

Voices Unheard: Stories of Immigrant Teachers in Alberta

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Published online: 14 April 2014

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Abstract This paper presents the stories of four immigrant teachers as they endeavor to resume their teaching careers in Calgary, Alberta. The teachers in this study participated in a six-month professional bridging program in Calgary in 2008 in order to upgrade their professional knowledge and to meet Alberta certification requirements before seeking employment in local school boards. A narrative inquiry methodology was used and data was collected from a series of unstructured interviews over a two and a half year period from September 2008 until May 2011. Data from the interviews were compiled into individual narratives that chronicle experiences of professional transformation and acculturation. In a changing educational Alberta landscape that is becoming increasingly diverse, stories of internationally educated professionals are increasingly relevant, yet seldom found in the literature on teaching.

Keywords Internationally educated teachers · Acculturation · Professional integration

Introduction

In 2010, an account of a group of internationally educated teachers from Jamaica who immigrated to Alberta in the 1960s was published in the Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy. According to this article, approximately fifty Caribbean teachers settled and taught in Alberta during that period to fill teacher shortages caused by the increasing population of post-World War II baby boomers in the prairies (Kelly and Cui 2010). The publication that carried this article was a special issue dedicated to exploring the some of the challenges of internationally educated teachers (IETs) in Canada. Research from other provinces on the experiences of internationally educated teachers specifically Ontario, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and British Colombia were included in the journal and can be found elsewhere in current educational literature on this topic.

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The ability of professional immigrants to gain access and achieve success in re-qualifying, obtaining, and retaining employment in their fields has become a growing focus Canada in recent years (Statistics Canada 2007). Internationally educated teachers (IETs) and professional bridging programs for teachers have been included in this focus. There is a growing body of research on systemic and social barriers faced by immigrant teachers in their professional integration and acculturation in Canada (Benyon et al. 2004; Brigham 2008; Basia 1996; Deters 2008; Kailasanathan 2006; Mawhinney and Xu 1997; Michael 2006; Phillion 2003; Ryan et al. 2009; Schmidt et al. 2010; Taraban 2004). Schmidt (2010) finds recent interest in immigrant teachers merited by the vast numbers of the teaching workforce in Canada, "Immigrant teachers comprise a minority group worthy of particular focus in light of the fact that teaching constitutes the largest profession in Canada" (Canada Teachers Federation 2006 in Schmidt 2010, p. 236).

This paper introduces a longitudinal study (from September 2008 to May 2011) of the lived experiences of four immigrant teachers who participated in a six-month professional bridging program for internationally educated teachers in Calgary, called the *Transitions To Alberta Classrooms* (TAC) program offered by The Calgary Board of Education and the University of Calgary. The purpose of this study was to explore the teachers' professional experiences after having completed the bridging program and to offer insights into the lives of immigrant teachers in Alberta as they transform their teacher identities in new educational contexts. The methodology of the study was a narrative inquiry through which unstructured interviews and conversations allowed the participants to describe their lived experiences from their own perspectives. This research sought to answer the overarching research question: *What can be learned about the professional integration of immigrant teachers in Alberta through examining narratives of their lived experiences?*

Fifty years have passed since data was collected on the lives of a group of Jamaican immigrant teachers in Alberta. In the current economic climate in Alberta, there are neither teacher shortages nor active recruitment of internationally educated teachers to fill workforce gaps. The foreign born population of Alberta exceeded the half-million mark in 2006, and immigration to Calgary now makes up almost twenty-five percent of the urban population growth in Alberta (Statistics Canada 2010). As a result, Alberta classrooms have become highly diverse, reflective of this recent wave of immigration to the province. Despite these statistics, many immigrant teachers have not yet been able to pass through the many barriers that stand between them and the practice of their profession in Alberta. This inquiry focuses on four immigrant teachers who tell their emergent stories as they live this process in Calgary, Alberta. It is not only timely but intrinsically set in time, place, and context. This study aims to give voice to the lived experiences of teachers seldom heard, and to begin to view the changing pedagogical landscapes of twenty-first century immigrant teachers in Alberta.

The Transitions to Alberta Classrooms Program

As a result of the interest of some administrators in the Calgary Board of Education who observed the underemployment of international teachers in their schools, many of whom were working in school lunchrooms and as educational assistants, in 2006, a grant was awarded to the Calgary Board of Education to conduct a needs assessment and program design for a professional bridging program for internationally educated teachers. This grant was funded by Alberta Immigration and Employment. The

program model that resulted from this report was entitled, the *Transitions to Alberta Classrooms* (TAC).

A pilot of the Transitions to Alberta Classrooms program was offered through a partnership with the Calgary Board of Education and the University of Calgary in February 2008. It was a full-time, six-month program, offering 360 h of classroom instruction and 360 h of practicum teaching. Internationally educated teachers who met a minimum language proficiency test (Canadian Language Benchmark 7 or TOEFL IBT 70+) were recruited for the first intake of the program in November, 2007. The first cohort included eight teachers from Argentina, the Congo, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, and the Ukraine.

A review of the research on bridging programs for internationally educated teachers indicated that a practicum or practice teaching experience would be critical to the successful preparation of teachers with international qualifications (Cruikshank 2004; Shervey and O'Byrne 2006; Walsh and Brigham 2007). This component was embedded in the TAC program and required participating teachers to be in schools for approximately half of the allocated course hours. The educational content components consistently suggested by other IET program models included study of the philosophy of the system of education in the local context, curriculum design and unit/lesson planning, classroom and school operations, methodology and learner-centered instructional strategies, classroom management and assessment strategies, and thorough knowledge of the Alberta Program of Studies and Teacher Quality Standard (TQS). The professional language components of the program included the development of professional language ability and clear communication taught, practiced, and applied through an integrated model of language instruction for specific purposes. One instructor was hired to teach the program, and serve both as the classroom instructor and practicum advisor. That instructor was also the investigator and author of this research project.

Study Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

The participants for this study were recruited from the first cohort of the TAC program by the researcher. Of the eight teachers, four agreed to be interviewed three times over approximately a two and a half year period. The first interviews took place in March 2009, approximately eight months after the completion of the TAC program. Subsequent interviews were conducted in November 2009 and November 2010. The location for each interview was determined by the participants.

Each interview was guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of questions was determined prior to the conversations. The conversations from all of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in full. The written texts were sent to each teacher for their editing and approval. Changes to these texts by the participants were integrated into the raw data. The final written versions of each interview were assembled for each teacher by the researcher to create the individual narratives presented in this paper.

Narrative Inquiry

This study uses a narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin and Connelly 1996 & 2000; Connelly and Clandinin 1999 & 2006) where the focus is on understanding the

participants' experiences from their own perspectives. A narrative inquiry approach acknowledges that teacher knowledge is derived from personal experience and can be described as narrative life history. It is through examining life histories we may come to see the richness found in experience—the “starting point and the key term for all social science inquiry” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. xxiii).

There is, in fact, a void in the literature containing the stories of immigrant teachers in Canada. Elbaz-Luwisch (2004) offers an explanation, “Stories of teaching in a new culture are rare in the literature on teaching, perhaps because the phenomenon itself tends to go against the grain: teachers are seen, at least in part, as representatives of the culture, responsible for passing it on to the new generation, and one would not expect this important task to be put in the hands of newcomers to the culture” (p. 389). In Bell 2002, argues that narratives can function in opposition to the elitist scholarly discourses often found in research and that it provides an opportunity for marginalized groups to participate in academic knowledge construction.

“People live stories, and in telling these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. xxvi). In the context of immigrant teachers in Canada, life history methods can help illuminate the participants' personal successes, struggles, and development within the social contexts of their lives as immigrant teachers. They can also reveal how teachers respond to, and establish connections between their past and present lives inside and outside their classrooms (Clandinin and Connelly 1996). Personal experience methods such as conversations and dialogues can help both the researchers and the participants to establish theoretical links between knowledge, context, and identity. These connections are relevant to understanding the transformed lives of immigrant teachers in Canada as try to find their way “in” from the outside of Canadian schools.

Teacher Change as Transformation

There are many theories and models that seek to identify the processes and outcomes unique to adult learning. For the purposes of this study, transformational learning theory, specifically attributed to Mezirow (1991 & 2003) provides a theoretical framework from which to reflect upon emerging themes arising from the participants' stories. Transformational learning is described as deep learning that results from the process of extensive examining, questioning, validating, and revising one's tacit “meaning perspectives” or paradigms (Mezirow 1991). By adulthood, individuals have reached a level of analytical ability to reflect upon their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that make up their meaning perspectives. When a radically different or incongruent experience cannot be assimilated into an adult's meaning perspective, it is either rejected or transformed to accommodate the new experience (Taylor 2008).

According to Mezirow (1991), transformational learning is usually triggered by a problem and can be therefore be a painful process to go through. After experiencing dilemma, individuals critically reflect upon their situation and talk to others in a process of working through or synthesizing the dilemma within their meaning schemes or personal paradigms. After critical reflection and discussion, individuals are compelled to change, or to reorganize their ways of thinking around the problem and to take a course of action—they can no longer

accept their old ways of thinking and behaving because of the new information they have gained through the reflective process.

The challenging process of having to rebuild and reestablish their professional lives leads these teachers to reflect upon the dichotomy of who they have been and who they are becoming, not only teachers, but also as family members and new citizens of Canada. The interview process itself may have assisted the teachers to critically reflect upon and verbalize the many ways they have changed since completing the TAC program.

Limitations

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) acknowledge the ambiguity found in qualitative research methodologies, “What may appear as an objective tape recording of a structured interview is already an interpretive and contextualized text: it is interpretive because it is shaped by the interpretive processes of researcher and participant and their relationship, and it is contextualized because of the particular circumstances of the interviewer’s origin and setting” (p. 94). Thus, the relationship between researcher and participants, and the contexts and interview questions used in data collection in this study inevitably limit the findings.

Cross-cultural, cross-language research inherently brings with it a number of important considerations, many of these having to do with the interpretation of personal data collected through language. All of the participants in this study told their stories in English—their second or third language. And although the teachers have achieved a very high level of proficiency in English to become re-certificated to teach in Canada, it is likely they were not able to express their ideas and feelings in the exact words they would have used if they were communicating in their mother tongue. The researcher in this study faced the challenge of composing each participant’s narrative from the raw data through the filter of not only personal bias but also through the cultural background and linguistic abilities of the participants. In order to address some of these issues, all participating teachers were sent the finished transcripts of their interviews so that they could add, edit, or delete information. These changes were then integrated into the data, and original transcripts were revised to reflect these changes.

Participant Narratives

Lucky Chances—Naina

In her opinion, Naina was unusually lucky at the start of her teaching career in Calgary because she was offered a fulltime teaching position shortly after receiving her Alberta teaching certificate in August 2008. Unfortunately, as time went on her luck would change.

Naina is originally from Pakistan and was trained as a secondary science teacher. She taught for eight years in Pakistan before immigrating to Regina, Saskatchewan, with her husband in 2003. Naina stayed home with her son when he was born, and when he was ready to start kindergarten, she decided she would try to go back to work as a teacher. She understood that she would need to become re-certificated in order to teach in Canada, so

when her husband's position was transferred to Calgary, she applied to Alberta Education. She was told by the teacher certification office that she would need to complete 18 credit hours of coursework in order to be re-licensed to teach in Alberta.

Naina and her family moved to Calgary in late 2007, and she was accepted into the first cohort of the TAC program right before the course began in February 2008. Naina was successful in the program and completed two practicums—one in a science classroom in a junior high school and the second as a Chemistry teacher in a large high school. Approximately two weeks after the TAC program finished, Naina was offered a full-time position as a math teacher in a Calgary junior high school.

Naina's new school was located in a part of Calgary that was largely populated with immigrant and working class families. Naina explained during our first interview that she had found managing the behavior of the students in the classroom difficult and that she had experienced a few uncomfortable confrontations with parents of her students. However, Naina felt that she was able to address these issues over the course of the school year and that over time she had learned how to develop positive relationships with the students and gain the respect of their parents. She attributed this feat to the support she had received from her coworkers and administrators. During the first interview, Naina reported that it had been a tough but rewarding year—she found teaching the junior high students in her new school on a daily basis far more demanding than when she completed her practicum teaching in the TAC Program.

Naina explained that a thorough understanding the curriculum had taken a lot of time during her first year of teaching. She found the block periods of one hour and fifty-five minutes difficult to plan for, and she had trouble keeping her students on task and productive for that amount of time each day. Managing student behavior was challenging, but changing her approach with her students had helped her to be more successful. She described this new approach as being friendlier—she tried get to know her students' home lives, their personal interests and problems, and she communicated with them individually outside of class, rather than just during class time. "I think in my opinion I have become closer to my students. Before I was a traditional teacher in Pakistan so I kept some distance between me and my students. I asked my colleagues what to do (in Calgary) and they told me different strategies. I started talking to my students about their personal problems and issues and now they are coming closer to me. That is maybe the reason I have earned their respect".

At several months in the school, Naina felt respected and welcomed by her colleagues but didn't always feel the same about the parents in the school. She especially was challenged by some of the Caucasian parents, she thought perhaps this was because she was the only immigrant teacher in the school. When the parents challenged Naina or blamed her for their children's academic issues, the school administrators stepped in to deal with them. This contributed to Naina's feelings of being professionally supported despite the challenges she had faced from parents. Language was another area that Naina identified as hindering her ability to communicate with some parents. "Sometimes you are talking to the parents you just try to pass through the conversation, you try not to have a deep discussion and change the topic because you don't have the vocabulary to go deeply".

In addition to gaps in her language proficiency, Naina identified cultural issues that proved a barrier in her teaching. Naina had never taught children with the kinds of issues that her students had, some of them coming from homes where there was little

supervision, where families were divorced or dealt with alcoholism or drug abuse. “So before I didn’t think about that situation but now as time progresses I know that these issues happen in this society. So that’s why now I feel myself more confident and comfortable because I came to know about their problems and now I can easily handle them”.

In her second interview, almost a year and a half after finishing the TAC program, Naina described her first year of teaching in Canada as the hardest in her life because she had never come across the situations she faced as a teacher in Calgary in her previous teaching positions in Pakistan. Naina felt that after that year of teaching she had learned how to gain respect from her students and their parents. She had learned how to team-teach and collaborate on lesson planning load with her colleagues. She attended professional development workshops on behavior management and integrating technology into the curriculum. Naina decided that in order to be successful in Canada, she needed to be more flexible in her teaching—for example, if she couldn’t get through a lesson because the students were having difficulty, she could finish the next day. She had adapted her teaching for style and methods to suit her students’ needs and now that they knew her better and she was more relaxed, she could have more fun with them. Naina described how in her second year she dressed up for Halloween and her students really loved it. “I am friendlier with the teachers now. I have some students and some teachers, they like to ‘high five’ me. They enjoy it. These are the small examples. And now I am becoming part of this system. I am adapting myself”. She said that she was really enjoying teaching her second year and that the experience was changing not only her teaching style but also her confidence and her way of living in Canada.

Naina explained some of the personal transformations that were ensuing from her living and working in Canada. “You cannot change anyone’s personality. Whatever I am I am. My nature cannot be changed but I can change my way of dealing with people, with my kids and all that. I’m changing a great deal. Before I was a stay-at-home Mom and I was really strict. Now I am so friendly with my son that he wants to play with me. He loves to go out with me. It’s definitely changing with my son, as well”. Naina even explained her acculturation to Canada further when speaking about a recent trip she and her husband had taken to Pakistan for a family wedding. They found some things at “home” strange, “Now we went back home and we found lots of stuff we don’t like over there and people say, okay, now you are Canadian, you are not Pakistani”. She explained that teaching in Canada had brought her out of a depression—that she was lonely and depressed at home before she went into the TAC program and started teaching. She was happy to be working, to feel productive and busy as a beginning teacher in Calgary. It was a return to another “home” where she felt comfortable—the classroom.

During our third and final conversation, Naina explained that she had learned much about teaching in Canada in her first two years of full-time teaching. She felt that planning and understanding the curriculum was critical to being successful, as well as understanding how to manage and develop relationships with students. She had developed collaborative relationships with her colleagues and had developed her English language proficiency enough to feel she could now communicate effectively with the parents of her students. She felt that her work ethic had been appreciated by her administrators and that she had a lot to contribute to the school community as a

multilingual, multicultural teacher. “And as I told you, as the time passes I start to become more comfortable. I know there are lots of kids with issues but I have quite good relationships with them”.

Unfortunately, just about two and a half years after completing the TAC program, Naina was not longer teaching math in the junior high school in Calgary. Budget cuts had forced many principals to let go their newer teachers, and Naina had been one that did not have her probationary contract renewed. By the time I saw her, she had done a few days of substitute teaching but was primarily staying at home. Naina was confused and saddened by not being able to keep her teaching position and she was not enjoying being a substitute teacher.

At the end of our last interview, Naina reiterated that she hoped to be offered another chance to teach in Calgary, especially since she felt she had a much better understanding of teaching and the culture of Canadian schools. Naina decided to further her education by applying for a Master’s degree in Educational Technology while she waited for another opportunity to teach fulltime in a local school. Not one to give up, Naina decided that she would continue to work towards that goal until she attains it. She hoped once again that luck would be on her side and that she would soon be hired as a fulltime teacher again.

The Heart and Soul of Teaching—Driada

Sometimes, the lives of immigrants are so intriguing they seemed to have been created for characters in films rather than lived by real people. Such is the case of Driada, who has had a fascinating and diverse teaching career that spans three decades and three continents.

Driada was trained as a teacher in her native Ukraine in the mid 1970’s. The Soviet regime still occupied the Ukraine when Driada received her Bachelor of Science degree at the National University of Donetsk. She went on to teach high school chemistry and biology in Donetsk for six years after obtaining her degree and teaching certificate. She immigrated to France with her husband in 1985, and although she was fluent in French, she found it difficult to find a teaching position there. She and her husband then immigrated to Ndjamena, Chad, where her husband worked for the government and Driada helped open up an international school with the Canadian consulate. Driada worked as a teacher and administrator in this small African school for almost sixteen years before immigrating to Canada.

Driada applied to Alberta Education’s Department of Professional Standards for her teaching certificate soon after arriving in Calgary in 2007. She took English language courses at a local college, worked for Enmax (an energy company) and in a preschool before joining the first cohort of the TAC program in February 2008. During the program, Driada had her first practicum placement in a science class in a French immersion high school, and the other in an English medium school where she taught French language to junior high students. Driada had been advised that she would need to complete over thirty credits in education to receive her Alberta teaching certificate. After completing the TAC program, Driada was accepted as a substitute teacher with the Calgary Board of Education while she continued to take coursework towards completing these requirements and working part time in schools.

During our first interview six months after the completion of the TAC program, Driada spoke of how much she loved her time working as a substitute teacher, and the fascination she found with the diversity of students in the schools where she taught. She had taken every substitute job offered to her, regardless of the subject area or the age level of students. Driada described how she strove to develop strong relationships with many of her students, especially those who needed a little more attention or lacked confidence. She had always valued relationships with her students in her teaching prior to immigrating to Calgary and this never altered, despite the different teaching contexts and the different ages of her students. “After the children when they feel you take care of them, they start to talk to you about their dog or their grandfather that died. This is the work that hasn’t changed for me. I have had this kind of work with students in all countries. This is the human approach”.

Driada felt welcomed by all of the school communities when she worked as a substitute teacher despite feeling that her developing English language skills were a barrier in some circumstances—especially when she was trying to teach English or Social Studies in an English medium school. Driada also felt that because of her intermittent time in schools and the coursework she had to complete during her free time, she wasn’t able to delve as deeply into the topics or prepare as thoroughly as she would have liked to. Despite these challenges, Driada felt that overall, teaching in Canada was fun—that schools were open and welcoming to immigrant students and teachers, that children were generally treated better than in schools in the Ukraine and Chad, and that there was more motivation and support for teachers. “In the Ukraine after the revolution, the relevance of the curriculum was confused. The content of the textbooks was changed to reflect communist ideologies. In Chad there is no respect for teachers”. Driada said that she loved the collaborative nature of teaching in Canada—the sharing of resources and ideas between teachers, students, and parents.

During our second conversation a year and a half after finishing the TAC program, Driada reflected on her growing confidence and feeling of belonging to the professional teaching community in Calgary despite still being a temporary teacher. She felt her English language skills were improving steadily and that the educational coursework that occupied her out of school hours were helping her to improve her pedagogical knowledge and skills. Driada considered herself to be a life-long learner, and being immersed in the educational world through working in different schools was helping her to feel that she was understanding better and becoming part of the educational culture in Calgary. “Even in subbing you grow every day. You improve your knowledge and you observe. In the first year I was more observing, right now I take action. When we talk during lunch I can say my opinion more often, not only hearing other people. I participate in discussions more. I suppose that now I’m more flexible and helpful for the classroom teacher. I can share something that I have learned during my subbing experience in a variety of subjects and schools in Calgary”. Driada actually felt that substitute teaching was an important opportunity for professional development and growth for teachers, offering a variety of learning experiences that were perhaps more important than coursework or teaching in the same classroom all day.

In addition to her growing participation as a teacher in Calgary schools, Driada also said she was personally changing as a result of living in Canada. Driada felt that there was more balance in her life as a teacher in Calgary, and that she now spent more of her non-working time being active and engaged in physical activities than in her previous teaching positions. She felt her overall quality of life had improved and she appreciated

the clean air and beauty of the environment around her. Driada found herself feeling more “Canadian” as time went on, and she used an example of driving according to the speed limit as a demonstration of her increased respect for the rules of her society. She felt responsibility for the well-being of her community and that in return, the community protected and valued her contributions. Driada spoke of feeling especially lucky to have come to Canada to resume her career and family life.

At the time of our last interview, it had been almost two and a half years since Driada finished the TAC program. She had completed all of the coursework for her Alberta teaching certification and she was still working as a substitute teacher for the Calgary Board of Education. She described this work, however, as having changed. “Right now my subbing has taken another character. Now I go to a school where I know the children, the students and the teachers. This is trust – the students trust me, the teachers trust me, I trust them. This is confidence, like a triangle, and this is very important”. Driada developed a network of schools and professionals that were calling her regularly for work. She found great satisfaction in this work despite not yet having secured a permanent teaching contract because she was learning so much. She attributed all of these steps as vital in her transformation into a “Canadian” teacher.

“Relationships are the heart and soul of learning both for children and adults in school. As teachers we know this very well. Even though learning is individual, it is shaped by feelings and attitudes that are formed within a social context”. Driada described her feelings about being an internationally educated teacher with a philosophy that had not fundamentally changed, although she felt transformed in many ways. She described herself an educator who considered teaching her vocation. After having taught previously in three other countries, Driada greatly appreciated the opportunity to continue her career in Canada. She worked hard to develop relationships with her students everywhere she taught and this, above all, connected all of her teaching experiences over the span of her career. “Everyday something happens and students show you they are happy to learn with you. This is my objective, my purpose”.

A Good Thing—Lien

Lien was born and raised in Hong Kong and immigrated to Canada in 2004 with her husband and two young sons. Lien had lived in Canada prior to immigrating—she completed her teacher training at the University of Alberta in 1988 and then returned to Hong Kong to begin her teaching career. Lien taught Mathematics in a senior high school for sixteen years in Hong Kong in a “Band One School”, which is a school for high achievers, and when she returned to Canada as an immigrant, she hoped to resume her teaching career. Unfortunately, after renewing her Alberta teaching certificate, Lien was unsuccessful in passing the screening interview with the Calgary Board of Education. She lost all confidence in her ability to work as a teacher in Canada.

In 2008, Lien signed up for the Transitions to Alberta Classrooms (TAC) program hoping that it would help regain her confidence, improve her English language skills and enhance her understanding of current teaching methodology. After completing the program in July 2008, Lien once again interviewed with the Calgary Board of Education and this time she was successful. Two weeks after her initial interview with the school board, Lien was requested to fill a math position in a junior high school; a few days after that, she was teaching. It all happened extremely quickly and was very

exciting. But as I would learn later, it didn't end in the way Lien anticipated or hoped: "When I look back on this incident, I feel I made a bad move, made a bad decision. It was the first offer I ever got. I was so excited to accept it without researching the school I was going to teach in. I didn't know if I turned down the offer if I would get another. After that I feel I should have waited".

During our first interview eight months after the TAC program had finished, Lien explained that the position she had been offered was in a junior high school in a part of Calgary where the students have many challenges—socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural—it is an area with many immigrant and working class families. The school had undergone a lot of change in its administration—in fact, the principal that hired Lien was no longer principal at that school on her first day of work. It was a junior high school that was undergoing a huge amount of change in a short period of time and teachers starting beginning their careers in that tumultuous environment would have to be strong, resilient, and resourceful.

The first real challenge Lien faced was the behavior of her students. "I tried to do a few things to calm them down, both harsh and soft, they just didn't listen to me. They talked a lot, some complaining to each other, some interrupting, and they walked away from their desks. Some gathered by the windows and some ignored me. I had no idea what I could do to manage this class. I was so frustrated and stressed. In my past experience, I never had to deal with these behavioural challenges". Lien explained that she found it challenging to plan tasks that would keep her students engaged during the entire one and a half hour block she taught them. There was a new math curriculum to implement, new administration, and unresponsive, unmotivated, and low achieving students to teach. In addition, Lien put pressure on herself to achieve the same quality of teaching that she had given in Hong Kong. All of this proved incredibly stressful for Lien. Two months after the beginning of the school year, she resigned from her position.

During the time after she had resigned, Lien had been substitute teaching in the Calgary Board of Education and she was still saddened by her brief and unsuccessful fulltime teaching stint in Calgary. She was reflective about how it had all occurred and why she had become overwhelmed by her students' behavior and lack of interest in math. Lien felt over the course of time that had passed since leaving that position, that if it hadn't happened so quickly (finishing the course, getting the job and starting teaching) she may have been better prepared to handle the challenges. "If I was hired in the month of June and able to access teaching resources, I would have enough time to be better prepared over the summer. At least I could have my lesson planned; I could get my teaching materials prepared". Feeling unable to handle her students' behavioural issues, in addition to not feeling prepared to teach effectively made Lien feel incompetent as a teacher. "I felt I was not capable to teach students with such behavioural challenges. I was so frustrated to see my class in such chaos".

Lien also felt that even though she had successfully completed two practicums in Calgary, she hadn't fully understood how to handle challenging students. After having been a substitute teacher for the months following her first assignment, Lien felt she had a deeper understanding of how to approach such classes and students. In fact, Lien even mentioned in this first interview that were she offered this teaching position again, she would probably take it. "I think I have learned to be flexible, not thinking back too much or sticking back to where I used to be. As a sub, I should be ready to teach in

different schools. If I don't change I will have the same problems as before. If I get a second chance to teach there, I might say yes now. I now know what to prepare for and how to get myself prepared for the situation".

Despite the very real challenges Lien faced in her professional life since completing the TAC program, Lien said she still loved teaching and looked forward to going to schools every day. "I always feel happy to be a teacher. That's my life career. I chose to be a teacher a long time ago and this is the only thing I feel like doing". Lien spoke of good times she had with students in schools where she felt she had made a positive difference and was appreciated by them. "They come to you for help and they listen even though you are a first time teacher for them. They listen and respect you. That's nice". Lien also spoke of feeling stronger and more confident as a result of teaching in different classrooms with different groups of students. She maintained her determination to one day get another chance at a full-time teaching position.

When Lien was interviewed for the second time almost eight months after the first interview, she had been substitute teaching quite regularly at one or two large high schools in Calgary. She felt that she was doing more actual teaching of math than in her first months of substitute teaching. Lien described herself as really growing as a teacher, "When I think back to when I was teaching in Hong Kong, I thought I knew how to manage different things but in Canada I found there was so much more to learn in terms of teaching and learning. There's something hidden I never imagined that I would know how to do. Because in Hong Kong I used to teach motivated students, excellent students, so I thought as long as I could prepare them with good teaching materials, prepare them to write the examinations and prepare them for higher education, I would do the job. But here it's different because the teacher is not always going to get motivated students. And that's the area that I have to learn besides preparing good teaching materials. I need to prepare myself to deal with less motivated students, less disciplined students. That's the hidden thing because when you are working or teaching in one school for a long time you don't know what's happening outside the school. But now it's like I'm not in the box anymore, I'm going outside the box and I have to think outside the box".

Lien described her personal and professional changes further, "It's a challenge, and I think this kind of experience moves me forward as a teacher. I feel that I am tougher because I have faced tough situations. And I think I have to grow tougher and tougher to meet the needs of the real world". Lien remained steadfast and positive in her outlook for having a teaching career again as she continued to develop relationships in schools. She described the importance of the confidence she gained through her substitute teaching experiences and how this developed slowly after having been completely lost. Lien was reflective about how these professional challenges were helping her to grow and change as an individual. "Being an immigrant you move away from your home country to a new place. There are so many challenges that you face in your new environment. I think it is good when you look back on all those years. You grow and you have moved forward in terms of the quality of life".

One of Lien's favorite stories was of seeing a student in Superstore who recognized her from a substitute teaching day in his class. The student waved at Lien and said hello to her—it meant a great deal to Lien that he had remembered who she was. In another story, Lien told about a student who thanked her for teaching her one day in a class. These small incidents meant everything to Lien and helped her to continue forward on

her professional path to teaching. “This is not just a nice way, a polite thing – they really appreciate your teaching. And for sure they learned something from that lesson, right? That’s why they say thank you. I treasure those moments”.

In our last interview conducted almost two and a half years since Lien finished the TAC program, Lien was still substitute teaching but she had also secured a short-term teaching contract in the Calgary Board of Education at the end of the academic year. She was also teaching a math course for the on-line division of the Calgary Board of Education. All of these steps helped Lien feel she was making inroads towards obtaining another full-time teaching contract. She described that time as “the most exciting part in my teaching career here in Canada”. Although she was no longer on a temporary contract during our last conversation, she was enjoying her substitute teaching at one particular high school in Calgary and was hopeful that one day she would have the chance again to have her own classroom. She felt that she now understood the Canadian teaching context and was prepared to face any student, in any school. She remained optimistic in her outlook for her future as a teacher in Canada and reflective about the value of the slower path she was taking towards achieving that goal, “So if I have a one day teaching job and I’m getting paid and learning in a school, I think I’m earning both experience and money. That’s a good thing”.

The Bitter and the Sweet—Dulce

Dulce is originally from Argentina and she immigrated to Canada with her family in 2000. She had taught PE in Argentina for almost ten years and her family lived in Thailand and Nova Scotia before eventually resettling in Calgary. Dulce began the long process of applying for teacher certification in Alberta shortly after arriving in Calgary, and to make ends meet, she worked as a building cleaner while she also cared for her two young sons. Dulce attended the first cohort of the TAC program in February 2008 and she completed two practicums during the course, one in the Spanish bilingual program in a junior high school, and the other as a physical education (PE) and Spanish teacher in a large high school. When she finished the TAC program, Dulce started substitute teaching in both the Calgary Board of Education and the Calgary Separate School District.

After a few months of substitute teaching, Dulce received a temporary contract in a Catholic elementary school to teach math and PE. She found this position challenging, primarily because she started the school year late and was given no real orientation to the school. When she arrived to teach in the school, Dulce felt unwelcomed to some degree by her colleagues and administrators. It was an isolating experience: “I wasn’t expecting to be ignored to the point that I don’t know where I stand in the school. From my heart I feel that I am a teacher but the way the people interact with me, I feel I do not exist for them”. Dulce attributed this treatment to the fact that she was different—perhaps because she was an immigrant teacher and the other teachers had never had contact with an immigrant teacher before. She sat at staff meetings with very minimal interaction with her colleagues, and it was extremely uncomfortable for Dulce. She felt ignored and unwelcomed: “I’m a ghost there”.

While she did feel ignored by her colleagues in the school, Dulce spoke of her best experiences in the school being with her students. She taught math to grade one students and even though she had not taught this subject before, “When they could

show me they have learned a lot in an area I never taught, that was really satisfying”. Dulce felt the feedback she received from her students was enough to sustain her and to help her to continue on despite feeling excluded from the community of teachers in the school. She was also reflective about being able to teach despite the challenges she was facing with her coworkers. “But I’m happy with what I’m doing. I mean teaching and you have to face things. I think it is part of life. It’s okay, you know, I am a fighter. No problem”.

During our second interview, it had been over a year since Dulce had finished the TAC program. She had resigned from her first teaching position and had signed on to be a substitute teacher with the Calgary Board of Education. She was feeling positive about her work as she had been teaching continuously for two weeks in a Spanish bilingual program. “I really enjoy it because I know what is coming. I can see what is happening, who needs more help. I can finally put to use all of the things I know, all of my knowledge”. In this school, the principal had come to her room to make sure everything was okay and told her Dulce how happy he was that she was working there. Dulce felt appreciated and acknowledged in this school by both the staff and principal, and that had a profound effect on her feelings as a “legitimate” teacher in the school.

Dulce still felt that being an immigrant teacher impacted her acceptance in the school communities; she said that she felt this was probably normal since there were so few immigrant teachers in Calgary schools. “I think it’s normal because people are not exposed to those speaking in a second language. So it’s a little bit harder for them to understand us because we have accents. It’s tiring, you know. I think that’s what happened”. Dulce was becoming reflective about the changing face of education and the effect that would have on both the immigrant and dominant communities. “Everybody has to adapt. People from here have to adapt to us and we have to adapt. When I came here I had to change a lot of things about myself. If you don’t want to change that’s okay, but if you want success in this culture and this country, you have to change”.

Dulce saw her role as an internationally trained teacher as multidimensional. She felt in one regard that she was a teacher of subjects, but in addition, she was also a role model for other immigrant teachers and a mentor for immigrant students. During our second conversation, Dulce spoke of her aspiration to become a leader of a school so that she could use her experiences to create a more effective environment for teachers and students. “I would like to be a principal of a school because I would love to have a school where all of the teachers are integrated - they work together. This is because I went through that where you are working in a school and everybody is in their own world. If I have the opportunity to be a principal I will integrate everyone. Everyone has to be as a family, working together as a family for the benefit of everybody – the students, and I would like to have the participation of the parents, which is so important”.

A year after her second interview and almost two years since she had participated in the TAC program, Dulce had secured a temporary full-time contract in a large high school in Calgary teaching Spanish and Science to mostly English as a second language (ESL) students. She was feeling more confident and secure in her work and felt that she had a better understanding how the school system worked. Dulce said that her teaching had changed, “because through experience I found different ways how to teach my subject and different ways of engaging students. It’s changing all the time”. Dulce was

working in a department with other teachers and she finally seemed to have found the collaborative environment she had been seeking. “I feel part of the school. Everybody gets together and talks about things. Before I was looking for faces and nobody answered because everyone was busy. But now they know I am here. So I think it’s a matter of time, probably. If I work here next year that will make me feel much better”.

Dulce described the relationships she developed with her students and how she was trying to inspire and motivate them to achieve. She loved working in this high-needs school where many of the students had challenging home lives and needed an adult to spend time to give them guidance and mentoring. Dulce felt this was her calling, and that she had finally found a place where she could teach in a way that made a positive difference in the lives of her students. Dulce spent quite a bit of time during our last discussion telling stories about the ways she was making an extra effort to help her students understand the many opportunities that were available to them if they could set goals for themselves. In her new teaching position, Dulce found her greatest challenge in finding time to do everything she wanted to do for her students. “The school demands you to do so many things; you have to document so much and answer emails. So this is taking me away from my time to be planning and finding resources to provide for these kids”.

In the two and a half years since finishing the TAC program and ten years after arriving in Canada, Dulce was finally very close to reaching her professional goals. She had faced both bitter and sweet along the way and this left her with a very interesting perspective on her journey into the teaching profession in Calgary, “Well, at the beginning, it’s hard and it’s a big change coming from your country where you are appreciated for your work and recognized. You come here in the middle of your life with an accent and being an immigrant and not knowing the system. So it makes you feel a little bit uncomfortable. It makes you feel that you are not part of the system. But now I know about the system and how it works. Now I know that other teachers’ attitudes are not about me but because they are so busy. So now that I know that I feel much better. I understand the system now, and I am looking forward to improving day by day as a teacher”.

Discussion

The four internationally educated teachers in this longitudinal study represent a variety of backgrounds, countries and languages of origin, subject area specializations, and professional experiences. What unites them is their unwavering desire and dedication to work in their chosen profession after immigrating to Canada, and their participation in a six-month professional bridging course with the purpose of obtaining recertification and/or employment as teachers in Alberta. Some of the teachers were more successful than the others in gaining fulltime employment after finishing the bridging program, but despite the many obstacles they faced, none of the teachers gave up on their professional goal to become a *Canadian* teacher.

Through exploring their narratives, we can see that the relationship between the teachers and their students remains a constant and critical element of their professional lives in their home countries and again in Canada. It is in these relationships the teachers renew their sense of purpose and calling to their profession. As teaching

occurs in both physical and spatial locations, and the concepts of place and space are found in these narratives. There are concrete places the teachers speak about—classrooms and schools in both their home countries and in Canada, and metaphysical spaces—sense of “finding their place” or “home” in a new educational system. *Flexibility* is a self-identified trait the teachers use to define changes to the way they interact in their new personal and professional contexts in Canada. The process of becoming more flexible is developed through time and experience, both of which are described as the essential building blocks of personal and professional transformation. A discussion of time is also relevant for placing these teachers in the current educational context in Alberta, one that is being slowly transformed by their presence. This reciprocal transformational element of the integration of internationally educated immigrant teachers in Canada has not been explored in this study, but is a relevant and important area for future research.

Some important things can be learned from the four teachers’ stories presented in this paper. One is that professional integration is a continuous process, not an endpoint; that the factors that initially draw and sustain teachers in the profession can remain constant over time, place, and space; that the process of having to relearn professional scripts can simultaneously tear down and increase professional confidence. From their stories, we can see that facing challenges in the professional acculturation process can generate a transformed self—one that has been described as *hybrid* by Bhabha (1998), composed of both who they were and who they are becoming. We can see that the acculturation process is not easy or fast, and that decisions, timing, and luck can greatly impact outcomes. Definitions of professional success can also alter and transform throughout the integration process.

The professional acculturation process is perhaps best understood in retrospect, through the telling of one’s story. In a time of growing immigration, shifting demographics, and an increasingly diverse population, perhaps it is time for us now to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a teacher in Alberta through listening to the unheard voices of immigrant teachers in our schools.

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