THE CLOSED DOOR: CREDENTIALIZED SOCIETY AND IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the role that credentials play in immigrants' experiences in Canada. The article discusses the theoretical basis of the non-recognition of foreign credentials and provides practical examples of the impact of non-recognition.

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A typical scenario

An immigrant from Nepal arrives in Canada as a permanent resident in the Economic Class. In his country of origin, he earned several degrees, including a Bachelor of Commerce, Master of Commerce, Bachelor of Education and Master of Education. He taught commerce and accounting courses in a senior high school, and he hopes to continue a career as a teacher in Canada. However, he spends the first six weeks going through the settlement phase, in which he attempts to find housing, a school for his children, apply for an Alberta health card, Social Insurance card and other necessities. Once in a position to actually look for work, he books an appointment with an employment counselor at a local immigrant-serving agency. The counselor realizes that the client speaks English poorly and suggests that the client undergo a language assessment. The client patiently waits for yet another agency (Agency B) to call him about his English test; he is advised to start Level 1 English at a local community college in two months.

Six months later, the client comes back to the employment counselor with hopes of exercising his passion to work as a teacher. However, the employment counselor discovers that the client lacks job search skills, occupational research skills and knowledge of the Canadian labour market. Furthermore, the client's certificates and other supporting documents from post-secondary institutions need to be translated into English. The counselor suggests that the client enroll in a four-week employment readiness class and refers him to Agency C for document interpretation and then on to International Qualifications Assessment Services (IQAS) for an assessment of his credentials. He is also referred to the Teacher Certification Branch and the Alberta Teachers' Association. Twelve weeks later, IQAS notifies the newcomer that his combined twelve years of post-secondary education compares to the completion of grade twelve and one year of a Bachelor's degree in Canada. The immigrant's credentials are deemed to be below those required of a teacher in Canada, and he therefore cannot currently work as a teacher.

The client quickly books an appointment with the career advisor at the immigrant-serving agency. The career advisor informs him that he cannot teach in Canada unless he has the requisite number of years of education (or course hours) and will probably have to go back to university and complete (or perhaps redo) several years. Understandably, the young man from Nepal is angry, baffled, confused and panicky, unsure of where to turn for employment. The money he has brought from overseas is running out, and the road to becoming a successful teacher appears out of reach. His wife, a social worker in Nepal, is also unable to work in Canada because her skills have not been recognized and she, too, requires English training. The gentleman informs the employment counselor that he is in desperate need of employment. He is referred to a local employer willing to hire him as a cashier working 40 hours per week for $10.00 an hour.

Background and theoretical discussion

Canada's workforce is aging, birthrates are declining, and there are labour market shortages in many occupations (Herzog, 2004; Reitz, 2005). Although immigration policies reflect an increasing demand for immigrants to alleviate labour market shortages, immigrants face great difficulties

integrating into the labour market, and many professional positions remain unfilled. The non-recognition of the credentials of Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs)[1] is an important piece of the puzzle and is the focus of this article.

Several factors are at play. First, immigrants are increasingly arriving from non-traditional source countries (Statistics Canada, 2005), and this poses greater integration challenges than in the past. Second, they may have – or be perceived as having – values that are different from those of established Canadians. Third, they may lack social and economic capital, which are important for labour market integration. Finally, regulatory licensing bodies control access to professions and trades through licensing and registration requirements. These policies also steer the requirements of educational institutions and hiring and promotion guidelines in occupations where credential assessment must be carried out prior to registration and licensing. I would argue that employers' emphasis on Canadian credentials and experience is a means of preventing IEPs from entering into their professional field once in Canada. Regulatory licensing bodies and their members – who often reflect Eurocentric ideals – possess high status, prestige, and access to rights, positions and rewards. Recent immigrants, mostly from Asia, Africa and South America, are largely absent from these elite bureaucracies and organizations.

One way to interpret this phenomenon is through Weber's theoretical concept of closure. Closure is a form of social inequality resulting in class formation and stratification. Contemporary writers, including Collins (1998) and Murphy (1994), have expanded the concept of closure to include credentialism. They suggest that credentials are an instrument used by the dominant class to restrict access, privileges and opportunities for the subordinate classes. Although many immigrants have credentials that are regarded as sufficient in their country of origin, Canadian policies value these credentials differently, and immigrants often work in positions other than those for which they were formally trained.

This is related to conflict theory, which is grounded in the premise that some members of society are endowed with greater power than others. This leads to a continual struggle or conflict between these two positions. Individuals and groups who benefit from a particular structure will strive to see it maintained, while those who are disadvantaged struggle against it. Credential assessment is a tool that was designed by societal groups with power and has placed restrictions on IEPs entering regulated professions. Educational institutions, regulatory and licensing bodies, corporations and industries have the means and authority to benchmark credentials and enforce standards for membership and entrance requirements. In addition, they can "inflate" (to use Collins' term) entrance and licensing requirement at their discretion, and IEPs must comply. Often, these policies serve to further benefit the existing elite. This is a form of closure because it is a process that allows privileged social groups to maximize advantages by limiting access to privileges and "life chances" (Koch, 2003). While power and rewards are intrinsic to all social structures, a better awareness of these social tendencies can allow us to work towards providing an equitable environment for immigrants.

Newcomers are constantly in conflict with bureaucracy at all levels, including the immigration office, settlement agency, educational institutions, and credential assessment and licensing bodies. Weber argues that bureaucracies stand in opposition to our notion of democracy; he uses the metaphor of the "iron cage" to describe bureaucracies. To compound matters, employers are reluctant – or unable – to hire professionals who are not already licensed in Canada, and newcomers are thus caught in a cyclical dilemma that prevents them from working in their field and acquiring Canadian experience.

> While awarding points for applicants' education and experience, the selection criteria will not necessarily translate into professional placements in their fields. Indeed, the application to immigrate includes a statement recognizing that immigrants may not find a position in their profession.

Credentials and the role of the labour market

Collins (1988) encourages us to move beyond the aesthetic value of credentials (whereby merely having titles such as M.Ed. or Ph.D. does not guarantee that a person is skilled or knowledgeable) and look at the role the labour market plays in determining the value of education and credentials. He suggests that "an individual's occupational attainment depends to a considerable degree on what degree level is achieved and also on the value that such a degree has in relation to all the other degrees existing in the competitive market for status" (Collins, 1988, p.180). He adds that "expanding the educational credential system to take up the slack and create new jobs…is the form that the economic class struggle takes in a credentialized society" (Collins, 1988, p.182). Removing existing barriers for IEPs may cause a surplus in the labour market, which would result in deflated wages for certain occupational groups. The non-recognition of foreign credentials is, in other words, instrumental in maintaining and supporting the status quo.

For example, Employment Readiness Workshops[2] encourage newcomers to either upgrade their skills and or obtain Canadian experience. However, I have worked in an immigrant-serving agency for over ten years, and it has been my experience that, in spite of extensive education and re-training, immigrants still face systemic, personal and institutional barriers when entering their professions.

What are employers looking for? In my opinion, they are looking for employees with the Canadian values, culture and the "rituals" that Weber, Collins and Murphy emphasize. 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.

Collins (1988) suggests that "competition, decentralized democracy and a market for status credentials has made education a kind of business, selling opportunities of educational degree" (Collins, 1988, p. 178). For an immigrant, retraining may be a necessity, but for the Canadian counterpart, it gives them further status and "cultural money." Consequently, training centers and educational institutions are welcoming foreign-trained students. There are, however no employment assurances.

Proponents of degree assessment and meritocracy provide a technocratic explanation for the need for such credentialing. They assert that individuals require advanced technical skills, which are increasingly seen as essential by employers. Collins argues that there is no clear evidence that skill requirements have changed over the years, but rather that the technocratic explanation for credential inflation is largely a result of "organizational politics" (Collins, 1988, p.175). It is problematic that while Canada emphasizes the need to attract highly skilled workers (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002), immigrants with these skills continue to have difficulty integrating into the labour market.

There is also a strong expectation that immigrants should accept Canada's prevailing practices and standards (Li, 2003, p.11). Hence, some may argue that policy-makers are aware – or even expect – that not all immigrants' credentials will be recognized, and IEPs will thus take up the non-skilled labour positions often turned down by their Canadian counterparts. Murphy (1994) suggests that, in this way, education acts in a manner similar to ethnicity, race and class origin in that it can be a basis for exclusion. The systemic racism and discrimination faced by immigrants is well-documented (Razack, 2002; Dei, 1996; Bannerji 1995) and is essential to fully understanding the current position of those that are marginalized and underutilized. This issue, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

In spite of the integration challenges faced by immigrants, Canada continues to accept immigrants whose credentials may or may not be recognized. Nearly half of all immigrants who come to Canada arrive through the Skilled Worker Class, which includes the Principal Applicant and his or her spouse and dependents. Principal Applicants are assessed against a grid that awards points on the basis of work experience, level of education, official language proficiency, age and adaptability. While awarding points for applicants' education and experience, the selection criteria will not necessarily translate into professional placements in their fields. Indeed, the application to immigrate includes a statement recognizing that immigrants may not find a position in their profession. In the absence of prior learning assessment (and recognition of formal and non-formal learning), competency-based assessment, and other strategies that reduce the barriers of credentialism, immigrants may be relegated to low paying labour jobs.

Conclusion

Tackling the larger systemic issues will require time, effort and collaboration from all parties including government, non-governmental officials, regulatory bodies, and businesses. Although there are a few bridging program that reflect this collaboration, such as the Engineers and Technologists Integration Program (ETIP)[3], more programs need to be developed. The latest round of bridging programs constitute a patchwork which, although largely effective, is a temporary measure. Incentives for businesses to hire foreign-trained professionals are absent, and creative work is needed on this front. We must also look critically at existing policies and practices to build a seamless framework and collaborative partnership between stakeholders. Unless such measures are taken seriously by policy-makers, labour market integration issues will persist.

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Notes

[1] The terms Internationally Trained Professionals and Foreign Trained Professionals are often used interchangeably, but the latter has a negative connotation for many professional immigrants.

[2] Employment Readiness Workshops are designed to assist newcomers with their job search strategies – generally funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

[3] The Engineers and Technologists Integration Program (ETIP) is a nine-month engineering bridging program at the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN). It is a collaborative effort between non-governmental organizations, regulatory bodies and educational institutions that assists internationally trained engineers to re-qualify as technologists.


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A recent issue of the *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* (Vol. 15, No. 2, 2006) was guest edited by Tom Carter and Marc Vachon of the University of Winnipeg; John Biles and Erin Tolley of the Metropolis Project Team; and Jim Zamprelli of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. It contains selected articles on politics, religion, housing, youth gang activity, sports and recreational services. These articles explore the challenges posed by the increasing concentration of religious, linguistic, ethnic and racial groups in Canadian cities as well as suggesting ways to facilitate the integration process.

La plus récente édition de la *Revue canadienne de recherche urbaine / Canadian Journal of Urban Research* (vol. 15, n° 2, 2006) est le fruit d'une collaboration entre les rédacteurs invités Tom Carter et Marc Vachon (Université de Winnipeg), John Biles et Erin Tolley (Équipe du projet Metropolis), et Jim Zamprelli (Société canadienne d'hypothèques et de logement). Cette revue présente une sélection d'articles portant sur la politique, la religion, le logement, les bandes de jeunes, les sports ainsi que les services récréatifs. On y aborde les défis que pose la concentration croissante de groupes religieux, linguistiques, ethniques et raciaux au sein des villes canadiennes, et on y propose des moyens de faciliter le processus d'intégration.

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