

How British Columbia Offshore School Teachers are Constructed on Government Websites

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Abstract: This article examines how the province of British Columbia (BC) constructs teachers on its government websites for the BC offshore school program. BC offshore schools are authorized to teach the BC curriculum with BC-certified teachers abroad, and currently operate in eleven countries. Our critical discourse analysis of BC provincial government websites shows that teachers are constructed as independent and responsible for their own understanding of employment conditions and for adapting to other cultures. A video on the government website does not give teachers speaking roles; instead they appear as background actors in still photographs. A secondary website mentions that teachers help internationalize the BC curriculum. While the main website issues cautionary advice to potential teachers, it does not explain any benefits of teaching abroad such as gaining economic, cultural, and social capital. The findings in this study will advance scholarship in the positioning of teachers in neoliberal global education, particularly in the BC context.

Keywords: British Columbia offshore schools, international school teachers, critical discourse analysis, neoliberal subjects, teacher precarity

Introduction

This article examines how the province of British Columbia (BC) constructs offshore school teachers on its government websites. Since the late 1990s, BC offshore schools (BCOS) have operated in eleven countries¹, teaching the public provincial curriculum to students from the host country (Cosco, 2011; Province of BC, 2023a; Schuetze, 2008; Wang, 2017). The BC offshore school program certifies schools to employ BC-certified teachers and principals to teach, assess, and evaluate the BC curriculum. Graduates earn the same BC high school diploma that is conferred in Canada. Within this program, many Canadian teachers have relocated, either temporarily or permanently, to countries that host BCOS. Offshore school teachers working at a BCOS must be certified by the BC Ministry of Education's Teacher Regulation Branch or be in the process of obtaining certification (Province of BC, 2023a). BCOS teachers are not union members, are directly employed by the school, and are held accountable to the Professional Standards for BC Teachers (BC Teachers' Council, 2019). There are multiple ways for teachers to find employment contracts at the various private offshore schools, but they are hired directly by the schools, usually by principals or the Offshore School Representative. Even though teachers are hired by the individual offshore schools (not the BC Ministry of Education), there is some information for potential BCOS teachers on the BC government websites, which we analyze in this article.

In this study, we examined two BC government websites and one video to understand how offshore school teachers are constructed and portrayed. The three publicly available data sources are: (1) the primary "Offshore School Program" (OSP) website, (2) a three-minute promotional video titled *British Columbia's Offshore School Program* embedded on that website, and (3) a secondary government website called "BC for High School." We formulated the following research question to guide this study: How do BC provincial government websites construct teachers working in BC offshore schools? Our study is punctuated by each author's experiences as BCOS teachers over the past decade and our shifts to emerging scholars in international curriculum and pedagogy. We define *BC teachers* as classroom teachers who hold BC provincial certification. In this study, we do not analyze the administrators or locally certified teachers even though they are employed in BC offshore schools. This paper begins with a literature review and a description of the theoretical framework that guides our study. Then, we explain our methods of inquiry, and detail our findings. We have organized our findings into three sections based on the data sources. Finally, we discuss the findings and present our conclusions to the study.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

We situate our study within scholarship that explores the field of international school teachers because offshore schools are a type of international school. Specifically, we examined studies of precarious teacher careers by Poole (2019), Rey et al. (2020), and Tarc et al. (2019). With most BC offshore schools located in China (Province of BC, 2023a), it is worthwhile to engage Poole's (2018; 2019) concept of *Chinese internationalized schools*, which are

¹ Currently there are schools in Bahrain, Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Egypt, France, Japan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Taiwan, and Thailand (Province of BC, 2023a).

Chinese schools authorized to host a Western “international” program within a Chinese host school. BCOS located in China primarily enroll Chinese students and most programs are autonomous cohorts within larger hosting schools, so there are similarities and differences with Poole’s (2018; 2019) categorization.

Poole’s (2019) interviews with international teachers in two of these internationalized schools found that some of these teachers embraced living in precarity and autonomously chose to do so, while others were ambivalent or scornfully accepting of their situation, feeling that they were unemployable in their home countries. Precarity is described as unstable living and employment conditions as foreign residents and employees in private institutions. Poole (2019) explained that “global educational precariat” was not a homogeneous group but consisted of subgroups based on certain contexts and individual relationships with their passport and chosen countries (Poole, 2019, p. 73). International teachers are one of the subgroups, who are confident and privileged enough to teach abroad and accept a certain level of precarity. Poole’s (2019) study informs our research by viewing BCOS teachers as neoliberal subjects who have the abilities (or passport privileges) to cross borders to teach the BC curriculum abroad and extend the reach of Canadian cultural influence; yet also live in precarious employment circumstances on yearly contracts. An effect of precarity may be teacher desires for more fulfilling, secure, or full-time teaching jobs either in other international locations or in one’s home country. The subsequent impact on schools is higher staff turnover in some offshore and international schools.

Three studies have explored the staffing of BCOS and teacher turnover issues. Schuetze’s (2008) comprehensive case study of three BCOS in the early years of the program described the teaching staff as either early-career novices or newly retired. He also noted the high turnover rate, whereby teachers usually only stayed in their offshore school teaching positions for one or two years due to feeling isolated or envisioning a lack of long-term career prospects at the school. A decade later, a study by Fittler (2019) focused on the high turnover of teachers at some Canadian offshore schools in China. Her study reported that factors such as challenges with adapting to the cultural differences between their home countries and their expectations of life or work in the new country, dissatisfaction with professional growth opportunities, or poor working conditions all contributed to the high turnover at offshore schools. Schuetze (2008) explained that staff turnover was a problem that led to continuity issues in offshore schools as “a lack of ... longer-term experience that could be shared with new teachers” (p. 14). A student participant in Alexander’s (2019) research expressed that the very high turnover of teachers at her BCOS was detrimental to her learning and comfort at school. Although this was a problem for her education, she harbored no ill will, and even sympathized with the Canadian teachers, who she felt desired to live in major Chinese cities like Shanghai or Beijing or wanted to go home to their families. High turnover of BC teaching staff has been a long-standing issue, especially in schools outside of major cities.

Additionally, we drew from Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital accumulation, based on our own motivations to work at offshore schools. Ian, for example, was somewhat motivated by economic capital, as he could earn a higher wage in China rather than South Korea where he first started working. Laura, on the other hand, chose to work at a BCOS for the cultural capital she could gain, as she got to experience Chinese culture more intimately than she could by simply traveling around the country. Both authors also gained social capital (friends, professional acquaintances, and references) and cultural capital (knowledge of other societies and languages) through teaching internationally.

Furthermore, studies of international school teachers by Tarc et al.’s (2019) as part of the middle class aligns somewhat with our lived experiences, specifically in terms of how teachers and their families perceive capital accumulation over their careers and sojourns abroad. By centering the family as a unit, the teachers in Tarc et al.’s (2019) study expressed that raising children as expatriates created new opportunities for social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) through cross-cultural friendships and cultural capital through internationally-minded education. Tarc et al. (2019) interpreted one participant’s perspective of gaining social and cultural capital as more of a habitus of cosmopolitan capital as they had access to social encounters with more worldly elites and becoming more comfortable in such situations. Their study also identified the opportunity to earn economic capital as an additional appeal of international teaching, with one participant and their family seeking better paying opportunities as they developed more professional connections within the international education community. Alternatively, Rey et al. (2020) suggested that the potential to relieve international teachers’ student debt “might constitute a key element in the process of extracting teachers from a nation-state framework ... to become a globally mobile workforce” (p. 365). The study by Rey et al. (2020) reported that international school teachers can gain significant economic capital, as

they can “enjoy packages that include multiple advantages such as accommodations on site, insurances, and flights, and profit from living in regions that are substantially less expensive than their home surrounding[s]” (p. 366).

As we examined the discourses about teachers on the BCOS websites, we considered how teachers were both privileged because of their university education, professional teacher certification, and a strong, mobile Canadian passport, however were simultaneously precarious because of unstable or undesirable working conditions and, sometimes, considerable student loan debt early in their careers.

Methodology

We examined three data sources concurrently and discursively, always informed by our prior personal and professional knowledge of offshore schools. We conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1993; 2013; Janks, 1997; Scollon, 2008). We considered Fairclough (1993) definition of discourse, which is “a form of social practice,” such that “it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping” (p. 134). Fairclough’s (1993) interpretation of CDA “aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes” (p. 135). Therefore, as Janks (1997) outlines, Fairclough’s interpretation of CDA prompts researchers to not only consider the linguistic characteristics of the text, but also consider the historical and social conditions that shape the text. Fairclough (2013) explains that discourse is defined in relation to some other object (beyond the text) and is not independently definable, explaining “we can only arrive at an understanding of it by analyzing sets of relations” (p. 3). This is referred to as discourse – the meaning of text beyond the sentence level. For us, this means that the social and historical context of the province of British Columbia, and of the offshore school program is part of our analysis.

We started with first viewing the video, titled *British Columbia’s offshore school program*, took notes on our observations of the spoken and visual discourse, and then transcribed the spoken and visual text. Next, we analyzed the Offshore School Program (OSP) website (Province of BC, 2023a) where this video was hosted, considered the ordering of headings, and questioned why information about offshore school teachers was meagre. Through exploring the links on the OSP website, we found the website titled “BC for High School” (Province of BC, 2023b) and initially noticed the structural and aesthetic differences of this website compared to the OSP website. Our findings in the next sections focus on the portrayal of BCOS teachers, such as how teachers are included in discourses on the websites and video, and where they are more frequently absent, silent, or marginal in the overall visual, oral, and textual data.

Findings

Construction of Teachers on the OSP Website

Upon first viewing the Offshore School Program (OSP) website, we see a photograph of a teacher standing at the front of a classroom facing students who have their hands raised. The teacher stands in a traditional teacher position at the front of the class with an authoritative but caring posture; thereby portraying teachers as independent professionals who will confidently lead the class through the BC curriculum. The raised hands create a narrative of eager and intelligent students responding positively to the teacher’s prompt. The narrative of this photo shows that a BCOS blends traditionally teacher-centered classrooms with the features of liberal, Western education, which is illustrated by wall decorations and students in casual attire in the photograph. Below the photo is a short statement outlining the basic requirements for a certified offshore school. Included in this statement are the words “B.C.-certified teacher” hyperlinked to a teacher recruitment webpage. By providing this link, the website authors are indicating the importance of *certified* teachers in offshore schools. The next hyperlink is formatted in a bullet point with the text: “See all of the certified and pre-certified offshore schools and their inspection reports,” which leads to a list of all the offshore schools organized by country. On this webpage, each dropdown section includes the school location, the owner/operator, the Offshore School Representative, and PDFs of recent annual inspection reports. This section of the website could be used by teachers to learn more about current or future employers, as it provides access to inspection reports, administrator contact information, and school websites. Although there are no job postings on this website, the inspection reports and school websites provide insight into the quality, size, and structure of each school and serve as an entry point for teachers to compare various offshore schools.

Teach at a BCOS. The aforementioned “B.C.-certified teachers” hyperlink on the main OSP webpage leads to another webpage with information for potential offshore school teachers, titled “Teach at a B.C. Offshore School.” This page begins with an explanation of the importance of teachers having a valid BC teacher certificate, for the “delivery of the B.C. educational program at offshore schools” (Province of BC, 2023a). The word *delivery* indexes teachers as transmitters of the curriculum onto students which aligns with neoliberal views of curriculum as a product.

The emphasis placed on a valid teaching certificate could be seen as a clarification or assurance for teachers or potential BCOS owners that the province is responsible for certifying teachers. It is followed by a clear assertion that the province is not responsible for helping with employment visas for teachers or “resolving disputes between teachers and offshore schools” (Province of BC, 2023a). In other words, while educational credentials such as provincial teacher certification, student credits, and diplomas are transferable across borders, Canadian labour laws and collective bargaining rights are not applicable in other countries. Although these warnings could deter some teachers, the province may also be assuring investors in the host countries that Canadian laws and human rights codes have limited or no applicability in the countries where offshore schools operate.

The section headers on this informational webpage are written as command sentences, or the imperative mood, with leading verbs: *find*, *follow*, *do*, and *be*. The four headings are “Find a teaching opportunity; follow the rules; do some research on what to expect; and be optimistic and adaptable” (Province of BC, 2023b). The first heading prompts teachers to find an offshore school teaching position on *Make a Future* – a BC government job posting website for most BC domestic and offshore teaching positions. The next section, “Follow the rules,” instructs teachers to visit the consulate or embassy of the destination country to learn more about the immigration requirements. There are no links or additional resources associated with this section, meaning that teachers are expected to find and understand this information themselves, ideally during the application and hiring process.

The next section continues to place the responsibility in the hands of teachers, with a list of questions that teachers can research before accepting their teaching positions or ask in their job interviews. All these questions are related to the work conditions, such as “How many hours a week will you work?” and “What rights do employees have?” despite the earlier statements on this website that excuses the province from supporting teachers with these aspects of their jobs. The final section, “Be optimistic and adaptable” again puts the responsibility of emotional regulation on teachers with suggestions for how they can adjust to life in the new country. The first line, “A successful transition will depend on your attitude” removes all responsibility from the province of BC to support teachers in their schools and new countries. Moreover, there are no links to services that may help with these transitions, like counselling or immigrant services. While we tacitly agree that a teacher should have an optimistic, adaptable, and positive attitude when moving to a new country, offshore school colleagues and administrators should have support systems in place to help teachers adjust to their new lives and jobs. These suggestions are helpful and possibly self-evident, however, genuine testimonials or mentorship from experienced teachers would add a personal element to supporting an individual deciding whether or not to apply to work at an offshore school.

The prevailing discourse on this webpage positions teachers as having their own agency and responsibility for getting a job, understanding the employment contract, following immigration laws, and adapting to life abroad. The pronoun “you” is prominent on this webpage, positioning teachers as solely responsible for deciding to live and teach abroad. Considering that BCOS are hosted in some countries that have (or have had) travel warnings that state “exercise a high degree of caution” (Government of Canada, 2023), links to this potentially valuable resource are noticeably absent. Also missing on this webpage is advice for LGBTQ+ couples who may have to hide their relationships in either their professional or personal lives depending on which country they choose. Overall, while the authors of this webpage assume that teachers have the agency to seek and obtain jobs, the tone of this advice comes across as patronizing and demeaning to teachers.

Constructions of Teachers in the Video

The three-minute video titled *British Columbia’s Offshore School Program* (Province of BC, 2018) is embedded on the main OSP website and includes clips of students, parents, and administrators speaking about BC offshore schools and the BC curriculum. Within this video, multiple students and administrators speak, but teachers do not. This

omission is a notable discourse because teachers are most directly responsible for enacting the curriculum through their daily pedagogical interactions with their students. Moreover, the most prominent speaker is the BC Offshore School Inspector, who speaks four times throughout the video. This positions the inspector as the foremost expert in offshore education. By only featuring administrators and principals, the implied message is that the managing and administering of the BC curriculum is what matters most; and that teachers are secondary. The absence of teachers in the video may have been an organizational oversight or an implicit suggestion of teachers’ insignificance in BC offshore schools from the perspectives of the BC government.

Table 1

Speakers in the BCOS Video

Job or Role	Country (number who speak)			
Students	France (2)	Egypt (1)	Colombia (2)	
Graduates	China (2)			
Parents	Japan (1)	France (1)		
Principals	China (1)	Colombia (1)	France (1)	Japan (1)
Administrators	Canada (3)			
Teachers	(0)			

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the speakers in the video. Their name, position, and country appear on a title card below their spoken contributions. The emphasis on students, parents, and administrators (both in-school principals and Canada-based senior administrators), and the silencing of teachers is made clear in this table. However, teachers are not completely absent; their images are featured in still photographs and short video clips interspersed throughout the video, much like silent background actors. Teachers are seen interacting with students during a group activity, actively engaging with a student presentation, attending school sporting events, and presenting graduation ceremonies. Overall, this video further constructs teachers as insignificant persons who are simply delivering the curriculum and are peripheral to the BCOS program.

Construction of Teachers on the BC for High School Website

The second website we analyzed is titled “BC for High School.” It has a different URL² because it is not hosted on the main BC Ministry of Education website and is structurally and aesthetically different from the OSP website. The website’s homepage is divided into two equal halves, with the left side titled “Study BC’s Curriculum internationally” and the right titled “Study in British Columbia.” Beneath each subtitle are short overviews of the two programs, followed by a link that invites users to explore either the “Offshore” or “Onshore” programs. This website includes both the onshore international student program, which invites students from abroad to study in BC public schools around the province, and the offshore program which is the focus of this paper.

There are fourteen subsections of this website, which briefly describe the BC curriculum, application procedures for opening new BCOS, and testimonials from students, parents, inspectors, graduates, principals, and offshore school representatives. There are no testimonials from teachers; the only time teachers are mentioned in this website is in the subsection titled “Unique Advantages.” This webpage lists seven advantages of BC’s education system, focused on the credibility of the BC high school diploma, the possibility of BCOS students earning places at postsecondary institutions globally, and the diversity of the student body at many offshore schools. Teachers only

² <https://bcforhighschool.gov.bc.ca/> instead of <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/international-education/offshore-schools>

appear in the final statement: “[t]he expertise and experience of B.C. educators working at offshore schools – their contributions enrich teaching practice and help schools develop an international curriculum” (Province of BC, 2023b). This sentence describes teachers as experienced professionals with expertise who contribute to BCOS education through their practice and curriculum development. However, the reference to “international curriculum” is ambiguous and could refer to content adaptations on course overviews or pedagogical adaptations in each teacher’s classrooms. Adaptations may include culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; 2018), language support for English language learners, or simply the inclusion of local courses as part of the overall school curriculum. While only including one sentence about teachers relegates them to the periphery, their contributions are shown in a positive and professional light. However, the main discourse on this website prioritizes the BC curriculum over the teachers.

Discussion

How Teachers are Constructed as Neoliberal Subjects

Neoliberal subjects are a contradiction because they are “held responsible and accountable for [their] own actions and well-being” (Harvey, 2007, p. 65) while simultaneously conforming to the omnipresent neoliberal market that not all actors have equal access to. This is apparent in the three different representations of teachers on both the BC government websites and the video analyzed in this study. The main OSP website portrays potential teachers as active individuals responsible for finding a job at a BCOS and then adjusting to life in a new country (Erlandson & Karlsson, 2022; Saltman, 2014). Yet, while teachers are highly educated and have a professional certification, they are not given adequate representation on the webpages and videos we analyzed; their voices are not equally valued. The suggestions for teachers on the OSP website read like a response to complaints from previous BCOS teachers, instead of as helpful guidance or support that would frame teachers as valuable to the success of the BCOS program.

A different construction is found in the video: teachers are voiceless and frozen in images, while all other stakeholders (students, parents, administrators) have speaking roles. The BC curriculum is more prominent in the video than the professional qualities of BC certified teachers. For example, the BCOS Representative for China explains, “We try to blend devotion to study, strong computational skills, the inquiry base, group research, interaction, higher level thinking skills,” (Province of BC, 2018) while photos of teachers interacting with students play silently behind this audio. The teachers are seen but not heard. Finally, on the “BC for High School” website, there is only one sentence that mentions teachers in which they are constructed as experts who help develop the BC curriculum for use in international contexts. This construction is misaligned with the silent and still portrayals in the video.

Precarity is also a feature of neoliberal careers that applies to BC-certified teachers who leave Canada to work in offshore schools. The findings in this study align with Poole’s (2019) comments about the precarity of this specific subgroup of international teachers in terms of their labour rights, some civil rights, and collective agreements for teachers certified in BC that do not apply in foreign countries. The notion that teachers are replaceable neoliberal subjects corresponds with scholarly studies that show that high staff turnover is a problem in BCOS (Fittler, 2019; Schuetze, 2008). The negligible presence of teachers in the video and websites is congruent with the precarity of overseas employment which is contingent on one-year contracts and sufficient student enrollment.

Do BCOS Teachers Accumulate Cultural, Social, and Economic Capital?

We found that the capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Tarc, et. al, 2019) that teachers can gain when working at a BCOS is rarely mentioned: teachers are paid wages and therefore accumulate economic capital, but there is no information about the potential cultural and social capital that teachers should accumulate during their years abroad. The OSP website explains what *not* to do, how to behave, how to properly represent the BCOS program, but does not entice teachers with opportunities to gain cultural and social capital, such as the tacit professional development of working across culture and the sharing of international pedagogies. In the video, while the students speak enthusiastically, and are evidently gaining cultural capital through their education, teachers are static and stagnant, as an ever-present, reliable, and replaceable feature of the schools. The “BC for High School” website mentions teachers, but more as an additional (not a central) element of the overall BC curriculum brand for the students in the global education market.

Conclusion

Through our discourse analysis, we found that there are contradictory constructions of teachers on the BC offshore school websites (Province of BC, 2018; 2023a; 2023b). We found three constructions of teachers: (1) as independent sojourners who need to be given disclaimers before accepting a job at a BCOS, (2) as silent and frozen background actors surrounded by administrators speaking about BCOS, and (3) as experts who help internationalize the omnipresent BC curriculum.

Additionally, while the capital that students gain from the BCOS program is evident, there is little mention of the capital that teachers can accumulate. In fact, their positions in the BCOS program appears precarious and the tone of the instructions for potential teachers on the OSP website implies that teachers are not as important as the BC curriculum framed as a commodity for delivery. Throughout the three data sources, it is implied that the key to student success is the BC curriculum, which suggests that everyone involved in BCOS, and perhaps in much of international education, have internalized and accepted their roles as neoliberal subjects. This study contributes to the growing field of international school teachers (Poole & Bunnell, 2023) and provides insight into how teachers are represented. Future research could explore how former BCOS teachers make meaning of their teaching experience and consider if and how they accumulated social, cultural, and economic capital. Such research could provide more meaningful, helpful, and critical testimonials for these websites and the wider profession of international teachers.

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