

Access to the Teaching Profession:

Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs) Experiences

Katina Pollock

OISE/UT

This overview presents the case of how internationally Educated Teachers (IETs) face considerable challenges when attempting to participate in the teaching profession as a full-time permanent teacher. IETs are defined for this overview as teachers who have successfully completed an education degree outside of Canada, and have also received teacher certification in Ontario. Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), the teacher regulating body, conducted a survey called *Transition to Teaching* (2005). This survey reported that IETs are disproportionately over represented (48%) in the occasional/supply teacher workforce compared to new Ontario graduates (18%), teachers educated in other provinces (23%) and teachers educated at border-colleges (24%). This disproportionate concentration of IETs doing occasional/supply teaching is a concern as it appears that many IETs are seeking full-time permanent employment but are not successful in securing such a position. Discourses found within Federal and provincial documents and interviews conducted with 13 occasional/supply teachers indicate that issues around IETs' access to the teaching profession originated from a deficit model. IETs, in general, should be considered an educational asset as they bring other ways of knowing that are culturally influenced.

In considering the positioning of IETs in the teacher workforce, most tend to be both on the periphery and at the bottom of the internal teacher workforce hierarchy

(occasional/supply teaching). The general positioning of IETS within the teacher workforce hierarchy can leave the impression of IETs being less valued. Often overlooked is the ‘value-added’ factor. IETs bring with them a wealth of professional and cultural knowledge, skill sets, and experience that can be utilized, especially in highly diverse school environments. This knowledge has largely gone untapped.

It became apparent early in the interviewing process that many IETS are well-educated with numerous years of teaching experience outside of Ontario and/or teaching experience within the Ontario private school system. For example, one IET received her teaching certificate in Hong Kong, where she taught for 17 years. After immigrating to Canada, she chose to upgrade her teaching certificate and completed a Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics. While completing her Bachelors degree at an Ontario University she also worked as a teacher in a Heritage school in an attempt to gain more teaching experience. Presented with the possibility of a Long-Term Occasional (LTO) position, she then participated in five summer institute courses. This experience is now more typical since recent changes in Federal immigration policy that have encouraged “immigrants who have a high level of education and previous experience in the labour market” (Owen, 2005) to come to Canada.

IETs reported a number of challenges in gaining access to the profession, three of which are briefly reported here: creating appropriate networks, language issues such as English language proficiency and accent/dialect; and cultural differences.

Creating Appropriate Networks. Much of the literature on promotion and career planning cites the importance of networks for career mobility/movement (Catalyst, 2001, Drentea,

1998). Networking is just as important for IETs attempting to gain access to full-time teaching. In a sense, IETs enter the occasional/supply teacher workforce at a disadvantage because they have few to no established networks. Conversely, graduates from Ontario teacher education programs are better positioned to develop more useful networks because of their familiarity with the Ontario public school system. For instance, occasional/supply teachers familiar with the Ontario public school system tend to have connections with former administrators from their formative schooling in Ontario, connections to pre-service educators who are closely tied to the field of education in Ontario and pre-service host teachers in the Ontario system who, in most cases, act as references for the newly qualified teachers. Because of relocation, many IETs have fewer of these types of connections and therefore require additional time and energy in getting established. As one IET commented:

...it's really important as a supply teacher to cultivate the relationship with the secretary because they are the ones that actually do a lot of the phoning and they'll call you back, and the principal, I try to get to know the principal...and then I get to know the different staff, try to make friends...

Language Proficiency, accents and dialects. English language proficiency should not be an issue for certified IETs as they would have met the set standard language test. However, tests such as the TOFEL test for language proficiency, do not test for occupation-specific language and the subtle nuances of word meanings, leaving many IETs unaware of the present 'politically correct' discourse. This can lead to a number of negative outcomes such as being perceived as not suitable to teach and not called back for supply work or hired for any type of permanent teaching position. In addition, the accents some IETs have can also carry a negative value. Mawhinney and Xu (1997)

reported that IETs were constantly questioned about their accent. Respondents indicated in their interviews that at times they were discriminated against because of their accents. Accents from countries which most reflect the dominant teaching population (95% white (WALL,2004)) such as the UK, Australia, and New Zealand appear to be less hindered in their access to the profession than compared to other IETs who possess accents from non-western countries. As one interviewee stated,

Language is a barrier, not in terms of proficiency. I think it's clear that it's important to have a proficiency level when in a classroom, but there are cultural barriers that people face around accent, [and they] may not necessarily get a job because they have an accent. (interviewee #16)

Culture Differences. Lastly, in addition to technical knowledge such as understanding the Ontario Standards of Practice, Ontario Provincial Curriculum, The Safe Schools Act, etc., there are other cultural and social norms specific to the general Ontario public school system that IETs may need to understand in securing a full-time teaching position. IETs are challenged by teaching in a dominant culture while attempting to bring one's own particular ways of knowing. There were subtle hints that while none of the IETs outwardly stated that they felt they were being discriminated against, their stories indicate that there is room for such an interpretation.

Respondents indicated racism can play a part in how IETs are not provided with the same opportunities to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Although teacher training appears to be similar in most cases, cultural differences tend to act as a barrier. A white, occasional/supply teacher commented,

A: ...I'm very privileged compared to most people who are supply teaching, ... Well, a lot of people are quite racist in their assumptions about supply teaching,

so if they see somebody who is “whitish” and who speaks English with the same accent that they speak, and who is doing [occasional/supply] because they are doing a graduate degree, rather than because they couldn’t get a job teaching, and all of the assumptions that they might have around supply teaching are sort of ... there, I play into them just by existing and having my body so, I don’t ever see a big shock on people’s faces as I’m walking through the door and supply teaching...

Conclusion: The Ontario Government’s New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) and the mini-discussion paper, entitled “Teacher Excellence: Unlocking Student Potential Through Continuing Professional Development” (August 16, 2004 (v.2) demonstrates that the provincial government understands the importance of ongoing professional support for teachers, particularly those new to the public education system. But while there have been provincial initiatives to orient IETs to the Ontario Public teaching system, such as *Teach in Ontario*, these programs fail to provide any type of ongoing support for the IETs. IETs need systemic support in the form of program expansion beyond credential assessment, upgrading and “bridging”.

While it may be beneficial in pragmatic terms to provide support in the form of additional training for IETs, it would also appear that policy initiatives addressing issues around IETs are too narrowly focused. These policies tend to view IETs as if the challenges to accessing the profession is solely their problem, and do not take into consideration the possibility of larger systemic issues. Systematic change must occur within the educational system where IETs are perceived as assets who bring new knowledge and skills to the Ontario education system.

References

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