

Exploring the Educational Role of Immigrant Service Organizations

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the rich immigration history and the strategic role it plays in Canada's future, the issue of immigrant settlement and adaptation is still prominent. We are still grappling with questions such as: How do new immigrants adapt to a society very different from their own? How do they navigate the complex paths that citizenship entails? In this regard, where do they go for assistance? In particular, where do they get the educational programs they need to upgrade their knowledge and skills as new citizens? This study investigated the educational role of immigrant service organizations in assisting immigrants with their settlement and adaptation in Canada. The study took place in four non-profit immigrant services organizations in Alberta: Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, ASSIST Community Services Centre, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, and Calgary Chinese Community Service Association.

Case study was chosen as a research methodology because it enabled us to focus on the particularity and complexity of a single case to understand an activity and its significance. As a case study inquiry, the project combined methods of document analysis, observations, and individual interviews. Data collected from the document analysis were used to portray the organizations' history and structure and to prepare a written descriptive profile of the organizations. The researchers also visited all research sites and observed some classes and activities. A total of 83 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with executive directors, board members, administrative staff, instructors, and clients. All interviews emphasized the interviewees' personal and lived experiences with immigrant service organizations. The four case studies provided an in-depth analysis of the unique conditions, challenges and learning opportunities for immigrants in each case context. Multiple data sources and methods indicated that this study adopted a triangulation approach which ensured the credibility of the research.

The findings from the four case studies have shown that immigrant service organizations can play an important role in helping immigrants and refugees with their settlement and integration. An analysis of the organizational profile reveals that they were founded in response to the influx of refugees and immigrants to their respective communities, with a shared mandate in bridging the gap in immigrant settlement and helping newcomers become full participants in Canadian society. Despite a common humble start, their development in the first 25-30 years took a different route, with the multicultural organizations experienced the most exponential expansion and the ethno-specific organizations only a moderate growth owing to lack of funding. However, all organizations did their best in providing a wide range of educational programs and services which fall under four categories: i) language assessment and training; ii) employment programs; iii) citizenship education; and iv) community participation and education. In particular, they spearheaded alternative community responses in addressing the issue of devaluation and denigration of foreign credentials and prior work experience. Their career bridging programs have become important stepping stones for immigrant professionals to get into Canadian job market. The experience of the four organizations have provided testimonies regarding how non-government organizations can work in partnership with the state to achieve collective social goals in fostering the integration of immigrants and refugees. The findings from this study will inform policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in developing new policy and fostering community initiative in the area of immigrant settlement and integration.

FINAL REPORT

Background

Despite the rich immigration history and the strategic role it plays in Canada's future, the issue of immigrant settlement and adaptation is still prominent. We are still grappling with questions such as: How do new immigrants adapt to a society very different from their own? How do they navigate the complex paths that citizenship entails? In this regard, where do they go for assistance? In particular, where do they get the educational programs they need to upgrade their knowledge and skills as new citizens? This study investigated the educational role of immigrant service organizations in assisting immigrants with their settlement and adaptation in multicultural Canada. The specific objectives of the study were: 1) to identify the most salient dimensions of educational programs; 2) to examine the educational purposes they serve; 3) to analyze the social contributions concerning immigrants' settlement and adaptation; and 4) to identify the major strengths and weaknesses facing the programs.

The study took place in four non-profit immigrant services organizations in Alberta: in Edmonton, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, ASSIST Community Services Centre; in Calgary, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Calgary Chinese Community Services Association.

Methodology

One case study of each of the four different organizations was conducted. Case study was chosen as a research methodology because it enabled us to focus on the particularity and complexity of a single case to understand an activity and its significance (Stake, 1995). As a case study inquiry, the project combined methods of document analysis, observations, and individual interviews.

The research design included the following three phases:

1. preparation, profile of four immigrant services organizations
2. conduct of case studies
3. knowledge mobilization

The document analysis included annual reports, newsletters, AGM meeting minutes, program brochures, and Web information. The data collected were used to document the organizations' history and structure and to prepare a written descriptive profile of the organizations. Through document analysis, key informants were identified for personal interviewing. The researchers also visited all research sites and observed some employment training classes, English classes, computer literacy classes, annual general meetings, and special events.

In total, 83 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted at four research sites with executive directors, board members, administrative staff, instructors, and clients. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. While most were interviewed in English, three were conducted in Cantonese and two in Mandarin Chinese. While founders and early board members helped us understand the early history and development of the organizations, the administrative staff was instrumental in helping us analyze the current structure and educational programs of the organizations. More

important was the perceptions and experiences of immigrants themselves regarding the four organizations and their role in immigrant settlement and integration. All interviews emphasized the interviewees' personal and lived experiences with immigrant service organizations. The four case studies provided an in-depth analysis of the unique conditions, challenges and learning opportunities for immigrants in each case context. Multiple data sources and methods indicated that this study adopted a triangulation approach which ensured the credibility of the research.

Key Research Findings

Bridging the Gap

An analysis of the organizational profile reveals that all four organizations are community-based non-profit voluntary organizations that have served immigrants and refugees in Edmonton and Calgary for more than twenty five years. They were initially founded to bridge the gap in settlement services for immigrants and refugees in their respective cities. Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN) and Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) were founded in 1981 in response to the influx of Vietnamese refugees in the two cities with support from the Mennonite churches in Edmonton and the Calgary Catholic community. The founding of ASSIST Community Services Centre (formerly known as the Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre) and Calgary Chinese Community Service Association (CCCSA) preceded the first two organizations in 1977 and 1978 respectively, as a response to the increasing number of Chinese immigrants and Cantonese-speaking refugees from Vietnam. At the initial stage, they also provided English classes, language translation, basic settlement and information services with the help of one or few staff members and a handful of volunteers. All organizations shared the same mandate in bridging the gap in social services for immigrants and helping newcomers become full participants in Canadian society.

Responding to Changing Community Needs

Despite a humble start, all organizations experienced major development in their first 25-30 years, which reflected the growth of local immigrant population and their responses to the changing needs of their communities. EMCN and CCIS had had the most exponential expansion, which can be found in the growth of the organization, the number of clients served, and the programs and services provided. For instance, by 2006 the EMCN had grown into an organization which served 4,000 immigrants and refugees annually with the help of 75 part-time and full-time staff, and over 200 volunteers. Likewise, the CCIS had become an organization serving 8,000 immigrants and refugees annually in Calgary with a team of more than 150 staff members and 800 volunteers. It is clear that they had become the largest immigrant service organizations in Alberta and possibly in Canada. With the bulk of funding from federal and provincial governments, they had become a special mechanism between formal public bureaucracies and primary social networks, simultaneously bureaucratized and non-bureaucratized. In contrast, the two ethno-specific organizations only experienced moderate growth, which did not match the demographic changes of the local Chinese population in their communities. Unlike their counterparts, ASSIST and CCCSA encountered difficulties in winning funding from grant agencies owing to fear of ghettoization. They remained ill-funded, understaffed, and functioned from inadequate premises.

Diverse Educational Programs and Services

This study reveals that important changes occurred in the programs and services provided by all four organizations. At the initial stage, lack of resources limited their provisions to basic settlement services such as language interpretation and information services. Now they have become well-established multi-service agencies providing a whole range of programs and services under five major categories: reception and orientation, information and referral, counseling and advocacy, educational programs, and facilitating client access to mainstream services. Although they were regarded primarily as immigrant service agencies, they also provided a variety of educational programs, including: i) language assessment and training; ii) employment programs; iii) citizenship education; and iv) community participation and education. It seems clear that all four agencies provided basic settlement services (such as information services, referral, and orientation), English as a Second Language programs, and community participation and education (including community outreach, public forums, educational materials, promotion of civic participation, and community development). However, only EMCN and CCIS had the adequate facilities to provide employment-oriented programs, such as career counseling, career bridging programs, skills training, job search, resume and interview preparation, employment networking, workplace orientation, work placement, and information on professional accreditation. ASSIST and CCCSA emphasized family-oriented educational programs for children, youth, seniors, volunteer and community development. It seems clear that immigrant service organizations played an important educational role in preparing immigrants to be independent and productive citizens. Their success can be attributed to their community roots, multilingual language capacities, being responsive to community needs, holistic approach, and professionalism. They provided an affordable model to immigrant settlement and adaptation in Canada.

Community Response to Non-Recognition of Foreign Credentials

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) was once claimed to be potentially “the most radical innovation since the introduction of mass formal education for children and youth in the last century, and its extension to adults in this one” (Thomas, 1998, p.341). The current issue of non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience for immigrant professionals indicated that PLAR has become a serious barrier to adult learning rather than a facilitator, which concerned us as adult educators. Numerous empirical studies had been conducted and published in this area, but we had not made much progress with finding solutions for the issue. Hence, this study first traced the roots of this issue by theorizing a body of published studies on this topic and then explored community responses with the hope of finding solutions to solve the problem.

Our analysis reveals that devaluation and denigration of immigrant’s prior learning and work experience can be attributed to two major causes. First, epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge lead to a belief that the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly those from the Third World countries, is deficient, incompatible and inferior, hence invalid. Second, an ontological commitment to positivism and liberal universalism exacerbates the complexity of this process. By applying a one-size-fits-all criterion to measure immigrants’ credentials and experience, liberal universalism denies immigrants opportunities to be successful in a new society. The juxtaposition of misconceptions of difference and knowledge with

positivism and liberal universalism forms a new head tax to exclude the ‘undesirable,’ and to perpetuate oppression in Canada.

As to the community responses, we focused on two career bridging programs: 1) Engineers’ and Technologists’ Integration Program (ETIP) at EMCN, and 2) Integrated Language Instruction for Skilled Immigrants (ILISI) offered by CCIS. The ETIP was designed for internationally educated engineers. It was a ten months program with three months language training at EMCN, 6 months skills training at NAIT, and one month job preparation at EMCN. The goals of the program were to facilitate professional accreditation, labour market access, skills training, and networks with local industry. Its graduates would become technologists in training and were eligible for full membership as Certified Engineering Technologists after one year of employment. The success rate for securing a job after the program was high and many immigrants said it opened the door for them. For that, the program won several awards. The ILISI focused on English acquisition for immigrant professionals, with fourteen weeks of in-class instruction on ESL and employment skills training and four weeks of work placement in the area of professional skills of the individuals. The purpose of the program was to expand skilled immigrants’ English language knowledge and to gain Canadian experience in order to prepare them for the Canadian workplace. It also provided them with opportunities to meet employers and learn Canadian workplace culture. Both programs had become important stepping stones for immigrant professionals to get into Canadian job market, but this study found that they left the abovementioned root causes untouched.

Policy and Practice Implications

This study has important implications for immigrant settlement and integration, adult education for immigrants, and immigrant service organizations. The findings from this research will inform researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in several dimensions.

First, this study addressed several federal research policy priorities. In particular, its focus on the role of immigrant service organizations related directly to Metropolis Policy Priority No. 12. The findings provided important testimony regarding how non-governmental organizations can work in partnership with the state to achieve collective social goals in fostering the integration of immigrants and refugees. The results of the study also supported new national policy development in supporting ethno-specific immigrant service organizations.

Second, previous studies on immigrant service organizations had focused heavily on their role in providing settlement services. This project generated new knowledge about the educational role of immigrant service organizations, the scope of educational programs they provided, and their social contributions.

Third, the study of the education of adult immigrants had been a neglected area. We knew little about how adult immigrants acquired necessary skills and knowledge in a new society. This research undoubtedly bridged the gap in our knowledge in this area.

Fourth, the findings from the study provided guidelines for practitioners to reassesses their past practices and plan for the future. As researchers we hope this will foster community initiatives in

helping immigrants in their settlement and integration, particularly in addressing the issue of devaluation of foreign credentials and work experience.

List of Students

1. Sylvia So, Ph.D. student, Department of Sociology, University of Alberta
2. Zenobia Jamal, M.Ed. student, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta
3. Vicky Liang, M.Ed. student, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
4. Yueya Ding, MA student, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
5. Elizabeth Kuva, M.Ed. student, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary

Research Dissemination

Publications

Guo, S. (2007). Tracing the roots of non-recognition of foreign credentials. *Canadian Issues*, Spring, 2007, 36-38.

Guo, S. & Andersson, P. (2006). The politics of difference: Non/Recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden. In P. Andersson and J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp.183-203). Leicester, UK: NIACE.

Guo, S. (2006). Adult education in the changing context of immigration: New challenges in a new era. In T. Fenwick, B. Spencer, and T. Nesbit (Eds.), *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives* (pp.198-207). Toronto: Thompson Nelson.

Andersson, P., & Guo, S. (2006). The politics of recognition: The missing 'R' in the PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden. Proceedings of the 36th Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA) (pp.18-24). Leeds, UK: University of Leeds.

Guo, S. (2005). Immigration and adult education. In L. M. English (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of adult education* (pp.302-304). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Guo, S., & Andersson, P. (2005). Non/Recognition of foreign credentials for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden: A comparative analysis, Edmonton: PCERII Working Paper #WP04-05. This paper was later included in P. Andersson and J. Harris (Eds.) (2006), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp.183-203). Leicester, UK: NIACE.

Guo, S. (2005). In the name of academic excellence and standard: Discrimination against immigrant professionals in Canada. Proceedings of the Cross-Cultural/Anti-Racism Education Conference. Edmonton: University of Alberta, November 17-19, 2005, pp. 126-131.

Guo, S. (2005). Difference, deficiency, and devaluation: Non-Recognition of foreign credentials for immigrant professionals in Canada. Proceedings of the 24th Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) Conference. London, ON: University of Western University, May 29-31, 2005, pp. 124-130.

Presentations

Guo, Y. (2007). Gender, work, and ESL learning: Voices of immigrant women. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL). Costa Mesa, California.

Guo, Y. (2007). Communication skills: Perception of adult ESL learners. Paper presented at the 5th Hawaii International Conference on Education, January 6 – 9, Hawaii.

Guo, Y., & Guo, S. (2007). Bridging the gap in immigrant settlement and adaptation: The role of adult education. 5th Hawaii International Conference on Education, January 6 – 9, Hawaii.

Guo, Y., & Guo, S. (2006). Community response to the non-recognition of international credentials and work experience for immigrant professionals. Faculty of Education Research Forum, University of Calgary, November 17, 2006.

Guo, Y. (2006). The employment experiences of skilled immigrant women. Paper presented at the annual Conference of the Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL), Edmonton, Canada.

Guo, Y. (2006). Language learning and agency: Perspectives of skilled immigrants. Paper presented at the joint Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (CAAL), Montreal, Canada.

Guo, Y. (2006). A language issue? Perspectives of professional immigrants. Paper presented at the 8th National Metropolis Conference, March 23-26, 2006, Vancouver.

Campbell, K., Fenwick, T., Gibb, T., Guo, S., Guo, Y., Hamdon, E., & Jamal, Z. (2006). Immigrant service organizations and employability programs: Precarious positions. False Promises: Precarious Work in the New Economy Conference, October 20-21, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Anderson, P., & Guo, S. (2006). The politics of recognition: The missing ‘R’ in the PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden. 36th Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA), Inter-Cultural Perspectives on Research into Adult Learning: A Global Dialogue, July 4-6, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

- Guo, S., & Jamal, Z. (2006). Citizenship, integration and informal learning: The role of immigrant service organizations. 8th National Metropolis Conference, Immigration and Canada's Place in a Changing World, March 23-26, 2006, Vancouver.
- Guo, S. (2005). Difference, deficiency, and devaluation: Non-recognition of foreign credentials for immigrant professionals in Canada. Paradoxes of Citizenship: Environments, Exclusions, and Equity. 24th Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) Conference, May 29-31, University of Western University, London, Ontario.
- Guo, Y., & Kuva, E. (2005). Meaningful employment: Challenges for skilled immigrants. Paper presented at the joint Conference of the Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL) and the English as a Second Language Council (ESL-C), University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada.

Work in Progress

- Guo, Y. (manuscript). An investigation of skilled immigrants' employment preparation in an ESL program. *Intercultural Communication*.
- Guo, S., & Guo, Y. (manuscript). Non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience: Exploring community response. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*.
- Andersson, P., & Guo, S. (manuscript). Governing through non/recognition: The missing 'R' in the PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*.