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Karen Magro
University of Winnipeg

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Adult Newcomers and Immigrants in North America: Promising Pathways for Transformative Learning

Karen Magro, University of Winnipeg

Introduction and Theoretical Background

More people are on the move today and migration is recognized as one of the defining global issues of the 21st century. Available information suggests that there are about 194 million people living outside their place of birth. There is growing recognition that migration is an essential and inevitable component for the economic and social life of Canada. Immigration today has become more complex as individuals attempt to reestablish their lives and livelihoods in cultural contexts very incongruous to ones they left. Learning and cultural integration can be a lifelong process that involves struggle, loss, negotiation, and transformation. Navigating a new culture requires the ability to learn new emotional, social, cultural, academic and work related skills in a short period of time.

This qualitative study is based on the participation of 118 adult refugees and immigrant learners, settlement service providers, adult educators, and administrators who work in adult learning centres, school divisions, and government sectors in a moderate size Canadian city (Winnipeg, Manitoba). This study was conducted over a two year period (2009-2011); transformative theories of adult learning provided a theoretical base and interpretive lens for analyzing the data collected from interviews and written autobiographies. My study explored the pre, trans, and post immigration experiences and expectations that adult newcomers and refugees living in Winnipeg's inner city have had. I examine the role that adult education has played in helping newcomers integrate into Canadian society.

Theories of transformative learning have been applied extensively in different educational contexts such as literacy development, counseling, health education, environmental movements, cultural adaptation and intercultural awareness, and professional development. Mezirow's (1981; 2000) theory of transformative learning describes how individuals interpret, construct, validate, and reappraise their experiences. Life crises such as the death of someone close, divorce, a move, trauma, conflict, or war, and the rebuilding one's life in an unfamiliar culture can create conflict, self-examination, reflection, and a change or revision in perspective. Emerging strands of transformative learning theory have drawn our attention to non-Western ways of knowing and learning, planetary sustainability, a cultural-spiritual view of learning (Merriam and Grace, 2011). Teachers and counselors, in particular, can play a vital role in assisting adult learners to become more critically reflective and open to choice and change. Theories of transformative learning becomes particularly relevant in the context of understanding the way in which refugees and newcomers cope with the loss of their home country, language and customs, professional standing, and begin to learn new skills to navigate new cultural, educational, legal, and social terrain (Mezirow and Associates, 2000; Taylor, 2006; King, 2005).

Leong-Kappel and Daly(1994) suggest that few studies have examined transformative learning theory in an urban setting. Drawing on their research on the lives of adult learners living in the inner city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, these authors write that "density and diversity" and their consequences: anonymity and complexity constitute their description of urban. They explain that "for many urban learners, anonymity is the consequence of political, social, and economic barriers that prevent the development of sustained relationships and restrict access to

urban power structures and resources. Complexity is inherent in the lives of urban learners and is manifested in the multiple stressors by the environment of urban poverty, violence, illiteracy, and unemployment.’ (p. 86) These theorists suggest that adult educators need to become more involved in the federal, state, and metropolitan arenas where decisions are made regarding funding and the recognition of adult learners’ prior experience. Martin (2004) writes that “not only should the learning environment be free of physical violence, but it should also respect learners’ initial language, culture, dress, celebrations, and style of interacting while assisting them in new ways of viewing the world” (p.95).

Ellen Foster (1997) links the stages of transformative learning theory with studying a new language like English. Learners who previously felt confident and socially adept may begin to feel insecure and threatened when learning an unfamiliar language. “At the technical stage, self-concept is particularly vulnerable, as learners are simultaneously coping with the material to be learned (the language and its rules) and with the disparity between who they know themselves to be and how they represent themselves in the classroom”(p. 36) The teacher’s ability to create a safe classroom climate and draw on the skills and prior experiences of learners is critical to successful language learning. In essence, the heart of transformative learning involves building positive relationships; moreover, it is as Edward Taylor (2000) writes “much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies (small group activities, experiential learning); it involves an acute awareness of student attitudes, personalities, and preferences over time, and as signs of change and instability begin to emerge, educators can respond accordingly”(p.187).

Methodology

This qualitative study integrates phenomenology, life-history interviews, and narrative analysis. The use of personal narratives as valuable instruments in collecting qualitative data has been studied extensively in recent years in helping understand the dynamics of immigration and resettlement (Dominice, 2000; Merriam and associates, 2004; Ng, 2006). I also had access to over 20 autobiographies that the director of one of the adult learning centres shared with me. The primary means of data collection in this study were semi-structured interviews. The audiotaped interviews lasted approximately one hour; the interviews were then transcribed and themes emerging from the interviews were then identified. The interview questions centered around the adult refugees and immigrants’ adjustment to life in Winnipeg. What barriers have they experienced? What are their goals and aspirations and to what extent have these been met? How have teachers and service providers tried to reduce existing systemic barriers in order to improve educational and employment access for newcomers?

Research Findings: Negotiating Identity and Belonging

I found that while there are “islands of transformative change” in educational institutions, survival in a new country takes precedence over realizing personal and career goals. Financial hardship, housing, credential recognition, isolation and changing relations within families, and discrimination were among the barriers identified by participants. The adult immigrants and refugees who participated in this study had unique paths of resettlement. The process of resettlement for both adult immigrants and refugees was influenced by factors such as financial resources, social and career networks, personality factors, cultural values, education, language proficiency, and opportunity and access to educational and employment networks. In writing about the importance of citizenship education, Schugurensky (2006) asserts that while “status is

about being a full member of a community, identity is about feeling like a member of a community” and “is rooted in factors such as a common history, language, religion, values, tradition, and culture, which seldom coincides with the artificial territory of a nation state” (p.68). Interestingly, while there is an expectation that immigrants should be able to seamlessly integrate into the cultural, social, and economic fabric of North America once they arrive, the institutional barriers created by government, professional, and service organizations often restrict rather than encourage participation. These restrictions can lead to pessimism, alienation, and isolation among newcomers (Grant and Nadin, 2007; Ng, 2007).

For some of the adult immigrants who came to Canada seeking better employment opportunities, there is the difficulty of establishing a career and a network of professional contacts that would help them fulfill their professional goals. A teacher from China who had immigrated to Canada seven years ago describes her disillusionment:

I want to demonstrate my intelligence, persistence, and energy. I have never given up but I often asked myself if I chose the right career in being a teacher in Canada. I have studied and completed four degrees but I still cannot find work. I am a divided person. It is painful to be teacher in Canada. After 8 years I am still seen as a foreigner.... To get a job, you have to beg. I feel tired to pan handling my skills and credentials. I bring my portfolio with me to each school when I substitute, hoping that the principal will sit down with me. For a well educated person like myself, there is the loss of dignity that I deal with with. There is no appreciation of the fact that I can teach Chemistry, Biology, Environmental Studies, and Math. People see me only as an unusual foreigner with an accent. I feel that I have a lot to teach these kids in the inner city. So many of the kids from different cultures today have lost their cultural heritage ...I love Canada but I also love my Chinese cultural heritage and this is something I can share.

Gloria’s situation reflects C. Khan’s (2007) observation that employers “are looking for employees with ‘Canadian values, culture, values, and rituals. While regulatory bodies, employers, and others may wish to close off options to immigrants, those armed with a knowledge of the dominant class’s rituals, habits, and practice are more likely to attain economic equality...[Skilled worker class] immigrants are assessed against a grid that awards points on the basis of work experience, level of education, official language proficiency, age and adaptability.....the selection criteria will not necessarily translate into professional placements in their fields.” (p. 65) Similarly, Roxanna Ng (2006) found that the immigration process for many is restricted from the moment newcomers are granted landed immigrant status. In addition to the potentially lengthy and expensive recertification process, “a disturbing trend is that many non-white immigrant women are ghettoized in feminized sectors of the labour market (e.g. as cleaners, cashiers and servers in fast-food and grocery chains) regardless of their skills and qualifications...This overall picture indicates a significant under-utilization of valuable human resources in Canada” (p. 1). The situation is even more desperate for refugees escaping war torn countries. For adult refugees, the process of English language acquisition and the completion of secondary and post secondary education are made more complicated by the need to cope with poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, responsibilities to those left behind, and psychological trauma as a result of war, separation from family, and personal tragedy. Long hours of work in minimum wage jobs balancing home and academic responsibilities, and paying back loans from the government create untenable situations for some newcomers.

Resilience and Informal Learning

Resiliency and optimism were personality characteristics that also emerged in the interviews with adult refugees. Resilience can be described as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances. Psychological resilience is concerned with behavioral adaptation, usually defined in terms of internal states of well being and effective functioning” (Masten, 1991, cited in Anderson, 2004, p. 53). Resilience can be applied to individuals, families, and communities that provide resources and opportunities to build supportive networks. Anderson (2007) notes that personal qualities like courage and optimism that form resilience are not guarantees of future resilience. Without the proper scaffolds and opportunities to gain confidence, competence, and meaningful employment, resilience can be eroded. A number of the immigrants and refugees in this study took personal initiatives to improve their lives by embarking on a new career path, helping friends and family left behind, and networking with other refugees and newcomers to create stronger links with community and educational resources. Some of the refugee women who participated in this study took the initiative to organize craft sales and community gardens as a way of mobilizing community involvement and neighbourhood revitalization. These women also developed a community based “needs centre” to help recent newcomers find better housing, education, and medical services. Many of the adult newcomers in this study demonstrated courage, optimism, and an openness to help others:

I have a master’s degree from Kenya and I now work with refugee youth as an advisor, but my first job in Canada was sorting garbage....There is hope but you have to have determination, vision, and a plan and each person has a variety of resources. You can’t be mentally locked up in the past if you are to move forward. I don’t use the word ‘impossible’ I use the word possible. My father was a leader in our village and he had a passion for learning. He encouraged me to fulfill my goal of coming to Canada.

I work with teens today who are alienated with their parents. Refugee youth are living in two worlds. Poverty can drive young people from refugee backgrounds to a life of crime. A lack of education poverty and cultural misunderstandings can cause refugee families to become alienated from society. The neighborhoods that some refugees live in are not safe and their children quickly become out of control. Worlds and communities collide and the results can be devastating. I am an advocate for young people and challenge them to persist. It is not only individuals we have to educate but communities at large—about working out problems peacefully.

My career progression has been that of a teacher in my country of origin to a garment worker in Canada. I am a high energy person. I became involved as a volunteer translator in the Chilean community. Personality, creativity, and a desire to take risks play a pivotal role in settlement. I went from being a garment worker to an immigrant counsellor to a facilitator, program designer, coordinator, and now director. I designed the first literacy program for immigrant women who were left unemployed due to factory closures.

When I lived in Sierra Leone, I saw horrible things and there was no respect for

humanity. Since I have been in Canada, I have been lonely but I see a respect for humanity and human rights. This has motivated me to help my people back home. I want to make a documentary about the innocent amputees in Sierra Leone. They all deserve to have their dignity restored. I would like to build a help facility for the disabled---similar to the ones I see in Canada.

The research findings reinforce the importance of recognizing the “hidden talent” of adults and the informal learning that occurs in response to adapting to a new culture (Guo, 2011). Intercultural competence has been linked to a transformative process whereby individuals adapt, integrate, and learn skills and values from other cultures (Bennett, 2007). A number of the adult learners demonstrated this competence and were very open to learning new skills and cultural norms. Reinforcing this finding, Roxanna Ng (2006) found that informal learning among newcomers is evident in several ways: 1) Learning job search strategies such as preparing a resume and cover letter and/or learning the skills needed to start a new career/occupation; 2) Building a social network by learning how to access information from the media, the Internet, their children’s knowledge, and their community; 3) Learning English to successfully navigate social, cultural, and employment demands; and 4) Changing their understanding of immigration and work.

Promising Pathways for Transformative Change

The teachers emphasized that their role and responsibility in teaching newcomer immigrants and refugees has become more complex in recent years. Many felt that institutional and systemic barriers (e.g. financial funding for further education, the bureaucracy of immigration preventing family reunification) needed to be reduced if their students were to become more fully engaged as Canadian citizens. The teachers’ perspectives on learning were consistent with strategies designed to promote transformative learning in the adult education classroom (Cranton, 2006; King, 2005; Taylor, 2000). Teaching from a transformative learning perspective is aimed at helping learners “gain a crucial sense of agency” in their lives (Mezirow and Associates, 2000, p. 20). It involves “creating an environment that invites multiple dimensions of learning [that include] attention to the cognitive, the affective, the relational, the imaginal, and the symbolic dimension of learning.” (Tolliver and Tisdell, 2006, pp.40-41) Advocate, cultural mediator, co-learner, mentor, and facilitator were terms used by the teachers to describe their roles and responsibilities. Personality traits such as kindness, cultural sensitivity, and an ability to teach content from an interdisciplinary perspective were cited by a number of the teachers and service providers as essential adult educator skills. Experiential learning and activities encouraging self-expression and confidence building through journal writing, artistic expression, and drama are some of the ways that the teachers helped their students develop academic and social skills:

Adult learners need opportunities to build skills, stability, and confidence. They need to find a sense of connection and meaning in a new society. Our students do not just want textbook exercises and rote grammar. The students who missed out on school desperately want the Canadian experience of education and the opportunity to learn about Canadian culture. Our students want adult themed topics---relationships, family and parenting, psychology, and world issues. You have to be a cultural guide in many ways. Students will quickly become bored if you just focus on workplace or essential skills that

do not seem to have a connection with the events they see around them on a daily basis. Learning about geography, film, sociology, and psychology is important and these are not topics that you would commonly explore in workplace ESL courses. Often vocational training can lead refugees and newcomers to dead end jobs, and this should not happen. I use journals, autobiographies films and speeches to help encourage motivation among my students. Many refugees need bridging programs but specific courses and programs should vary according to individual needs. EAL students need to feel included in general discussions...they do not want to feel singled out or labelled as different because they have an accent or their English skills need further development.

This study found that English language learning is dynamic and multi-layered; adult learners have multiple goals for learning English that reflect personal, social, and career interests. Given the vital role that education, health, and neighborhoods play in the lives of refugees and immigrants, more resources could be allocated by government agencies to ensure that neighborhoods could be made safer and more welcoming. Access to adult learning centres, increased funding to build needed day care facilities, churches, community and educational services that provide personal and career counseling, libraries, and medical centres are anchor points for individuals trying to establish themselves in a new society. Mentoring programs that pair immigrant and refugee students with professionals who have been successful in their career would help newcomers gain valuable social and employment networks. Employers also need to re-examine their hiring policies to reduce systemic barriers of racism and discrimination. In addition, on going professional development based on a model of transformative learning theory that would professional and technical employers learn more about the background and history of newcomers and refugees. A holistic and contextualized model of adult literacy education that integrates academic, financial, personal, social, technological, and cultural literacy would provide individuals with a strong foundation for success. Curricula should reflect diversity in terms of voice, culture, age, and gender.

This study suggests that the concept of intercultural competence is a personal and social skill that is vital to understand as it applies to immigration and acculturation. However, intercultural competence should not be viewed as a one way process of newcomers “fitting” into Canadian society. This concept can also be used to highlight the importance of societal attitudes toward newcomers. Rather than viewing immigrants and refugees from a deficit perspective as, for example, “a drain on the economy,” immigration is reconceptualised from an “asset” framework where all citizens develop the capacity to appreciate diversity. Finally, the ideas emerging transformative learning theory can be applied to many dimensions of immigration: language acquisition, cultural integration, the process of gaining intercultural competence, neighbourhood revitalization, and the systemic and structural changes in institutions that can give rise to increased opportunities for all citizens to take part and utilize their potential.

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