requirements to academic requirements, it is important to note that the academic courses required by the BCCT are based on case-by-case assessments of the teachers’ documented academic and professional experiences. Many perceived as valid the BCCT requirement to take one course in each of Canadian history and geography, also a standard requirement for Canadian teachers preparing to teach in elementary grades. Many also thought the required course work in education was useful. However, shifts in what it means to be a teacher were invariably experienced as an element of the course work undertaken by the immigrant teachers who complied with BCCT requirements. Min found the pedagogy quite different from what she was used to:

I learned a lot about the B.C. ways and the system ... like the philosophy here, which is very child-centered. The emphasis on reflective teaching, I found that very important ... the workshop on First Nations history. I liked that specially, too. The First Nations students will be among our students and it helps us to know about them more. I got to understand the work of the Ministry of Children. Because I’m an immigrant I didn’t know about those procedures ... now I know the proper way of dealing with those things. (Min)

For Susan, previously an English-language teacher in a private school in Asia who just completed the qualifying programme offered by a Canadian university, an education course that focused on developing paraphrasing and questioning skills as well as teaching for thinking was critical to reaffirming her identity as a teacher.

It’s totally different from the things I learned about teaching and learning in my country. ‘Sit down in your desk and don’t ask questions.’ But once you learn to think about how or what you think or how or what you feel, it’s very fun! Not only asking questions, but answering those questions, it’s fun! You feel like you are a person. I was so depressed
until I took that class. I was thinking of applying to the airlines or something, instead. But with that questioning I began to feel wonderful. (Susan)

Employment

At the time of the interviews, most of these teachers had yet to secure work in B.C. classrooms. Hence, while they had a great deal to say about their professional identities and the BCCT requirements they needed to negotiate before becoming eligible for TOC work, they had relatively fewer things to say regarding identity and its relation to pedagogical or cultural negotiations that occur in a working classroom.

Galya, who had earlier succeeded in getting the BCCT to waive the practicum requirement, nevertheless found structural barriers to employment.

... a week after I sent my application package and excellent reference letters to a school district to apply for work as a TOC, I received an answer that they don’t need me. So I called them to ask them and the reason they said they refused was because I don’t have B.C. experience.

And I said, ‘O.K. How can I get B.C. experience if you don’t let me be even a teacher on call in your district?’

They said that my volunteer experience [in my daughter’s school] didn’t count because they want you to have paid employment and a reference from a principal or evaluations from a teacher education practicum.

I said to them, ‘But O.K., BCCT gave me the permission to teach [without the practicum], so how, how you think this could be?,’ and she said ‘I don’t know, but this is what we require’ and I said, ‘O.K., what would you suggest me then to do?’ and she said, ‘Maybe you need to have some courses in Simon Fraser or UBC.’

... which was really frustrating to me after going through all this evaluation process. So that was it, ... and I asked, ‘... so maybe a person [Canadian] without any experience, newly graduated, will be considered over someone with 10 years teaching experience?’

(Galya)

Veronica, with no employment experience prior to coming to Canada, completed a required one-semester practicum and was successful in quickly getting work as a TOC

Her experiences were various:

... in the morning I had just a perfect classroom ... And they sent me in the afternoon to another school and it was grade three. It was maybe the most embarrassing teaching day in my life. I welcomed them, and I said my name and why I am there, and they just started to laugh, and they couldn’t stop laughing for ten minutes. They thought it was very funny. And then there was a special [education] assistant, and she told them that they were being very inappropriate, but it was very bad ... But I feel pretty good. I stay always positive no matter what happens. Like yesterday they laughed at me, but so what. I just said yes, I have an accent and they were all laughing, but you know, I feel so far it is good.

(Veronica)

Nan, with her Ph.D. from a Canadian university and many years of English as a Second Language experience in her country of origin, found employment teaching Mandarin in a secondary school. She heard from a friend about a vacancy created
when, mid-semester, the enrolling teacher went on leave. Nan was employed on a letter of permission until the end of the academic year and then was required to seek re-credentialling. BCCT turned down her application and specified that she needed to take courses at the undergraduate level. Her school administrator interceded on her behalf and her appeal was eventually successful.

As might be expected, employment is tightly linked to the negation or reinforce-ment of these teachers’ professional identities. Maeve, with 18 years of experience in primary classrooms in Ireland, recounted that her re-certification experience was partly traumatic, because for the first year and a half of her stay in Canada she could not work in her profession.

It made me quite depressed for a while. Because my work is important to me and it’s a lot about who I am. (Maeve)

Now employed as a full-time learning-assistance teacher, she says:

I was very happy to get back into the school system and I like what I’m doing now. (Maeve)

**Discussion: re-validating professional status and identities**

Persons look at the world from the positions into which they are persistently cast ... their perspectives develop over time. (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 44)

Many immigrant teachers’ discourses highlighted how they saw meeting BCCT requirements as a matter of developing survival strategies. A few also referred to negotiations in the cultural worlds of teacher education and job seeking with all of the respective social constraints that these worlds encompass. Reviewing the teachers’ narratives from a structuralist theoretical perspective suggests that these teachers are persistently cast, to greater and lesser degrees, into circumstances requiring them to re-validate their professional status. We are interested in how, in Bakhtin’s terms, these teachers engage with these authoritative discourses and how, in Holland’s terms, they exercise agency and author their identities.

From a sociocultural perspective, the immigrant teachers’ agency in creatively negotiating mainstream institutional requirements is apparent. In spite of numerous obstacles, they are ‘coming to terms with the positions into which they are cast … [and are] … remaking the conditions of their lives’ (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 44). In a number of instances, their agency has created spaces in public schools for students to engage in diverse discourses and consider new perspectives. However, the financial and emotional costs to the teachers have been high, sometimes prohibitive. Tears of frustration and despair were common in our interviews.

For some of the immigrant teachers, engaging with the authoritative discourse of BCCT was a humiliating process that negated their professional identities. One of the recurring themes was the lack of flexibility in the BCCT evaluation process and the complete disregard for teaching experience from their native countries or for graduate work and university teaching experience in Canada. Some, however, were able to
challenge the BCCT’s authoritative discourses and, following an appeal, gained an interim teaching certificate without enrolling in a teacher education programme. Many of those who undertook to fulfill the requirements found internally persuasive the BCCT authoritative discourse that to teach in elementary school in Canada it was important to know Canadian geography and history.

Several teachers understood that the BCCT recommendation that they needed to take education courses and do a practicum was because they came from ‘communist’ countries. One such teacher who enrolled in the practicum felt that even though the practicum went smoothly and provided a valuable opportunity for becoming familiar with a variety of classroom practices, the experience was costly and time consuming.

Those teachers who took prescribed education courses had a generally favourable opinion of them. They found that the instructors created opportunities for them to engage in educational discourse that allowed them to reflect on and articulate their professional beliefs and practices and to identify some of the sources of these. They saw these discourses as opening up possibilities to extend, rather than replace, their existing professional practices. These circumstances, while not of their choosing, enabled the teachers to identify themselves as learners and to validate this position as consistent with their professional identities.

Practicum placements also held the potential for teachers to have their professional identities confirmed or negated. The powerful authoritative voice of the classroom teacher could create the conditions for either opening the field to the practicum teachers’ internally persuasive discourses or shutting them out of the conversation; the classroom teacher could construct the practicum teacher as a professional colleague or as a disentitled newcomer. Where the new teachers were overtly criticized and put in marginal positions, as in Min’s case, they clearly answered these challenges with their own authoring voices but at considerable emotional cost. A number of them creatively responded by engaging in dialogue and building interaction with the students rather than with the classroom teacher.

Securing employment is the third key, challenging field. Galya’s case illustrates that it is difficult to avoid completely the authoritative discourses of both credentialling and teacher education institutions. Nan’s case illustrates that support and advocacy from established employers can be a definite asset. At the present juncture most of the interviewees are just entering the field of employment and will have various experiences of securing TOC and more permanent employment, although current increases in class sizes and consequent teacher layoffs do not augur well for them.

Most of the respondents’ stories presented tell how teachers have accommodated to and/or been silenced by mainstream institutions, unlike the few who chose not to engage with the BCCT discourse and negotiated work as educators in other institutional settings. However, we hope in future to hear about the variety of ways in which all individuals in the present study have been able to creatively and spontaneously draw upon their years of cultural, linguistic and educational knowledge from outside Canada and bring these into classroom and school discourses in ways that advocate for minority students and contribute to learning for all students and colleagues.
So far, few researchers have examined the experiences of immigrant teachers in Canada (for example, Thiessen et al., 1996; He, 1998). Previous research with Canadian teachers of minority ancestry, educated primarily within Canadian school systems, richly illustrates self-authoring that creatively draws on diverse experiences with Canadian mainstream and minority cultures (Hirji & Beynon 2000; Beynon et al., 2001, 2003). These teachers bring dimensions of multiple cultures into their teaching, but it has taken considerable time for them to creatively orchestrate this diversity. Multicultural and anti-racist approaches in their own education and teacher preparation experiences, when these were available, helped to support this creativity. Whether these or similar mechanisms can support the immigrant teachers remains to be seen.

Like Holland et al., we ‘... are especially interested in the ways in which people’s perspectives [on identity] develop over time’ (1998, p. 44). We expect that we shall hear more about the immigrant teachers’ creative, authoring voices in subsequent interviews after they have (desirably) secured employment and have had more opportunities to dialogically engage on a daily basis with students and colleagues. We hope that future research will further guide us in ascertaining and recommending structural changes and practices in teacher preparation and employment in Canada supportive of immigrant teachers’ work of negotiating identities in the new ‘cultural world’ (Holland et al., 1998) of Canadian teaching.

Conclusions and recommendations

The B.C. College of Teachers routinely requires teachers with non-Canadian credentials, many with years of professional experience in other countries, to enrol in recertification, academic course work and practica that, in combination, can take a maximum of three costly semesters to complete. In the interviewees’ perceptions, these requirements pose challenges to financial resources as well as to the integrity of their professional identities.

The Faculty of Education at one British Columbia university has, for many years, offered a one-semester practicum for experienced teachers from outside of Canada. With a special grant from BCCT, this programme has now been extended, on a trial basis, to two semesters. This course of study (when combined with whatever academic requirements BCCT recommends) still equals the three-semester teacher education programme required of a Canadian-educated university student with no prior professional training or work experience. In light of the narratives presented here, we question this extension with its attendant costs in time, money and emotion.

In addition, when the recertified teachers enter the field of employment, personnel processes entail a variety of discretionary judgements not strictly related to their qualifications. Moreover, even if they get hired, it is then at the discretion of yet another agency, the Teacher Qualification Service, to assess their previous years of experience for salary purposes. Few of the teachers we interviewed had yet obtained permanent employment; thus, we do not know whether and how their outside-Canada experience will be accounted for on various B.C. district salary scales.
Viewed from a structuralist perspective, the BCCT operates as a gatekeeper, authorized to insure that teaching positions in mainstream schools are filled by individuals who will transmit the cultural capital of the dominant society. The regulations constructed to accomplish this work render valueless the social and cultural capital of teachers from other jurisdictions. In addition, these regulations close off opportunities for bringing diverse cultural resources to students in British Columbia public schools; they thus impose the very opposite of Canada’s claimed status as an inclusive, multicultural nation.

We urge that, in future, teachers educated outside of Canada be seen as an asset in the Canadian teacher labour market. Opportunities for professional development that occur concurrent with employment, rather than as a prerequisite for it, have proved effective in other professions. For example, the federal Human Resources Development Corporation currently funds a programme placing engineers in paid internships.

A private school administrator we interviewed saw the potential for a similar arrangement for teachers:

I would prefer them [BCCT] to say ‘let’s see how you perform in a class. I would love to see your interaction skills and the strategies you use’. That would be effective … even an interim situation for a month or two … work[ing] in conjunction with an experienced person … that would be understandable.

The B.C. Teachers’ Federation has a long history of arranging for its members to take out-of-Canada teaching positions in a variety of aid and exchange projects, acknowledging these as legitimate learning/working experiences for B.C. teachers. Comparable reverse arrangements could be developed for newcomers to teaching in B.C. programmes that acknowledge, rather than devalue, diverse cultural and social capital. These could provide important professional experiences for host and newcomer alike.

The mainly positive experiences of those who do enter programmes for re-credentialling suggest that these programmes both value diverse identities and provide opportunities to develop new dimensions of teaching identities. Nevertheless, the negation of identity often triggered by teachers’ initial encounters with institutional requirements is of great concern. Those teachers who resisted institutional forces negating their identities often did so at the cost of time and energy that could be more productively channelled. Teachers initially credentialled outside of Canada potentially have much to add to the education of all students in Canadian schools. Fulfilling this potential requires that these educators’ encounters with Canadian educational institutions engage, rather than silence, their voices.

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Notes

1 Teachers immigrating to B.C., whether from outside the province or outside the country, are required to submit their qualifications to the BCCT for authorization to teach in B.C. The College, upon examination of non-B.C. credentials, makes determinations regarding possible requirements to establish eligibility for B.C. teaching certification. Teachers from outside Canada currently need to take two semesters of teacher education and may variously need to pursue the following requirements depending on their previous documented education: (1) course in each of Canadian history, Canadian geography, a laboratory science and mathematics, and (2) courses in English. Further, whether a teacher intends to seek certification for teaching secondary or elementary school will, in combination with the teacher’s documented academic and professional preparation, also have implications for the re-certification requirements that the College of Teachers will stipulate.

References


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