

Internationally Educated Teachers: The Sweet and Sour Journey of (Re) becoming Teachers in Canada

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Abstract: This literature review highlights the experiences of internationally educated teachers (IETs) navigating the teaching profession in some Canadian provinces. The study looks at the different perceptions of “good teacher” in Eastern and Western countries. The review also surveys articles discussing the value of teacher diversity. In addition, it examines the common challenges IETs encounter and the supports that some teacher education programs offer to IETs. This analysis of the literature synthesizes findings from 17 journal articles written by more than 43 authors, which were selected using online searches for journals focused on teacher education in Canada. The study has come to find that even though some institutions are making attempts to respond to the needs of IETs, qualifying bodies use more of one-size-fits-all approach when assessing IETs’ credentials and experiences, and there is a need to employ a more personalized approach to better assess IETs’ qualifications.

Keywords: Internationally educated teachers, Teacher education, Diversity, Re-credentialing

Narrative Beginnings

A flashback from three years ago appeared on my phone with photos of the walls of my well-loved elementary classroom, where I used to be a teacher. On that day, I posted an anchor chart to guide students to the *Words Their Way* routine, a word study curriculum that my former school used instead of the traditional spelling lists that are meant to be memorized without understanding the patterns that shape the ways words are spelled in English. When we moved to Canada in September 2018, my son’s teacher took pride in initiating the very same *Words Their Way* routine, and she explained to me how it is so different from traditional spelling teaching. I shied away from telling her how familiar I am with it, that I did coach some teachers in my previous school to use it five years ago in Saudi Arabia, not to mention that some of those teachers held teaching certificates from Western Countries.

I moved to Canada to pursue my Master of Education degree to advance my pedagogical knowledge, and I knew from the start that I was not qualified to teach at elementary schools. However, experiencing something is very different from only knowing about it. I struggled for quite some time to shift my identity from being a teacher to making my way into research, given my rusty academic writing and research skills at the time and the typical challenges of moving to a new country. After doing my research, exploring the requirements of qualifying as an internationally-education teacher (IET) in British Columbia, I discovered that even after holding a Canadian Master of Education, I would need to start from scratch to get requalified as a teacher. Ironically, the same teaching experience and knowledge that enabled me to study in Canada in the first place would not help me qualify as a teacher in Canadian schools.

According to Michael (2006), “immigrant teachers are a wasted resource of human potential in immigrant-absorbing countries” (p. 166). This begs the question: Is there a hidden presumption by Canadian teacher regulatory bodies that *all* IETs hold far from progressive orientation to education, and teachers still use outdated learning techniques? Canadian teachers take pride in implementing progressive teaching approaches, such as learner-centered, personalized instruction, developing critical thinking skills, design thinking, and being aware of students’ social and emotional needs. Nevertheless, many IETs I know of, including myself, are already well familiar with and have implemented those approaches in various teaching contexts outside Canada. However, I need to acknowledge that I cannot assume that this narrative represents the experiences of all IETs who immigrate to Canada and intend to resume their profession. Thus, I intend to embark on a narrative inquiry journey on the topic in the coming years of my doctoral research.

In this preliminary literature review, I explored the territory of IETs who participated in the few studies existing done on the topic. This gave me insight into their experiences and how they perceived the differences between the conceptions of being a “good teacher” in Canada compared with their home countries, or wherever they practised as teachers. In addition, I looked at the literature that highlighted the value of teacher diversity in countries with large immigrant population and its impact on students. I dug deeper into the qualification process to explore the stumbling blocks that IETs face in teacher education institutions and post-graduation, the kinds of supports that are provided to IETs by some programs, and whether there are avenues for reimagining the IETs recredentialing process.

Exploring the Territory of the “Good Teacher”

Marom (2018) explored the conceptions of the “good teacher” and how effective teaching is perceived differently in the East and the West. Marom (2018) asks “what conceptions of the ‘good teacher’ are evident in the recertification trajectory of IETs, and how do these open up or close down spaces for candidates to bring their experiences and voices to bear on reconstructing their professional identity in Canada?” (p. 169). The IET participants in Marom’s (2018) study reflected a widely different experience than my own, illustrated in the narrative beginnings above, and that motivated me to dive deeper.

According to the participants in Marom’s (2018) study, IETs seemed to wrestle with reconceptualizing “good teaching” as most of them expressed that how teachers were expected to behave and interact with students in their home countries was very different from what they saw in British Columbia (BC) schools. These participants, in my view, adopted a growth mindset where they demonstrated openness to develop their ideas about good teaching and to embrace new ways of building relationships with students, reconstructing their notion of authority figures in classrooms, learning how to consider the well-being of the whole child, and to develop more awareness of student social and emotional learning besides academic improvement. The participants highlighted certain attributes about what constitutes good teaching in the Eastern culture, where a teacher-centered approach prevails which, in turn, makes the teacher the sole authority figure in the classroom and students are expected to always show obedience.

Marom (2018) also interviewed various professionals in the recertification program in one of BC’s teacher education institutions, who expressed a concern that IETs often struggled with accepting the social aspects of Canadian classrooms. Students in Canada can freely express themselves and teachers are expected to adopt a dialogic approach, where student feedback and input in the learning process are valued — behaviours that might seem foreign to many IETs and even unacceptable in certain cultures. Another interesting finding from Marom’s study (2018) was the striking difference between how assessment is conceptualized in the East and the West; the notion that assessment is often perceived as testing that is only required at the end of the teaching process, to show how much knowledge could be retained by students, still prevails in many countries in the East. I agree that most of the learning experiences included in the recertification process are essential for IETs to help them adapt their teaching approaches to suit their new context. However, as Marom (2018) pointed out, teacher education program professionals tend to generalize the assumption that *all* IETs adopt similar views on teaching and learning. This hidden assumption places IETs in an inferior position without accounting for “cultural variations or individual agency” (p. 177).

Difference versus Deficient

What I perceive problematic is that the differences that exist among the diverse teaching cultures are often considered deficiencies, rather than opportunities to explore ways of learning and teaching. There are certain approaches to teaching that negatively impact students’ learning, which we cannot deem to be positive differences. However, I find it unfair to assume that any teacher who practiced outside Canada will adopt unacceptable teaching approaches. Even the IETs who themselves admit that teaching in Canadian contexts is foreign to them and that they have a lot to learn still have a lot to offer as diverse teachers who could bridge the gaps between teacher and student. According to Marom (2018), “the IET participants held more complex conceptions of teaching that were not dependent solely on their countries of origin or cultural affiliations” (p. 177). In a progressive education system that urges teachers to adopt personalized and individualized approaches when teaching diverse learners, and to always connect students’ prior knowledge to new learning, I find it shameful that the recertification process still uses a “cookie cutter” approach to certify teachers. What could be the underlying challenges that hinder the recertification process from being personalized, or at least to start with, what could IETs offer rather than what do they need to learn? The recertification process needs to be perceived as a transformational journey that adds more value to the Canadian education by providing our students with diverse ways of looking at the world, and “open[ing] pedagogical possibilities for highly diverse educational systems such as BC’s” (Marom, 2018, p. 179), rather than a program that supports IETs by giving them what they need so they could only conform to the expected model of the Western teacher (Marom, 2018).

The Value of Teacher Diversity

Ladson-Billings (2005) was among the scholars who emphasized the importance of diversity among teachers and teacher educators to “demonstrate that our actions are consistent with our rhetoric” (p. 231). She iterated that the teaching profession is dominated for the most part by white, middle-class, female, and monolingual teachers. It is important for racialized students to see that diverse teachers are successful in helping them “experience a more accurate picture of what it means to live and work in a multicultural and democratic society” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 231). Similarly, Villegas et al. (2012) asserted that “teachers of colour serve as critical role models for all children, especially for children of colour” (p. 285). Villegas et al., (2012) emphasized the social role that schools play in shaping student values, and how the overwhelming exposure to white teachers will inevitably lead to students internalizing unconscious messages that speak poorly of racialized adults and associate them with the less professional careers in the society they live in. Racialized teachers contribute to boosting the sense of worth and confidence of students of colour and motivate them to strive academically and to be able to “envision professional careers for themselves” (Villegas et al., 2012, p. 285).

Another argument that supports the unique role that racialized teachers could play in the lives of culturally diverse students is their ability to draw on cultural referents to facilitate learning, and hence improve academic outcomes of culturally diverse learners. According to Villegas et al. (2012):

Teachers who are familiar with the lives of children and youth of color are better able to build these bridges to learning for those students. For example, teachers might explain new curricular concepts with illustrations or examples taken from the students’ lives, embed new academic ideas and skills in problem-solving activities that are relevant and meaningful to them, select instructional materials that tap their interests, create classroom learning communities that take into consideration interaction patterns and approaches to learning prevalent in the students’ homes and communities, and use a variety of evaluation strategies to maximize students’ opportunities to show what they know in a manner that is familiar to them. (p. 287)

Child at al. (2011) emphasized that preparing racialized teachers will benefit both children in schools and pre-service teachers in teacher education programs, “learning to be culturally responsive and equity minded facilitated by exposure to instructors and peers who have different perspectives and funds of knowledge based on their different social identities and experiences” (p. 6). *While racialized teachers, IETs in the context of my study could potentially support culturally diverse students in several ways; this is not to claim that the mere existence of IETs in Canadian classrooms is enough to support culturally diverse students or even to negate the fact that there are many white teachers who address cultural diversity in their classrooms in meaningful and engaging ways* (Villegas et al., 2012). IETs need to be adequately prepared to teach in Canadian classrooms and they need to be familiar with the appropriate ways to integrate diversity in their teaching practices. “It would be unrealistic to expect teachers of color to develop culturally responsive teaching practices without the benefit of professional preparation to support this” (Villegas et al., 2012, p.288). The purpose of bringing up this conversation is to highlight that IETs represent valuable assets to our students, and to examine the ways their (re)credentialling process could be made more attainable.

Stumbling Blocks or Steppingstones

In 2007, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) acknowledged the negative impact of the lack of teacher representation for students from racialized backgrounds. As a result, the Ontario Ministry of Education, in its settlement with OHRC in 2007, proposed “that post-secondary institutions that provide teacher training and certification actively promote, advertise and recruit teachers and teaching candidates from racialized communities” (OHRC, 2007, section VI, no.38). Holden and Kitchen (2018), who analyzed admission policies in some of Ontario’s teacher education programs, contended that the demographics of the student population in those teacher education programs did not reflect the values of diversity and equity. They called for admission practices to be aligned with the education programs and they placed an emphasis on matching policies to the equity goals (Holden & Kitchen, 2018).

Cho (2010) conducted a critical ethnography to explore the lived experiences of five immigrant teacher candidates (ITCs) at one teacher education programs in Ontario. According to Cho (2010), ITCs’ stories reveal “the discourse and the conditions that have restricted ITCs’ access to B.Ed. programs and thwarted their success in field placements

and coursework, complicating the imagined immigrant and the concept of what it means to be Canadian” (p. 19). Many of the ITCs in Cho’s (2010) study came to Canada with a well-established sense of teacher identity, “which is negated by many faculty practices” (p. 18). According to Cho (2010):

Pressing faculty to expand their vision of “teacher” to include multiple demographics including a range of ages, sexual orientations, socio-economic statuses, and so on would be a crucial step in re-imagining the field of “teacher”. When faculties of education and educators focus on the perceived “deficits” of ITCs (e.g., accent, content knowledge, familiarity with the Canadian school system) they are legitimating unjust social relations and reproducing and reinforcing the image of the prototypical teacher. Focusing on what ITCs do not have negates what they do have. Exploring the taken for granted in schools reveals the dominant discourse that continues to ensure a white, female, middle class representation amongst TCs. (pp. 18-19)

Challenge #1: Admission to Teacher Education

IETs’ first step towards becoming teachers is securing admission into a teacher education program to fulfill their missing requirements of qualification. Despite the commitment of Ontario’s Ministry of Education (OHRC, 2007), research shows that IETs struggle in getting admitted to teacher education programs for myriad reasons. In most Canadian provinces, teachers need to hold a non-teaching, undergraduate bachelor’s degree (in Arts or Sciences), and a teaching degree (B.Ed.) that includes a practicum (Thompson et al, 2011). Drawing on my personal experience, I qualified as a teacher back home without a teaching degree that included a practicum; in order to resume teaching in Canada, I would need to attend a teacher education program in full, as attending only the practicum component is not a viable option.

According to the BC Ministry of education (2020), requirements to apply for a certificate of qualification in BC include taking prerequisite courses in Canadian studies, mathematics, and science. Teacher education programs make it compulsory to finish the required prerequisite courses and provide proof of written English proficiency to get admitted into their programs. Moreover, applicants to teacher education programs need to acquire recent teaching experience hours, half of which — according to most universities — needs to be locally obtained (UVic, 2020, Admission Requirements section). Local teaching hours could be accumulated through volunteering at schools, summer camps, or after school programs (UVic, 2020, Admission Requirements section), which makes it even more challenging for IETs to acquire after recently landing, as newcomers. In the case of IETs, the teacher regulatory body in the province assesses their qualifications and usually sends them an evaluation letter which details what they need to do in order to qualify (BC Ministry of Education, 2020). The begs the question, where does IETs’ previous teaching years, their practical experience, knowledge, and skills, fit into the admission application requirements for Canadian teacher education programs? These were the same experiences that deemed them as skilled immigrants in the first place and granted them immigration to Canada.

Challenge #2 English Language Proficiency

A very sophisticated level of English proficiency is usually required of IETs to enable them to navigate course materials and to disseminate their ideas in class discussions (Faez, 2010). However, according to Faez (2010), IETs need to take up language development as a lifelong learning goal rather than living in constant state of feeling “less” than Canadian born teachers. Faez (2010) highlighted the need for IETs to familiarize themselves with the aspects of the culture they live in while maintaining their cultural identities. It is also worth mentioning here that when individuals immigrate to Canada, only their *general* use of English language is assessed to ensure they will be able to function in an English-speaking society. However, their academic use of English is only assessed if they choose to pursue further education in Canada. What I find somewhat problematic here is that even if IETs pass the *academic* English test to apply to universities, it does not really demonstrate how well they will be able to use academic English in real contexts beyond the “test” setting, as it is relatively less challenging to practise for the predicted test structure and questions. Hence, getting the required score is attainable by most applicants and, in my opinion, does not accurately reflect their real academic English proficiency. I strongly agree with Faez (2010), that mastering a second language in academic settings requires a lot of patience and, more importantly, a growth mindset to develop enough resilience and persistence to continue learning.

Challenge #3: Cultural and Societal Challenges

Some participants in Faez's (2010) study found that cooperative learning practices, critical thinking, and analytical skills were a challenge; "due to their previous educational experiences and the societal power structures in their countries of origin, some candidates were not used to 'criticizing' or commenting on the scholarly work of others" (Faez, 2010, p. 11). This is true in many countries; however, over generalizing could be unjust to many IETs who might not have similar experiences. In Chassels' (2010) study, which also focused on IETs' experience as they take part in an initial teacher education program, an incredibly unique participant account of an adult Chinese immigrant journalist who made the decision to take up teaching career in Ontario was described. That participant, who acted as a representative of the participants in Chassels' (2010) study, offered a narrative account in a semi-structured interactive interview that provided realistic insight into the many challenges, and the handful of supports, that IETs experience in their initial teacher education B.Ed. programs. IETs experienced challenges associated with time deficit, economic constraints, language issues, cultural knowledge, feelings of isolation, and inferiority compared to Canadian-born or assimilated teachers. In addition, Chassels' (2010) study highlighted the topic of intra-cultural racism by some Canadians who might share the same cultural heritage with newcomers, and yet attempt to distance themselves due to their perception that newcomers are regarded as "lesser" by society.

Challenge#4: Practicum

Myles et al. (2016) conducted a study on the *Alternative Teacher Accreditation Program for Teachers with International Experience (ATAPTIE)*, launched to supplement IETs with the skills and knowledge they needed to resume their professions in Ontario (Myles et al., 2016, p. 233). According to Myles et al. (2016), the participants acknowledged power relations between teacher candidates, associate teachers, faculty liaisons, and school community, and how they factor in the IET candidates' practicum experience and evaluation. Some participants shared positive and collaborative experiences in their practicum, while others expressed feelings of resentment due to subtle or indirect racist gestures from their associate teachers. Some participants admitted that they were "put down" because of their non-native accents, or because of the striking differences between their previous teaching experiences and what they were expected to do in their practicum in order to succeed in the evaluation.

Challenge #5 Hiring Experiences

In Abawi and Eizadirad's (2020) qualitative study which drew on Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Matias & Zembylas, 2014, as cited in Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) (Gillborn, 2005; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005, as cited in Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020), they implemented document analysis and semi-structured interviews to capture the hiring experiences of ten educators in Ontario schools, in regards to equity and inclusion practices. They selected participants from various racial backgrounds to "contextualize their experiences in relation to race" (p. 21). Abawi and Eizadirad (2020) concluded that many of the job-seeking experiences were informed by the applicants' racial identities, and that "while overt biases, such as the segregation in the form of residential schools... have diminished, unconscious bias continues to thrive" (p. 25).

In another qualitative study that examined occasional teachers' work in Ontario, Pollock (2010) interviewed eighteen participants to understand their experiences as non-permanent teachers. According to Pollock (2010), many occasional teachers in Canada (Teachers on Call in BC) received their education outside of Canada; "IETs are marginalized by virtue of their unique work arrangements and resulting attitudes and beliefs about them as a group act as barriers that limit or obstruct social interaction between themselves and other teachers" (p. 3). According to Pollock (2010), in addition to the difficulty IETs encounter in securing occasional teaching hours, they start their careers in an unfortunate position where they face further marginalization because of the attitudes and behaviours of some co-teachers, and certain exclusionary practices in the schools that hire them.

Supports in Teacher Education Programs

Chassels' (2010) study is one of the rare studies that identified few supports that IETs received in the program, such as being offered one directed course that was designed specifically to respond to IETs' needs. In addition to the course being designed and delivered by a scholar who has a strong background of ESL, the participants in Chassels' study (2010) were provided a safe space to address their anxieties. Moreover, the participants reported an appreciation for

the constructive feedback offered by their associate teachers and program faculty, and perceived feedback as an opportunity for development and improvement (Chassels, 2010). However, it seems that the challenges that IETs experienced in general significantly outweighed the supports they received.

Rethinking the Credentialing Process for IETs in Canada

Some institutions in Canada tailored bridging programs to support IETs' qualification process. Wimmer et al. (2019), developed a program with some unique characteristics to support IETs. IETs had their own separate bridging seminar that helped address their challenges as newcomers to the profession in Canada, such as linguistic and cultural barriers, coming to terms with their transformed identities, and going back to school after many years of professional experiences in their home countries. Wimmer et al.'s (2019) reflective paper offered a very positive perspective of the participants regarding the program, in contrast to the perspectives of IETs offered in Chassels' (2010) study, which drew on a similar bridging program in Ontario. More challenges were expressed by the participants in Chassels' (2010) study, even though the two programs were very similar in design, including a designated component for IETs.

Another program that offers opportunities for IETs to update their qualifications rather start from scratch is the University of British Columbia Teacher Updating Program. "This program offers the opportunity to update teaching credentials while becoming familiar with recent developments in British Columbia schools" (UBC, 2020, para 3). In addition, Simon Fraser University offers the Professional Qualification Program (PQP), the goal of which "is to assist in the adjustment and acculturation of [immigrant] teachers to the BC school culture" (SFU, 2020, para 1). However, the applicants to both programs must take the same prerequisite courses and acquire domestic hours. Applicants also need to have a previous teaching degree in education that includes a professional practicum (BC ministry of education, 2020, Requirements to Apply section) even if they were qualified to teach in other countries with different degrees, which is the case in many countries where teachers can enter the profession with non-teaching degrees in other fields.

Concluding Thoughts

Certainly, some institutions are investing time and resources to design programs that respond to the needs of IETs and make their credentialing process more efficient. However, I think that the teacher qualifying bodies in Canada need to employ a more differentiated and, in some instances, personalized approach when assessing IETs' applications to identify their missing requirements. According to Kelly and Cui (2010), "Our research might point to the need for Canadian authorities to develop schemes that work with and recognize the knowledge that immigrants bring with them rather than consistently telling IETs that they have no skills" (p. 19). Even though IETs' applications get individually assessed, the approach used is more one-size-fits-all. It is true that some IETs come with far less education and experiences compared to what the profession requires in Canada. However, some teachers were hired at good schools in their home countries where they were trained to practise many of the Canadian education aspects. According to an IET participant in Pollock's (2010) study who volunteered at some Ontario schools to understand the education system, "there was an implicit assumption that Canadian-trained teachers were superior to teachers who were trained elsewhere in the world" (p. 7); the participant also noted that many schools outside Canada commonly employ educational models and even use the same resources used in the Ontario schools. All in all, perhaps it is time for teacher regulating bodies in Canada to revisit their approaches when looking at IETs' past qualifications, so that our actions can truly match our rhetoric (Ladson-Billing, 2005).

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