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The Professional Acculturation of Internationally Educated Teachers in Canada:

Affordances, Constraints, and the Reconstruction of Professional Identity

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Introduction: Background and Rationale for Research Study

This paper examines case study data from a qualitative research study on the professional acculturation experiences of internationally educated teachers (IETs)\(^1\) in Ontario, Canada. The study is motivated by two current issues in Canadian society. First, globalization has resulted in an ever-increasing number of internationally educated professionals crossing borders (Iredale, 2001). This trend is particularly strong in Canada, where changes in immigration policy in recent years have resulted in a high number of “skilled worker”\(^2\) immigrants who are granted residency status because of their education and occupational training. Thousands of highly skilled and educated immigrants arrive each year, including many experienced teachers from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. These professionals arrive with the hope and expectation of entering their profession, but instead face numerous barriers and often end up underemployed (Kadkhoda, 2002). The top three barriers identified by both immigrant job seekers and Canadian employers are: 1) lack of Canadian work experience; 2) transferability of foreign credentials; and, 3) lack of official language (French or English) skills (Canadian Business and Labour Centre, 2002).

Second, increased immigration has also resulted in greater linguistic and cultural diversity in Canadian society, especially in metropolitan centres which attract the majority of newcomers and their children. Many stakeholders in education have expressed the urgent need for teachers from diverse backgrounds to reflect and serve the increasingly diverse student body in the Canadian public education system (Dei, 2002; Solomon, 1997; Thiessen, Bascia & Goodson, 1996). What has received little consideration is the unfulfilled potential of internationally educated teachers. This is a classic mismatch: on the one hand, there is a

\(^1\) In this paper, I will use the terms internationally educated teachers (IETs) and immigrant teachers interchangeably, to refer to teachers who have been educated and have taught in school systems in other countries prior to their immigration to Canada.

\(^2\) There are three classes of immigrants in Canada: family class, refugee class and economic immigrants. Economic immigrants are further divided into skilled workers and business immigrants. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2003)
pressing need for teachers from diverse backgrounds in the education system; on the other hand, there are thousands of experienced internationally educated teachers from diverse backgrounds who are unable to gain full-time employment as a teacher in the Canadian public education system.

In order to address these issues of equity and diversity, and to promote greater entry and success of internationally educated teachers in the Canadian education system, it is necessary to better understand the experiences of teachers who cross borders. My study is framed by the following research questions:

1. What factors facilitate or constrain the successful professional acculturation of internationally educated teachers in Ontario? “Successful professional acculturation” is defined as the acquisition of the language and culture needed to fulfill teaching-specific functions. This is operationalized by IETs’ and other individuals’ perceptions of IETs’ level of communicative competence and the perceptions (by self and others) of IETs’ ability to function well in an Ontario school.

2. Are there relationships between the social identity of IETs and their agency regarding professional acculturation in the Ontario education system? If so, what is the nature of these relationships? “Social identity” is defined as the roles and characteristics of an individual as perceived or assigned by oneself or others. Agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act according to their goals and desires, within constraints. Identity and agency are operationalized by IETs’ self descriptions and descriptions of IETs by others.

A Review of Recent Research on Internationally Educated Teachers

Previous research on internationally educated teachers have examined the experiences of IETs in retraining and bridging programs that assist IETs to gain certification and entry into their receiving country’s education system, as well as the professional acculturation experiences of IETs who gained employment as teachers in their receiving country’s
In this section, I will review some recent research from several countries that have received a high number of IETs in recent years, namely, Israel, the United States, Australia, and Canada. I will highlight the studies and findings that are relevant to this paper.

Because of the massive immigration of professionals from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in the early 1990s, Israel is the source of a number of recent studies on internationally educated professionals. Recent research include studies by Michael (2006), Remennick (2002), and Elbaz-Luwisch (2004). Remennick (2002) compared the personal accounts of 36 former Soviet school teachers of mathematics and physics; 20 of these teachers succeeded in regaining their profession, and 16 decided to leave the profession. Those who succeeded were generally younger (thirties and early forties) with substantial teaching experience in the FSU. Language proficiency and personal traits such as self-confidence and resilience were instrumental to success in the Israeli school system. Seeking and having support from local and fellow immigrant colleagues, as well as support from Russian students and parents were also crucial. Elbaz-Luwisch (2004) used a narrative approach to explore the adjustment of seven immigrant teachers in Israel. Not all were trained teachers prior to their arrival. Dominant themes included the need to “give and take” in negotiating cultural differences with students, the potential of conflicts to increase the awareness and understanding of value differences and to facilitate the immigrant teacher’s adaptation, and the importance of developing a new identity without completely losing one’s previous identity.

In recent years, teacher shortages in the United States have resulted in the active recruitment of teachers from overseas. This has generated increasing interest in and research on IETs, including studies by Case (2004); Flores (2001); Flores (2003); Hutchison (2006); Hutchison, Butler, and Fuller (2005); Hutchison and Jazzar (2007); Rhone (2007); Ross (2003); and Wells (2007). I will highlight some findings from Flores (2003), Ross (2003), and Hutchison (2006).
Flores (2003) examined the professional and organizational socialization processes of Filipino immigrant teachers in the Hawai’ian school system. Flores found that commitment to student learning was the most powerful variable influencing teacher socialization, and that teachers with either no teaching experience or more than three years of prior teaching experience adapted more easily than teachers with one or two years of experience. Both survey and case study interview data revealed that students were the most important socializing agents and school administrators were the least important. Some colleagues were supportive and others antagonistic. The teachers also sought support from other Filipino immigrant teachers. The teachers in Flores’s study conveyed a high degree of conformity to and acceptance of the Hawai’ian education system, and prior assumptions about education and teaching did not appear to constrain their socialization.

Ross (2003) examined the experiences of immigrant teacher candidates from a variety of countries and backgrounds in a two-year pilot program at the University of Southern Maine. In contrast to Flores’s (2003) study, Ross found that differences in educational philosophies were problematic as all of the teacher candidates were “raised in authoritarian, traditional, delivery model schools” (Ross, 2003, p. 31), and this became their default mode of instruction. The nature of reflective practice was also problematic as the immigrant teacher candidates were not accustomed to a self-directed approach to learning. Other challenges included the relationship between teacher candidates and students. Because of different experiences, beliefs and expectations, many newcomer teacher candidates had more problems with classroom management than other interns.

Hutchison’s (2006) research, based on in-depth interviews with four science teachers (from Britain, Germany, and Ghana), focussed on the challenges these teachers faced in American high schools, and the strategies they used to adapt and become effective teachers in American schools. Major themes that emerged were cultural and logistical issues related to
initial settlement, differences in expectations regarding assessment, communication differences, and differences in teacher-student relations. Hutchison identified issues related to language and communication as one of the most prominent themes. Although three of the four teachers spoke English as a first language, there were still language barriers due to “differences in the use of expressions, manners of speech, accent, differential use of words in normal conversation and for scientific use, and spelling” (Hutchison, 2006, p. 79). The strategy used by all of the teachers to overcome challenges was to be active learners themselves, including learning from students. Hutchison concluded by identifying the need for orientation courses to address settlement and teaching-related issues, as well as mentorship to assist IETs in their transition to teaching in a different education system.

Immigration policy in Australia is similar to the Canadian strategy of recruiting highly educated and skilled immigrants for the workforce. In addition, teacher shortages in Australia have resulted in the focussed recruitment of a high number of internationally educated teachers in recent years. Issues of recertification, language proficiency, and professional acculturation have been prominent. Recent research on IETs in Australia include work by Cruickshank (2004); Cruickshank, Newell, and Cole (2003); Kamler, Santoro, and Reid (1998); Kostogriz and Peeler (2007); Peeler and Jane (2005); Reid (2005); Santoro, Reid, and Kamler (2001); and Seah (2002). Seah (2002) studied the perception of value differences by two IETs of mathematics, and the strategies that these two teachers used to negotiate cultural value differences as they attempted to socialize themselves professionally in the education context of their host country. Seah found that these teachers’ values influenced their interactions with students and their interactions in turn had to be modified to accommodate the values in Australian education. The studies by Kostogriz and Peeler (2007) and Reid (2005) both explored issues of professional identity and the marginalization of visible minority, non-native English speaking IETs. Reid’s (2005)
analysis focussed on the authoritative discourses of ‘qualifications’, ‘otherness’ and ‘whiteness’ (p. 257) which marginalized the IETs in their professional context. Following the work of Beynon, Ilieva, and Dichupa (2001) and their use of Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of dialogue, Reid examined how some participants were able to challenge and resist these authoritative discourses. Kostogriz and Peeler’s (2007) work focussed on the concept of a workplace as a dynamic space. Drawing upon Activity Theory, the authors argue for a conception of identity as fluid and multiple, “emanating from multiple lived experiences and sociocultural histories” and constructed through the “interactions between the tradition of local workplace and the flows of meanings, values, discourses and cultural artefacts through it” (p. 109). The main theme that emerged was the marginalization of the teachers because of their racial, cultural, and linguistic differences. How the teachers dealt with this marginalization both reflected and constituted their identity. The authors concluded by critiquing the neo-liberal the concept of community as based on homogenization and marginalization, and arguing for a “pluralization” of professional space.

In Canada, research on IETs include studies of IETs in upgrading and bridging programs, for example, work by Beynon, Ilieva, and Dichupa (2004); Mawhinney and Xu (1997); Myles, Cheng, and Wang (2006); and Phillion (2003). Other studies examined the experience of IETs in the workplace, for example, Amin (1997); Bascia (1996); Thiessen, Bascia and Goodson (1996); and Xu (1999). There have also been a number of studies informed by narrative inquiry, including work by He (1998, 2002), Ng (2006), and Wang (2002). One major issue that emerged from these studies was the reconstruction of a professional identity, in particular, the need to negotiate different values and beliefs. For example, He (1999), Myles et al (2006), and Wang (2002) all found that individuals’ history, philosophy and culture affected their beliefs about education, which in turn affected their

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3 “He” is a Chinese surname pronounced like [her].
adaptation to teaching in a new context. Wang also found that micro-politics in the school and individuals’ personality were the most important factors that impacted on adaptation choices of the participants. Another major issue that emerged was language proficiency, variety and accent. For example, in Amin’s (1997) study of immigrant English-as-a-second-language teachers, Amin found that these teachers were positioned by their adult immigrant students as inferior to White Canadians who spoke “real” Canadian English. This disempowered the teachers and had a negative impact on the teachers’ identity formation. Finally, a number of works, for example, Beynon et al (2004), Ng (2006) Thiessen et al (1996), and Xu (1999) dealt with issues of the marginalization of IETs. Beynon et al (2004) examined the experiences of 28 IETs seeking recertification in the province of British Columbia. This study used Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic perspective on identity processes to examine the IETs’ engagement with authoritative discourses regarding qualifications, and how the teachers exercised agency in appropriating or rejecting these discourses.

From this review of studies of internationally educated teacher in a variety of contexts, I wish to highlight two main themes. First, the findings these studies reveal the dialectic relationship between the identity and professional acculturation experiences of immigrant teachers. A number of the studies described the need of IETs to reconstruct their identities in the new education context. For IETs who are crossing social, cultural and professional borders, the need to negotiate their identities adds to the complexity of their professional acculturation.

Second, the findings from many of these studies highlight the importance of social mediation in the IETs’ adaptation to a new school context. A number of the Russian teachers who succeeded in the Israeli school system discussed how important it was to have a veteran Israeli teacher’s mentorship. The immigrant teachers who were successful in Wang’s (2002) study sought help from department heads and other teacher colleagues. The IETs’
professional acculturation was not only mediated by mentor teachers; the IETs’ interactions with students, administrators, parents and others in the educational community also assisted their professional socialization. For example, the teachers in Flores’s (2003) study and Hutchison’s (2006) study perceived their interactions with their students as most important for their professional socialization. Lack of mediation and acceptance of IETs, as shown in a number of studies, negatively impacted the IETs’ professional acculturation and identity.

Given the importance of issues of identity and mediation in these previous studies of IETs, sociocultural and activity theory (Cole, 1996; Leont’ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1991, 1998; Engeström, 1999), and the community of practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), with their focus on human development and the impact of the complex interaction between individuals, tools, and social practices within a certain setting, can offer important insights into the professional acculturation processes of internationally educated teachers. While a number of recent studies have demonstrated the theoretical insights afforded by sociocultural and activity theory in research on teacher development (for example, Boag-Munroe, 2004; Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson & Fry, 2004; Twiselton, 2004), to date, few studies have examined the professional acculturation of IETs from this theoretical perspective. In the next section, I will discuss aspects of sociocultural and activity theory, and the community of practice framework which inform my study.

**Conceptual Framework: Sociocultural Perspectives on Identity and Agency**

As my study focusses on the professional acculturation of internationally educated teachers who speak English as an additional language, and thus, are learning to teach not only in a different context, but also in a different language, in the following discussion of the conceptual framework for this study, I draw upon the works of scholars in second language acquisition as well as in teacher education and development.
Sociocultural and activity theory is attributed to the work of L.S. Vygotsky (1978, 1986). According to sociocultural theory, higher cognitive processes develop from social interactions which are mediated through language and other semiotic artifacts. In this developmental process, a novice is first other-regulated, i.e., receives mediated assistance from an expert, who scaffolds the interaction in order to assist the novice to appropriate new knowledge (Block, 2003; Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Over time, the new knowledge is internalized and the novice becomes self-regulated. Activity theory, developed from Vygotsky’s original proposals regarding human mental development (Leont’ev, 1978; Engeström, 1999), focusses on the activity system. While traditional approaches to the study of mental behaviour focus on the individual and what the individual is doing, activity theory also takes into account the complex interaction between the individual, the forms of mediation, and the sociocultural context, i.e., with what tools the person is acting (mediational means), where the action takes place, and why the person is acting (motives and goals). “Mediation through the use of culturally constructed tools and others’ voices (or discourses) shape the way people act and think as a result of internalization.” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 144-145).

Sociocultural and activity theory acknowledges the importance of an individual’s agency in the learning process. As Donato (2000) stated, in contrast to mentalist theories, an sociocultural and activity theory perspective highlights the importance of learner agency in learning tasks, and the situatedness of learning and development: “learners bring to interactions their own personal histories replete with values, assumptions, beliefs” and learners “actively transform their world and do not merely conform to it” (p. 46). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) posited that “the learnability question … has everything to do with human agency and intentionality” (p. 143). Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) described agency as “both unique to individuals and co-constructed” with other agents and the wider society (p.
According to a sociocultural perspective, identity is socially constructed and reflects the social, historical and political contexts of an individual’s lived experiences (Hall, 2002). Our social identity comprises our membership in a variety of social groups into which we are born, e.g., gender, class, ethnicity and race, in addition to group memberships that we appropriate through activities related to social institutions such as family, school and workplace. Associated with the various group memberships are values, beliefs and attitudes, which in part define our communicative activities. While our identities are shaped by our group memberships, we are also able to shape our identities through our agency, i.e., our actions and activities. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between identity and agency. Another important point is that how we enact our identity and agency depends on the contextual conditions.

Related to the concepts of identity and group membership is the concept of participation. In recent years, the participation metaphor has been introduced to complement the traditional acquisition metaphor (Donato, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Sfard, 1998). According to the participation metaphor, learning is a process of becoming a member of a community, and this process involves developing the ability to communicate through the language and behaviour that is deemed acceptable by the community. The participation metaphor and the concept of “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) view learning as becoming active participants in sociocultural communities, and constructing identities in relation to these communities.
Lave and Wenger’s community of practice framework conceptualize learning as a process of coparticipation rather than as an individual solitary activity. A central concept is that of legitimate peripheral participation. Learners must be seen as legitimate participants in order to access a particular community’s resources. Both legitimacy and peripherality are necessary in order for an individual to become a full participant in a particular community. Access is key and crucial: “To become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 100). Legitimate peripheral participation also involves power relations which determine whether one moves to full participation or one is marginalized and denied access to participation.

This framework emphasizes learning as involving the whole person with a sociocultural history and focusses on “activity in and with the world” and on the view that “agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). Another central concept is that learning involves the construction of identities as learning implies “becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations”, i.e., relation of specific activities and relation to social communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). The participation of newcomers also entails changes and transformation of the community.

In Wenger’s elaboration of this framework, issues of identity take centre stage: “our membership constitutes our identity, not just through reified markers of membership but more fundamentally through the forms of competence that it entails” (Wenger, 1998, p. 152). Wenger also introduced issues of nonparticipation in addition to participation:

We not only produce our identities through the practice we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in. Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not. To the extent
that we can come in contact with other ways of being, what we are not can even become a large part of how we define ourselves. (p. 164)

Another concept that is of particular relevance to my study is that of *multimembership*. Wenger stated that identity entails *multimemberships* which require the work of reconciliation in order to maintain one identity across boundaries:

> The work of reconciliation may be the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another. … e.g., when an immigrant moves from one culture to another … learning involves more than appropriating new pieces of information. Learners must often deal with conflicting forms of individuality and competence as defined in different communities. (p. 160)

While the participation metaphor and the community of practice framework are useful for examining workplace learning, Edwards (2005a) cautioned against the use of the participation metaphor to show mere changes in behaviour and issues of membership and affiliation without exploring the impact of participation on cognitive change. Mere change in behaviour is akin to an apprenticeship which reproduces the system, whereas cognitive change in an individual has the potential to make changes in the system. Edwards called for “a recognition of the cognitive elements in socio-cultural and activity theory frameworks and their capacity to explain how we learn practices” (p. 49). Edwards explained that Vygotsky, Luria, Leont’ev and their colleagues aimed to create a Marxist psychology, “which explained how the collective was incorporated into the individual through processes of mediation and which could be used transform ways of thinking and acting to the benefit of the greater good” (p. 52); thus, Vygotsky and Leont’ev “were not simply concerned with learning how to become a member of a community, they were interested in how we might transform our worlds through our increasingly informed actions on them” (p. 53).

As my study focusses on issues of identity and agency, I am also interested in exploring Edwards’s concept of *relational agency* (Edwards, 2005b; Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004) in my analysis of the professional acculturation of immigrant teachers. Edwards
described relational agency as “a capacity to align one’s thought and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations” (2005b, p. 169-170). Edwards and D’Arcy (2004) argued that “(by) engaging with the disposition of others within a ZPD, learners gain new insights into the phenomena they are tackling. They can draw on the histories and interpretations of others in their sense-making and are not riskily isolated.” (p. 150). According to Edwards, relational agency “occupies a conceptual space between a focus on learning as enhancing individual understanding and a focus on learning as systemic change and includes both” (p. 173). Thus, relational agency can be a useful conceptual tool in furthering understanding of the active agent in an activity system.

In summary, in this section, I have highlighted sociocultural perspectives on the nature of and relations between identity, agency and learning. These concepts will be explored in my case study of the professional acculturation of an internationally educated teacher in Canada.

Case Study Research Methods and Participant

This paper draws upon data from a larger study of internationally educated teachers in Canada. Data collection for the larger study comprised in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 33 IETs and 15 other individuals who have professional contact with IETs, such as school administrators and professional development facilitators. In addition, I conducted case studies of eight of these IETs. This paper focusses on the case study of Emily Chan (pseudonym), a secondary school Family Studies teacher from Hong Kong. Data collection for this case study took place during Emily’s first three semesters of teaching in an Ontario secondary school.

The data included four in-depth interviews with Emily, interviews with a school administrator and the head of Emily’s department, six classroom observations, three informal
meetings with Emily and her colleagues, surveys of 49 students in the third semester, and other document data which included course feedback surveys, conducted by Emily, of 21 students in the first semester and 22 students in the second semester. As the primary investigator of this study, I conducted all of the interviews, observations and third semester surveys. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent to the participants for member checks. Field notes were made during the class observations and after the informal meetings with Emily and her colleagues. The handwritten field notes and surveys were all word processed. All textual data were then coded with ATLAS qualitative data analysis software. An intercoder agreement check was completed, with an initial agreement of 84% before discussion between the coders, and an agreement of 99% percent after discussion. My analysis included the identification of recurring categories and themes in the data, and the exploration of these themes through my conceptual framework.

Emily immigrated to Canada with her husband and their two young children in the autumn of 2002. Emily explained that she and her husband wanted to have a change in lifestyle, and that she was “that kind of person who likes new challenges, new changes” (Int 1). Prior to immigrating to Canada, Emily had taught for 16 years in a secondary school in Hong Kong. Emily’s specializations were Family Studies and Teacher Librarianship. In addition, Emily had completed a Bachelor of Education degree at a university in England, and a Masters degree in Education in Hong Kong.

I had first met Emily in a Teaching-English-as-a-Second-Language (TESL) certificate course that I had co-taught in July 2004 at a college in Ontario. Emily stood out among the many TESL trainees that I have worked with over the years. Emily consistently demonstrated her positive attitude and openness to learning and improving her professional

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4 Emily’s third child was born in Canada in 2003.
practice. Approximately six months after this course ended, I received a telephone call from a school administrator who had interviewed Emily for a contract teaching position at a secondary school. The administrator pointedly asked whether I thought Emily would be able to handle Canadian high school students, as classroom management could be quite a challenge. I had replied that I was certain that with Emily’s positive attitude, extensive experience, and openness to learning, she would be able to handle any challenges that may come her way.

I met Emily again in June 2005, almost a year after the TESL course. At this time, I was conducting a pilot study for my research study. Emily was one of several individuals who had responded to my recruitment email. We had an audio-recorded interview in June 2005. At this time, Emily was just finishing her first semester of teaching Family Studies at the secondary school. Emily expressed interest in participating further in my research study, and agreed to be a case study participant. We had our second interview in November 2005, in her second semester of teaching. In her third semester, February to June 2006, I visited Emily’s classes on several occasions, conducted follow-up interviews, and met her colleagues and administrators. I also conducted interviews with one of the school administrators and the department head, and surveyed Emily’s students at the end of the third semester.

Findings

In this section, I present findings from Emily’s case study data, focussing on three themes: 1) challenges, conflicts and constraints; 2) affordances and agency; and, 3) professional acculturation and identity.

**Challenges, Conflicts, and Constraints**

Emily began teaching in an Ontario secondary school February 2005. In her first semester of teaching, she was assigned three Family Studies courses: “Living and working
with children,” “Parenting,” and “Individuals and families in a diverse society.” The first two were grade eleven courses, and the third was a grade twelve course. In our first interview, Emily spoke at length about three main challenges that she faced during her first semester: the curriculum and workload, the attitude and behaviour of students, and language barriers.

Emily had a very heavy workload in her first semester, compounded by a 3-hour daily commute to her school. In addition to learning to teach in a different school system with its rules, procedures, and expectations, and having to prepare for three different courses in an intensive semester system, Emily was challenged by the courses that she was assigned to teach:

I started teaching in February, everything is so new to me, especially the sociological course. Something is very … how do you say that? Ironical? Yeah, unbelievable. In this course you know what, what I have to teach. [takes deep breath] In this course I have to teach what is normally here. … For example, how young adults facing the society, so, family problems here, divorce, … child abuse, something like that, old people with their problems, I have to teach all those social issues! [laughs] (…) By a new immigrant! [laughs] (Int 1)

Emily felt that it was ironic that she, as a newcomer to Canada, had to teach Canadian students about Canadian society.

The second major challenge that Emily faced was the attitude and behaviour of her students. There were two main issues: lack of respect and students fighting for marks. Emily was surprised to experience the rampant cheating in her classes, even by the “good” students. In addition, she was taken aback by students who challenged her evaluation of their work, and who tried to convince her to raise their marks. Coming from an education system where teachers had authority and respect, Emily found classroom management to be a challenge during her first semester:

They (the students) tend to be very talkative in the class, not showing respect to you at the beginning, not doing the work you want them to do, yeah, just keep talking, sometimes they leave the room without your permission. (…) I find that the culture is really different from what I have in my own country. (…) Student behaviour. [laughs slightly] I never had the feeling that I didn’t
like this student, never had it before, but here, I have it. I don’t like some of the students, to be honest, but … but I try to tell myself, I’m the teacher, I cannot do that, okay? So I try to accept them. I have this kind of feeling maybe a short while, I never had it before, I don’t like this student, how he’s being so mean to me, so … unrespectful. One of these students, he never did any work during the class. He accused me of losing all his assignments, but this is not true! But I cannot-- sometimes it’s hard to prove it because, you know, I show my marks but he keep accusing me like that. (Int 1)

Student attitude and behaviour challenged Emily’s identity as a teacher, and her beliefs about how teachers and students should behave. However, Emily’s identity as a teacher contributed to her agency, and helped her to mediate her feelings, and to develop a more positive relationship to the students.

Third, Emily spoke about challenges regarding language. Although Emily had attended English-medium schools in Hong Kong, she explained that there had been few opportunities to speak English. In Canada, she spoke Chinese at home with her family, so she mainly had contact with English at school, with her colleagues and students.

At the beginning, I had difficulty to listen to every single word … from my colleagues and from my students. (…) I cannot hear what they say, they speak so fast. (…) Especially my students. And me myself, (…) sometimes they have difficulty to understand what I mean. (Int 1)

Challenges regarding language affected how Emily was positioned by some of her students, and also how Emily positioned herself. For example, Emily mentioned that some students corrected her pronunciation. Emily said that she was open to their correction as long as it was done in a polite manner, and looked upon such instances as opportunities to learn. However, some students were openly rude and made fun of her pronunciation. This was evident in several classroom observations, and course feedback forms from students.

While the positioning of Emily by some students as an ESL speaker challenged her authority and legitimacy as a teacher, with regards to interactions with her colleagues, Emily positioned herself as a newcomer to overcome her feelings of embarrassment regarding language barriers:
They (colleagues) are very nice too, so everyone seems to very supportive, but just the language barrier we have. Sometimes my colleagues-- I cannot explain very well in specific words or terms. I have to explain more, and sometimes it seems that she cannot understand what I’m talking about. Sometimes it make me a bit embarrassed, but I try to tell myself it’s okay because you’re a new immigrant, you’re not so familiar with their culture, their language … (Int 1)

Although student behaviour and language remained challenging for Emily throughout the three semesters, by the end of the third semester, Emily reported that there was some improvement.

Affordances and Agency

In this section, I discuss three affordances, namely, tools (material resources), community support, and relational agency, that helped Emily to overcome the challenges discussed above.

Emily used a number of tools to facilitate her teaching in English. Emily explained:

I have to spend a lot of time on my preparation, because my English is not that local, I’m not that fluent as them, as theirs, so I need to make sure, I have to prepare teaching aids to help me to speak fluently. (Int 1)

When I visited Emily’s classroom in the third semester, I noticed the detailed and organized notes on the chalkboard. However, this tool was only available during the third semester as Emily taught three courses in food and nutrition, and therefore, had her own specially equipped classroom. In previous semesters, she had to go to different classrooms for each course, so it was not possible to prepare the board work in advance. Emily also used other tools such as overhead transparencies, Powerpoint presentations, and handouts. In addition, Emily received resources from her colleagues, who generously shared their teaching materials and examinations. In order to manage student behaviour, Emily to use a point system learned from a colleague:

I have a point system for them, in order to motivate them to learn or behave well. So everyday I give them 20 points to the maximum, and sometimes even more. So five for being punctual and not late in class, and then 5 for first activity, (…) and then there’s 5 points for them if they’re involved, 5 points
for participation, maybe just filling out the work sheet, having discussion, involved in the activity, and 5 for completion of worksheet or assignment. Yeah, so I add them together, it’s 20. I find it very useful because they’re eager to have the marks. (Int 3)

This was an interesting example as it showed how Emily adapted to something that she actually disagreed with, the fact that most Canadian students were primarily motivated by marks.

Throughout the interviews, Emily spoke about the support from colleagues and administrators. Not only did colleagues share their handouts and other materials, as mentioned above, but they also provided important emotional support and acceptance of Emily as a legitimate member of their community. For example, regarding language, Emily’s colleagues told her that a lot of people are coming from different countries:

And they encourage me, even you speak English with an accent, … don’t mind. Most of us are like that! [laughs] (Int 1)

Emily’s colleagues also provided valuable guidance regarding unspoken rules of professional practice that were important for a teacher who is new to the system. Emily explained that the administrators were supportive, and she was told that teachers could send students who were misbehaving to the office. However, Emily’s colleagues told her:

“Don’t do it too often. You don’t want them to believe that you are unable to handle them (the students).” (Int 2)

Emily also described the emotional support that she received:

At the beginning when I was teaching I was so frustrated. I didn’t know how to handle the problem with the students, because they were quite different from the problems I had in my previous school. So she talked to me, showed me, she shared with me her experience. She seems to be understanding. Even being understanding is enough. [laughs] So that’s why I say emotional support. Even at lunch time sitting together, having some kind of talk. (Int 3)

On three occasions, I had the opportunity to spend time and interact with Emily and her colleagues, as they often ate lunch together in Emily’s classroom. I can concur that Emily’s colleagues were supportive and inclusive, treating her with respect and as an equal, and at the
same time, providing assistance. An excerpt from one of my field notes provide an example of my perception of Emily’s relationships with her colleagues:

During one lunch time, we were chatting and one of Emily’s colleagues said that she had to “catch up” on something. Emily understood “ketchup” and made a comment about ketchup, which was out of context. What I found interesting was that the colleague gently clarified that she had said “catch up,” and then explained what she had meant. For me, this showed a certain comfort level between them, that Emily’s colleague was able to do that, and it also showed support of Emily’s acculturation. From my observation, Emily’s interactions with her colleagues definitely confirmed the supportive atmosphere that Emily had described. (Field note, school visit 3)

Another affordance that helped to improve Emily’s teaching effectiveness and adaptation was that her relational agency, which centred on Emily’s efforts to understand Canadian students’ needs and behaviours.

Student’s style, their learning style, ... or their attitude towards teacher, at the beginning, as a teacher from Asian country, Chinese people, Chinese teachers, I don’t want them to respect me in higher level, but at least having some kind of respect. However, when you start to know oh they are like this. That doesn’t mean that they don’t respect you. But they just strive for what they want. That’s why they misbehave, or they yell, they speak in a loud voice, but the next day, they’re fine. So, if you know their purpose of doing that, or you understand, (...) then their misbehaviour will decrease. So you can see some people I have to talk to them privately or after the class or take the time to talk to them because they have some kind of problem in handing in the work. (...) So I think, when I compare my teaching at the beginning and my teaching now, I find that the conflicts are decreasing. (Int 4)

Thus, for Emily, understanding the students’ intentions, goals, and agency helped her to change her perception of their behaviour, and helped her to relate to her students more effectively.

Emily also explained how she reached out to the parents in order to better understand her students and their issues, and to know what’s happening at home. Emily was comfortable dealing with parents, as she was used to having close contact with parents in her previous teaching context:

To me it’s not hard because I have a lot of experience dealing with the parents, even in Hong Kong I am in the parent teacher association. I am a committee member working with parents all the time. I find that it’s very effective, to
call them right away when their kids have problems. (...) Actually the parents, here it’s a bit different from Hong Kong. I find that teachers in Hong Kong, they are more willing to call the parents. Parents receive a lot of calls, but here it seems that parents and teachers don’t contact too often. I don’t know, because most parents just tell me they appreciate my calls very much, they don’t receive a lot from the teacher, because sometimes those misbehaved kids at the end they fail, the parents are so sad to know that but it’s almost at the end and they can do nothing. (Int 3)

Emily’s relational agency and interaction with parents not only facilitated the improvement of her rapport with students and her effectiveness as a teacher; the positive feedback that she received from parents also affirmed her professional identity.

**Professional Acculturation and Identity**

Over the course of her three semesters of teaching, through the affordances discussed above, Emily was able to achieve success in her teaching. In this section, I discuss two themes: Emily’s adaptation to the Canadian education system, and Emily’s transformation of the system.

It is important to note that in the third semester, Emily was teaching three food and nutrition courses, which was one of her strong subjects:

I think this is the best semester, as far as I know, because in terms of the courses I teach, they are all food and nutrition courses, I’m more confident in teaching them. Because I am very experienced in teaching all the food and nutrition courses, even in Hong Kong. That’s why I’m so happy. (Int 4)

In contrast to teaching the three courses about families and individuals in Canadian society in Emily’s first semester, teaching these courses in the third semester enabled Emily to demonstrate her competence.

At our third interview (in the third semester), Emily said:

They are good kids, and you know being a teacher here for almost one and a half years, I get used to the environment. I mean, I get to know them more and more. I know their characteristics. (Int 3)

Emily’s adaptation and increased understanding of Canadian students and their attitude and behaviour was evident in her use of the point system to motivate students, as discussed
above. Emily also used other tools which indicated her adjustment to Canadian students, such as giving a riddle at the beginning of class:

Their motivation, their concentration will last longer as it’s interesting. I learned this here. You know, I always tell my husband, people here, they are so humorous, it’s very interesting. You do not find a lot of students in Hong Kong who say “Oh I’m joking.” It’s not common, but here they just say “Miss I’m joking.” [laughs] I like that, yeah. I’m that kind of person. Laid back, that’s how I learned the term, laid back. One of my students I asked him to give me comments, verbally. One of them said “Oh Miss you’re kind of laid back.” (Int 3)

Through her interactions with her Canadian students, Emily became aware of this aspect of her personality. In addition, not only did Emily develop an understanding and acceptance of Canadian students, by the end of the third semester, Emily began to appreciate the different learning style:

I think the learning style, they are very creative, expressive. And they are not afraid to give their opinion and they’re very friendly. Yeah, that’s what I like. (Int 4)

These quotations indicate that some of Emily’s values and beliefs about teaching and learning changed, and along with that, her conceptions of the roles and behaviours of teachers and students.

However, there were some aspects of Canadian education that Emily strongly disagreed with, and chose not to adapt to.

I just think the whole education system is spoiling the students you know. It seems that-- there is anything being excused, they can do anything they miss. Even they can make up the missed assignment. Right before the exam, even after the exam. The guidance teacher came to see you, “Ms Chan, can this student make up the assignment to bring up his or her marks?” I don’t think it’s doing for the benefit of the students. (Int 4)

Emily felt that such a system did not promote responsible behaviours in students. Emily resisted this Canadian educational norm, and asserted her own values in her teaching:

And maybe to them I’m quite strict because I always exert my rules in the class. I know maybe some teachers they don’t want to do that. I want to bring more discipline to the class. I don’t know if I’m successful or not. I try my best. And sometimes they say I mark their grammar too much. I don’t know,
but I say “You have to learn something, that’s why I mark your grammar.”” (Int 4)

Emily’s resistance is an example of her nonparticipation, which, as Wenger (1998) argued, is also an expression of identity. Emily noted that because of her adherence to her standards for work, she noticed an improvement in her students, for example, regarding submitting work on time. This aspect of Emily’s identity and agency was also confirmed by her department head:

I think Emily has got a pretty decent situation here, because mostly kids here want to learn and they respect her because of her background. But sometimes if you're perceived to be a weak character in a tough school, it could be very difficult. And I've seen that sometimes where someone maybe with a little bit of a language difficulty, only because of their background, was perceived the wrong way, but they didn’t have the character to deal with it. I've seen Emily. She can be pretty tough. She's very firm, but very fair. And she's got that ability to do that. (Int Jim, June 2006)

The findings also confirmed the positive contributions of an internationally educated teacher regarding attitudes toward and knowledge about diversity:

My comfort zone to them is bigger than maybe the local teachers, because I can understand some newcomers. Or some, even if they are not very new, I know people from different cultures, they have different habits or thinking or philosophy. Yeah, I think I would be more sensitive to their needs. Or I can appreciate their cultures more. Let me take one example. We have a kind of different cooking in my grade 10 classes, and some of the students don’t want to taste other student’s food because maybe it’s Indian, they don’t want to taste their food. Actually they even don’t want to try. I remember I have a taste of the vegetarian foods, some locals-- I know they are local students, they don’t want to try. So you see, but for some immigrant students, new immigrants, they’re willing to try. So I think maybe some new teachers like me, I can expose them to more cultures. (Int 4)

This was confirmed by the students’ comments on the survey. A number of students commented about the value of having an internationally educated teacher:

“I thought Ms. Chan was a great teacher and gave us different views on different topics.”

“Taught us about different cultures.”

“I liked the different perspective & techniques.”

“It helps you understand other cultures.” (Survey Class C)
Emily’s comments and the comments from her students provide evidence that Emily not only adapted to the Canadian educational context, but also contributed to transformation in her classroom community.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this case study of the professional acculturation of an internationally educated teacher in Canada revealed the individual and co-constructed nature of identity and agency. Emily’s background and previous teaching experience were important factors in constructing her identity, which both facilitated and constrained her adaptation to teaching in a different education system. For example, Emily’s identity as a life-long learner and a person who is open to new challenges helped her to overcome English language barriers in her professional context. However, conflicts between Canadian norms and some of Emily’s conceptions of effective teaching and learning resulted in Emily’s resistance to adaptation. Emily’s identity was also constructed by social interactions in multiple concurrent settings. For example, in Emily’s professional community of practice, which included her department head and other colleagues, Emily’s identity as a professional was affirmed. In community of practice terms, Emily was welcomed as a legitimate peripheral participant and was given full access to resources to support her professional acculturation. In Emily’s classroom communities, however, Emily’s identity and competence as a teacher were challenged by some students who positioned Emily as a non-native English speaking immigrant. This was one of Emily’s greatest challenges in her acculturation process. The findings also highlighted the mediation through material resources, social support, and relational agency, which enabled Emily to overcome challenges and to achieve professional success in a new education system, and helped her to re-establish her professional identity.
In conclusion, examining the experiences of an internationally educated teacher through sociocultural perspectives of identity and agency furthers an understanding of the complex, and at times conflictual, process of professional acculturation. A sociocultural perspective also has the potential to illuminate the affordances, for example, mediating tools, social interactions, and relational agency, which facilitate this process. The findings from this study also show the potential of internationally educated teachers to transform a community of practice, for the greater good.

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Transcription key

double hyphen-- incomplete word or abrupt break in speech
[ ] commentary or description of nonverbal sounds, e.g. laughter
, slight pause
... longer pause
(…) omitted text
bold word (or syllable) stressed
References


