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Immigration & Credentialing: A Case Study of Jamaican Teachers in 1960s Alberta

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Abstract: This paper examines the experiences of Jamaican teachers who immigrated to Alberta during the early 1960s. Using teacher narratives as well as archival research the paper aims to develop an understanding of issues related to racialization, immigration and citizenship.

Introduction

The research is a part of a much larger SSHRC funded project, Racialization, Immigration and Citizenship: Alberta 1900-1960s, which explores how processes of immigration and racialization affected the social formation of African Canadian communities in Alberta. The research is about knowledge production and dissemination. Whereas educational institutions have made attempts to disseminate knowledge about peoples of African descent, they tend to focus on experiences of people from the United States. There is a lack of consistent recognition of the historical presence of peoples of African descent in Canada—especially in Alberta. The case study allows us to understand how early immigrant teachers experienced their own education as adults; issues of racialization; as well as teaching as an occupation. On a macro level of analysis the study allows us to fill a lacuna in existing literature on how the social and historical formation of Alberta's African Canadians community and its position within the Canadian mosaic has been affected by a linking of the concept of race with immigration and consequently citizenship. Theoretical emphasis in sociological and adult education literature on immigrants of African descent has all too often been on blue-collar workers, or refugees who have immigrated. This research attempts to fill this gap by highlighting experiences of African Canadian professionals who were able to immigrate to Alberta in the 1960s and to gain employment in a profession certified in their country of origin.

Perspective and Theoretical Framework

Since much of the knowledge on teachers from the Caribbean in the 1960s has been traditionally marginalized in historical documentation and literature; oral history was chosen as an initial methodology for the project. Oral history is useful in gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants about past events and their way of life. It also allows people who have been marginalized to be seen and heard; and for those that are interested in their past to record personal experiences of their families and communities. By doing so, oral history can be viewed as protecting the past for the future. We also recognize critique of oral history methodology that participants' narratives may not provide accurate accounts of past events due to the limitations and fallibility of human memory. Our response to this point of view is that accuracy of the testimony can be verified by comparing with archival documentary sources such as school board records and Alberta Teachers' Association documents. Further, through exploring the divergence of interviewee's oral testimony from facts, we can discover their habitual thinking that emanates from the evolving culture in which they live. Such an epistemological position allows us to develop an

understanding of oral history as a method and to tease out how such oral histories are not unproblematic representation of THE truth (Sangster, 1994).

Archival research on educational policy documents produced by provincial government departments, school boards, Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and other educational agencies were central in developing an understanding of the historical circumstances enabling and constraining the dominant discourses on teacher shortage. Analysis relies on the narratives of the teachers interviewed in order to elicit the various "push and pull factors" and lived experiences that contributed to teachers emigrating from Jamaica. One focus group and individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with seven teachers who came to Canada between the years of 1963-1969. These teacher participants are members of the Mico Old Students' Association- a group of mainly retired teachers who attended Mico Teacher Training College in Jamaica. While the focus group acted as an orientation to issues that are regarded as important to the participants an open-ended semi-structured approach to interviews allowed for themes, not highlighted by existing literature, to be identified by participants.

Data Generated

As indicate above the research involves ongoing analysis as layers of complexity are continually unearthed. Following initial analysis we have identified two major themes (along with sub themes) for exploration in this paper: push and pull factor of immigration and the processes of certification and credentialing.

Push and Pull Factors of Immigration

In terms of our overall research concern, (racialization & immigration) the links are evident in both official and unofficial discourses in post World War II Canada. Following a history of immigration based on "preferred groups" who were white Anglo Celts the immigration of peoples of African descent to Canada is an interesting reflection of the changes in immigration laws. We note that in 1962, the immigration door to Canada appeared to swing open with the introduction of the Regulations of the Canadian Immigration Act which marked a significant change in immigrant selection criteria—from an emphasis on immigrants' race, color and national origin to their education, training and skills. This change in the racist immigration laws as well as the tightening of other sites for potential immigration such as the United Kingdom produced a major social and political pull factor for Caribbean immigration to Canada.

Among the participants a significant aspect in terms of the "pull factors" was the acute teacher shortage in Alberta and Canada during the early 1960s. Economically it was a time of expansion for all levels of the Canadian education system. Although there had been a chronic teacher shortage since 1940s (Departments of Education, Baker, 1948), economic prosperity along with the student population accelerated the demand for school teachers. A review of Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) magazine from 1940s to 1960s reveals that teacher shortage has been a consistent theme. In the 1967 annual report to the 5th Annual Representative Assembly, the secretary of ATA, Dr. S.C. T. Clarke held that " in September 1966 a shortage of 238 teachers was reported by superintendents compared with a shortage of 263 in 1965 (ATA magazine, 1967, p. 43). Further analysis of ATA magazines unearth various advertisements for teachers to work in Alberta, the following published in March 1967 issue of ATA magazine indicates the same problem: "School population had doubled in the last ten

years. We require approximately twenty additional teachers each year. There will be selected vacancies at most grade levels for September 1967”.

The interviews with the teachers reveal that there were a variety of ways in which they heard about the teacher shortage in Alberta and the need for teachers. A common source for information was the various advertisements that were sent out across the Commonwealth. As one participant stated:

Well, when I came here it was - Alberta was having a teacher shortage. They were advertising [...] especially in Jamaica for teachers, and we had a very good friend who was at York University here and was already teaching.”

At times the Canadian government sent administrators abroad to select teachers:

Back in Jamaica we had a bunch of Canadians coming down to interview teachers. It was all over the news media

For others, excursions abroad opened their eyes to other societies and gave them access to information and contacts who encouraged them to immigrate to Canada.

You know what, I graduated from Mico in 1962, and I taught for a year in Jamaica, and then I was seconded to Grand Cayman, and I worked for two years while I was in Grand Cayman – saw this ad in the papers recruiting teachers for Canada...and I saw this as an opportunity to continue my (laughs) exploration, instead of going back to ... What made me decide to come to Canada? Alberta? Number one, I traveled to Britain on a scholarship... I finished my year and met some great people there, students from all over the world... students from Canada, and we became very good friends and they – at the time there was a kind of exodus from England to Canada. You know, graduates – because there were jobs available. And I became very good friends with some Canadians, and they encouraged me to come to Canada.

Word of mouth and friends already in Canada was also a useful way of accessing information about the need for teachers:

Well, my wife had a friend who came to Canada and that friend got some info about Alberta especially, wanting teachers. So she sent her info about Alberta; about the place and need for teachers. And at the same time, she sent her an ad for teachers in Alberta... We decided that ... what if we go to Alberta and we didn't like it. So it was decided that one of us should go and just incase we don't like it then that one person could come back.

Push factors are varied, consisting of political, social and psychological ramifications, but without doubt the economic situation in Jamaica generated some of the strongest push factors. In 1962 Jamaica gained political independence from Britain. However, as Anderson (1993) argues, the political independence did not bring instant life improvements and thus could not curb the growing tendency towards emigration. At first glance, the push factor that propels Jamaicans to immigrate to Canada is the economic opportunities to improve their living conditions (Anderson, 1993, p. 37).

Credentials and Certification

Another factor that affected the ability of teachers from Jamaica being able to start in the profession that they were educated in their country of origin was the actuality that the teaching profession in Alberta was highly differentiated through levels of certification. Discourses of professionalism, status, and salaries were also dominant at this period of time and were drawn on to produce understandings about suitability or not of teachers. Examination of policy documents and the teachers' narratives reveal that there were at least three types of

permission that enabled a teacher access to the classroom: letter of authority, interim certificate and permanent certificate.

Letter of authority. Regarded as necessary when immigrant teachers were unable to present any proof of successful teaching many of the Mico teachers started off on this scale. As the lowest rung of the accreditation process Letters of Authority were viewed as undermining the stance of professionalism that was being advocated by leaders in the teaching community

Anyhow I got it, a teaching certificate – in those days they called it a Letter of Authority. I got a letter of authority, which authorized me to teach for – up to three years. Then I had to have them approve my qualifications in order to get certified.

Interim certificate. Still lower on the pay scale than a permanent certificate:

Yes we had an interim [certificate]... we had an evaluation. When we came here before we could be totally salary-bridged, to know what kind of salary we were going to get, we had to have an evaluation by the ATA and the department of education. That evaluation was based on the transcript of my 3-years teacher training in Jamaica. When the evaluation was done, it resulted in fact that we were given one year of university education for the 3 years of teacher education in Jamaica. Which meant then, for us to become a trained teacher with a degree here in Alberta, we would have to do 3 more years of uni education to qualify for a 4-year BA degree. So, we set out to achieve that.”

Permanent certificate. Increasingly linked during the 1960s to a university education.

“And you got your letter of intent, was it, or your letter of authority, and then once you got your degree you got your permanent certificate.”

At times the provincial nature of educational responsibility was a further barrier for gaining full recognition of teaching credentials. The following participant identifies how his experiences in Quebec were not recognized outside Quebec:

Teacher: Well, I had interim [certificate] from Quebec. That was good for Quebec but no body approved it in Alberta.

Jennifer: They wouldn't recommend it at all. So you had to go back to this letter of standing and then letter of authority.

Teacher: Letter of Standing is issued as a permit to teach; it gave you the OK for you to go into the classrooms....Letter of Standing is very brief and interesting. It certifies that you are ok then you apply for the letter of authority. But, when I went to school on my first job, I didn't realize that I wasn't alone. All the other teachers have started – only the principal alone had a BA or B.Ed. So I thought it was required to have a degree. I didn't realize that I wasn't alone. Even the Vice-principal didn't have a degree. They went to what was called a Normal School.

It was not only teacher education from Jamaica that was devalued by the provincial authorities but the experiences gained in K-12 education were also deemed deficient in comparison with Albertan academic standards. This attribution of deficit to Jamaican education resulted in these teachers having to return to school to repeat their high school education before they could make progress. Whereas in the 1950s the dominant and contested discourse surrounding teacher shortage meant getting more teachers into schools; by the 1960s dealing with the teacher shortage meant more professionalism linked to a more theoretical approach to teacher education. As one person illustrates the effect of the dominant discourse:

I think I should mention here that while you are on your letter of authority, they are asking you to go in and get certification - a degree within the next 2 years or so all teachers must have a degree. And so what we had to do was to try to get a university

but they wouldn't accept what I had from Mico. They wanted us to do Grade 12, so we all had to prepare and do Grade 12 in 5 subjects. And I went to Alberta College in the summer on correspondence..... But that's how I got my G. 12 certificate... You had to get that to get into university because when we and gave them what we have from Mico, they've never heard of Mico. They all thought it was false.

It is also useful to recognize that this process of credentialing and increasing bureaucracy was enabling as well as constraining for immigrant teachers. Thus, although their teaching credentials and experiences were devalued they were able to gain a degree of recognition that allowed them to start at a higher level on the economic ladder than some newcomers today. However, this process of recognizing credentials was not straightforward and still had frustrations for some.. As one interviewee indicated, their three-year teacher training in Jamaica was only equal to one year of university education at the University of Alberta, or two years at the University of Calgary. In order to get a four-year B.A. degree qualification, they had to undertake two or three more years of university education.

Well, the low points would be in terms of our training back home in Jamaica. We felt that we were trained to teach with just our training college certificate. I had 3 years at Mico Teachers Training College. After ...you come out, and you've become principal of a school, you had a feeling that we have reached a point. You come over here and then, when you look around you, you realize that most of the teachers around you are teachers who are university trained. And so you begin to realize that even though you might have the experience in teaching and proper teaching method, but certificate wise, you need more than that.

As the interviewee continues it is evident that the necessity for a university degree became a driving force for upgrading. The Alberta Teachers Association in particular was strong advocate for teachers obtaining a degree. For officers of the Association an all-degree teaching profession was a step towards gaining status for classroom teaching and a mechanism for increasing the attractiveness of teaching for young people.

You need a university education. University education is what is standard here and you better put yourself in a position to get that training. More so, the – the Learning experience – we were expected to retrain to meet the educational demands of Alberta which was entirely different from the educational demand of Jamaica. We got ourselves in a position for the re-training...because the retraining that came out of the result of our discovery did come to our benefit and our advantage.

Location of Teaching Positions

Advertisements in the ATA magazines and newspapers during the late 1950s and early 1960s indicate that the demand for teachers was most acute in the Northern areas of Alberta and often within Metis communities. As J.W. Chalmers argues in his 1962 article “The school in the forest”:

[T]hese schools lay east of the Peace River to the Athabasca and the NAR, and North of Lesser Slave Lake all the way to Fort Fitzgerald. Many had only recently been elevated from the humble status of mission schools. Half a dozen others had existed for 20 years or so as Metis Colony schools. Some were located in tiny settlements; a few in ancient fur-trading centres. (Chalmers, 1962, p.17)

So it is that several of the interviewees indicate that their experiences in isolated northern communities encompassed teaching in Metis and aboriginal communities. Such isolation from the mainstream of teaching also contoured their experiences in ways that

illustrate how occupational status, and rural experiences come together to produce long-term economic effects

We were working with natives in the native community. Atikameg and Grouard were native communities; also Saddle Lake is a native community...

Though not discussed in this paper issues of racialization manifested itself in a variety of forms; sometimes overt sometimes subtle. As well, isolation and marginalization are evident. Thus while some teachers had initial problems finding public accommodation during the first few weeks of arrival, most indicated that often racism was often more subtle:

I try to apply for a job and he look at me – “Why should I hire you when I have all my Canadian boys here to hire?” (laughs) I say OK. That’s that. Well, that could be racism.

Commentary

Theoretically the research reveals that issues around credentialing are connected not just to the degree of knowledge with which immigrants enter Canada. For adult educators, such knowledge can lead to a better understanding of how to undertake advocacy work for newcomers around policy issues related to the recognition of credentials and skills that immigrants bring to Canada. An interesting anomaly that emerges through an examination of the Jamaican teachers’ experiences is the way that their credentials were not rejected out of hand. Unlike today’s teachers who come from Jamaica, (Walsh & Brigham, 2006) they were allowed to start teaching while gaining a university degree and higher levels of certification. Our research might be able to tease out the how Canadian authorities can develop schemes that work with and recognize the knowledge that immigrant bring with them rather than consistently telling individuals that they have no skills. This data generation corresponds to the current debate on the non/recognition of foreign credentials for immigrant professionals in Canada (Guo & Andersson, 2005). The inability of Canadian society to recognize the skills immigrants bring with them means that immigrants will have decreased opportunities to become economically mobile.

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