Immigrant teachers’ lifelong learning experiences: research that informs the pedagogical practices of adult educators and teacher trainers

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I asked the man who is in charge of setting teaching barriers and he said, ‘We want our teachers to be highly trained. We expect to staff our schools with qualified and highly skilled teachers.’ Was he suggesting that I was inadequate? Sub-par? Not as good as ‘home grown’? Who made the rules in this place? …I was told Canada was in need of teachers, but obviously not teachers like myself. ['Leia', research participant]

Trac: I do not know whether I will be successful in the teaching ... I think I am one of very few minorities who has gone through this [teacher education program] here and I think I might be one of very few immigrant women who has gone through the system.

In this paper I examine the lifelong learning experiences of women who have migrated to Canada and were all teachers in their countries of origin. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital to help understand the women’s lifelong learning experiences as they move into teacher education programs in their effort to become certified to teach in Atlantic Canadian provinces. The paper demonstrates how a research project focusing on the lifelong learning experiences of a specific group of adult learners can inform the pedagogical practices of adult educators and teacher trainers.

Research participants and methodology
This paper is based on research conducted since 2005 and is on-going¹. The research has involved 24 research participants who are women who migrated to Atlantic Canada (some as international students, some as permanent residents or as temporary workers. Some now have Canadian citizenship). Before migrating to Canada, they were teachers in their home countries and some are now teaching or are attempting to get certification to teach in Canada. I refer to the research participants throughout this paper as
internationally educated teachers (IETs). They originate from Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Iran, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Poland, France, Australia, Mexico, and El Salvador.

This research methodology for this study is arts-informed. In groups of 5 to 7, the research participants regularly met to share experiences of integrating, immigrating, re-credentialing, and teaching. We usually began our sessions with about 15 minutes of silent flow writing in which the women wrote in a language they preferred about an experience related to teaching, integrating and immigrating. Following this one woman talked about or read what she had written, in English. All the women, including the story-teller, then chose a media (paint, blocks, clay, pastels, and other materials) to respond to the woman’s story. Then, taking turns we each talked about our artwork and how it related to the storyteller’s story. The ‘data’ consist of the participants’ art work, narratives (all meetings were audio taped and transcribed), and written pieces.

**Theoretical framework**

The narratives of the IETs indicate a complexity of subtle and not so subtle socially exclusionary and inclusionary experiences based on several factors such as their citizenship, gender, race, class, language proficiency, accents, age, class, etc. To examine the lifelong learning experiences of the IETs, I turn to Pierre Bourdieu, a French social philosopher whose work has had a significant influence on sociology of education around the world (Savage & Bennett, 2005, p. 1). For the purpose of this paper I focus on the fundamentally connected concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*.

Habitus is defined as, systems of ‘durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72); ‘schemes of perception and discrimination embodied as dispositions reflecting the entire history of the group and acquired through the formative experiences of childhood’ (Nash, 1999, p. 177). In a sense ‘the habitus contains the ‘genetic information’, which both allows and disposes successive generations to reproduce the world they inherit from their parents’ generation’ (Crossley, 2003, p.43). The actualisation of the habitus depends on the social location or field.

Fields consist of networks of relationships. In a sense fields are like a kind of game with players, stakes and ‘trump cards’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 230; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Within fields various forms of capital flow and because of the unequal distribution of capital, fields are sites of struggle and in a constant state of flux (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986).

Capital, which is a set of resources and power, takes many forms such as: cultural capital (e.g. knowledge, education, skills, attitudes, expectations, tastes, etc.; including linguistic capital, which is having proficiency in the dominant [bourgeois] group’s language); social capital (e.g. group
memberships, networks of relationships); economic capital (e.g. money, material wealth, resources) and symbolic capital (e.g. prestige or recognition; in effect, the legitimating of other forms of capital). Capital is power ‘which define the chances of profit in a given field’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 230).

While Bourdieu’s work has been criticized for being overly deterministic in that it is said to downplay the possibility for reflexivity and rational critique, ‘paint[ing] an overly consensual picture of the social order’ (Crossley, 2003, p. 45), I assert that his work (particularly his concepts of field, habitus and capital) helps to pose new questions and to unsettle simple explanations of, for example, social exclusion of certain individuals in certain contexts. I believe his work can help us bring into discussion the ‘undiscussed’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169) and expose the critical impetus for change expressed by the IETs in this research and to elucidate the possibilities of transformation within social structures.

The ‘field’ of teacher education
The IETs’ experiences are located across several fields which are situated within complex social, cultural, political and historical contexts. In this discussion I centre on the IETs’ experiences in teacher education programs in Atlantic Canadian. Atlantic Canada is a region that attracts and retains fewer immigrants compared with other regions in Canada. The urban centres in Atlantic Canada are not comparable in size to the major urban centres such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal or Edmonton, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, or Calgary, and do not attract a large number of immigrants. In the Atlantic province of Nova Scotia visible minorities represent just 4% of the provinces’ population (Census 2006, p. 2). Of the visible group which identified as Black, the vast majority (91.7%) were Canadian-born. Halifax, the capital city of Nova Scotia, has the highest proportion of Canadian-born racially visible groups in the country (Miller, 2009). With few immigrants in recent years and few visible minority groups, Atlantic Canada is a region with a relatively more homogeneous population compared with other regions in Canada. Moreover, when looking at the teaching profession in North America, the majority of those in the profession are White (Delpit, 2002; Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004; Phillion, 2003).

Nelly: When [I was a teacher in my home country] that made me feel wonderful. I felt I was being highly respected, like a superhero, and I was very useful.

Through the data IETs illustrate how their cultural, social, and symbolic capital is valued differently in the field of Atlantic Canadian teacher education programs compared with their home countries. Leia, for example, states: ‘Everything we are experiencing outside this culture seems to be discounted’.
Sara adds, ‘All your experiences back home have been erased. That makes me so sad… so depressed. ... I have to start as a fresh child’.

Many IETs (most of whom already have formal certification and teaching experience from their countries of origin) are required to complete teacher education programs (in part or in its entirety) in order to continue their teaching careers in Canada. Teacher education programs are presented as neutral places, relying on so called objective formal curriculum and evaluation systems, where some people are assumed to be ‘naturally’ suited and others are screened out. ‘Discourses in this university space function in ways that privilege whiteness, so that whiteness persists as what is worth knowing and as an identification worth performing’ (Schick 2002 p. 101). Some of the IETs highlight the ways in which racial and cultural identification processes play a critical role in the so called ‘rightful occupation’ (p. 101) of candidates in teacher education programs. IETs express their frustration, grief, and humiliation as they recognize that, ‘at the risk of feeling themselves out of place individuals who move into a new space must fulfill the conditions that that space tacitly requires of its occupants’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 128).

Margaret: [I was in Canada] …three years before I started studying my university degree here… But when I got into the university this is where I got the culture shocks. …that is when I got that ‘Canadians are different’ and ‘I am not doing this in this way and people might think I am different’… So I went to the [teacher education program] and there I really found there are cultural differences. …we usually face the situation that the white people, the people who are intimidating us … If I am meeting the white people, oh I am sorry for using this term, Canadian people for years, they would say ‘you are useless’ in their mind. When we have some good idea, they even don’t give some thoughts on it.

The IETs refer to their lack of cultural capital, such as Canadian middle-class attitudes, accents, networks, social skills, apparel, language as well as stories, odours, and lack of familiarity with North American popular culture. As they attempt to ‘play the game’, the IETs learn their lack of cultural capital represents to others in the field uncouthness, abnormality and backwardness. Trac, who is from an Asian country, provides an example of a time during her practicum when she was teaching her students about culture. She shared a personal story about how she has to ‘flick a switch’ depending on whether she is in her country of origin or when she is in Canada and sometimes she forgets to flick the switch back again. When this happens her friends ‘back home’ tell her she is acting like a ‘White man’. The co-operating teacher responded to this story by scolding Trac in front of the students (as well as immediately after in the hallway). Trac adds,

The teacher said, ‘I am from English culture, my culture is this, this, this. I don’t know what your culture is. In this class, you are supposed to teach in my way’…. I wrote a letter of apology and said I was sorry to the teacher. …I felt I
was pushed to the corner. I couldn’t move and leave. And every day I felt it was like, yes ma’am, yes sir, no ma’am, no sir. …it was very unpleasant.

Recurring themes in the IETs’ artwork and writing are of being silent (for example gags over mouths), being behind obstacles (that one must jump over or maneuver around), and being cut off from ‘mainstream’ society (for example, curtains over windows, being inside buildings with no doors, and being in darkness). The voices of some of the IETs include:

* I feel kind of scattered and small
I’m trying to hold all the pieces of myself together
It’s taking a lot of my energy to try to not collapse
It’s not super solid
I’m not very powerful,
I’m not (in) very control much of what’s happening.
There’s a lot of people making decision for you
I was so stressed
She frightened me in front of students and made me so small.
I cried. I just couldn’t take it any more
The stress made my back hurt
What is the problem? Why is the system not accepting me?
People are just ruling on me … and I am just falling apart everyday
I am losing my strength.
Sometime I just say, ‘Oh, God this should be the last day of my life’
You are hurting, because you think that you don’t belong or your education is not as good as the people who are already there.

For many IETs negotiating the field of teacher education programs involves psychological upheaval and trauma. They depict the pain of having to break off parts of themselves, become small scattered pieces, in order to fit within the new field, re-evaluating and vying for capital.

While the IETs are finding themselves ‘suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves in’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 19) they are also moving into fields in which their cultural and social capital is useable power. One such field is the arts-informed research group sessions, where the IETs have a strong sense of belonging, of ‘community’, where their dispositions afford them legitimacy and where they construct the ‘Other’ (i.e. White Canadians). In one session a research participant used mixed art media to represent 2 different ‘machines’ or what Bourdieu would refer to as ‘fields’.

So here is the machine. And over here is a different kind of machine, completely different kind of machine. So, somebody who comes from this machine over to here doesn’t know how to fit into that. Then what? Do they change their shape? And become something else? Or do they stay like this and then change the shape of the machine… like, on both sides? Both the…person and the machine itself [are changed].
Her artwork and narrative remind us no field or habitus is fixed or static. While trying to fit into the metaphorical ‘machine’ Leia elaborates on her transformation:

[I] have been fractured and I had to put it together again, perhaps even built it into something more defined, something stronger, something that would withstand the hardships that I knew I would have to face in search of that lost belonging.

**How can this research inform the pedagogical practices of adult educators and teacher trainers?**

Through a Bourdieuan lens we see multiple ways in which conflict is maintained and reproduced in the field of higher education, specifically in teacher education programs. By examining habitus, field and capital we can develop an awareness of how power is at work/in play so that we can then more deeply analyze how unequal power relations can be challenged. As adult educators and teacher educators we are confronted with questions about the impact field boundaries, habitus and capital have on each of us as we learn to ‘play the game’, such as: What counts as normal? What counts as knowledge and who decides? Who and what are left out and to whose and what advantage? What is it to look Canadian, sound Canadian, be Canadian, to be a teacher, or a student in a teacher education program? What is it to be an immigrant, an immigrant woman, an immigrant teacher? What complexities and assumptions are hidden in words such as ‘school’, ‘student’, and ‘teacher’, ‘immigrant’, ‘immigrant woman’, ‘Internationally Educated Teachers’? What is the legacy we are leaving on the school system, on the children in those systems and what should that legacy be? What are the costs involved as we negotiate fields, vie for capital and embody habitus?

The diverse experiences of IETs within the fields of teacher education programs can help us (adult/lifelong learner educators and teacher trainers) bring to light what we often fail to see. The IETs actively and creatively bring into question habitus as well as capital/ power within fields. Their narratives contribute to a re-imagining of teacher education programs, the credentialing process, the positioning of female IETs in the education system, etc. Further, we cannot deny or underestimate the agency of the IETs as they engage in critical reflection, story-telling, dialogue, artwork, etc.

A key learning from this research for adult educators and teacher trainers is the critical role the arts can play in social action. One example is art-informed research method (Brigham & Walsh, in press; Walsh & Brigham, 2005) and another is *Readers Theatre (RT)* (Walsh & Brigham, 2007). Based on my collaborative research with Susan Walsh, we have created, performed, and workshopped a readers theatre for teacher education candidates with some of our research participants at our university. The RT script juxtaposes the voices of our research participants and text from policy documents and a range of adult/teacher education literature. It also incorporates images such
as the participants’ artwork. The script and performance are deliberately “a
decentred, complex, and multi-voiced text (which) offers space for readers
and audience members to consider and reflect upon the performance” (Walsh
& Brigham, 2007, pp. 20-21). The RT is an innovative and interactive
approach aimed at educating students in the teacher education program. It
addresses many issues with regard to racism and misconceptions about
immigrants as well as concerns about the Eurocentric nature of the
curriculum/hidden curriculum in Canadian schools.
Each time we have presented the readers theatre a discussion period
followed. Without exception, audience members have expressed surprise
and dismay, sometimes shock and occasionally skepticism about the stories
and images, and have sought further discussion with the women who have
acted as readers. Many have indicated that they had not previously given
serious consideration to the experiences and perceptions of people who
immigrate to Canada although a few related to the women’s stories and
shared some of their own. (Walsh & Brigham, 2007, p. 21)
This research reinforces for adult educators/teacher trainers of the
importance of dialogue (and reflection) in learning (combined with such
processes as flow writing and other artistic means).

Endnote
1. Since 2005, my colleague, Susan Walsh, and I have been conducting
research together on Internationally Educated Teachers in Atlantic Canada.
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Council (SSHRC) (2006-2009) and Metropolis (2005, 2006). Currently,
another phase of research is underway which involves additional research
participants and the use of Theatre Collective Creation.

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