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An investigation of the career paths of internationally trained early childhood educators transitioning into early learning programs

Research Report prepared by

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Background

The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) is a non-profit professional association, established in 1950 to respond to fill the gaps in government regulation and formal facilities for training in early childhood studies for day nursery staff in that era. For fifty years, the AECEO organized and administered equivalency credentials; it continues to offer professional development, and is recognized as the voice of early childhood education in Ontario. In 2006, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario in partnership with Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office and the School of Early Childhood at George Brown College established the *Access to Early Childhood Education Program* (referred to as the ECE Bridging Program) to address the need to bridge internationally trained early childhood educators into the Canadian workforce and to rectify the labour force shortage in the early childhood sector. During the second phase of the project, additional funding was secured expanding the project's capacity by providing direct services in two identified high need immigrant communities in Hamilton and Ottawa. The project added Alqonguin College, Mohawk College and Hamilton's Affiliated Services for Children and Youth to its partnership roster.

In the last decade there have been an increasing number of internationally trained educators seeking early childhood equivalency in Ontario (AECEO 2011). Despite a wide variety of education credentials and professional experience, like other immigrants, early childhood educators with international training are not recognized by employers for their knowledge and expertise. As a result, the ECE Bridging Program was developed to provide an opportunity to combine international education with relevant early childhood courses in Ontario that would lead to ECE credential equivalency.

The current research initiative examines the pathway to employment in the field of early childhood education for internationally trained professionals. In particular, the study's aim is to investigate the experiences of internationally trained professionals in the ECE Bridging Program (first step in the accreditation process in Ontario for internationally trained educators). The study also explored the experiences of participants in applying for jobs prior to and after achieving their ECE equivalency. The second goal was to explore whether international education credentials had any impact on employability.

The study brought together a community consortium working on the project and the Atkinson Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) was contracted to complete the research project with support from the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study. The Atkinson Centre (OISE) with the Jackman Institute of Child Study is involved in numerous applied community research initiatives and offers internship opportunities for student researchers and professionals in early childhood education. It has a strong record of collaborating in community evaluations of programs that pay particular attention to outreach to diverse families, including immigrants.

In the initial stages of the project, the AECEO disseminated information to potential interview candidates, and provided relevant background information regarding program design, curriculum policy and employment tracking information to the researchers. The AECEO agreed to provide opportunities to share findings with their membership and the larger early childhood community.

The research design was based on a previous study on the career paths of early childhood education diploma graduates (Langford & Janmohamed, 2008).

The research project recruited participants who are internationally trained early childhood educators, had completed the ECE Bridging program and are currently employed in the ECE field. The AECEO is the lead organization for the ECE Bridging Program and works in conjunction with community college faculty who designed the program to include components on communication and outreach, assessment and mentorship, language support, and ECE field experience. Through the consortium's collective experience with professional standards in the ECE field, education, and community outreach, the partners work together to provide internationally trained early childhood educators a practical pathway to the workplace.

This study explored the career paths of graduates between 2007-2009 ensuring that the participants had completed the ECE Bridging Program and had gained ECE related employment positions. During this time, a total of 91 individuals completed the program and 25 graduates participated in the study. The first graduating cohort received their former post-secondary training in early education from twenty-four countries, with the majority from India. The educators had a range of post-secondary credentials including diplomas, undergraduate degrees and graduate degrees.

Research indicates that immigrant education and experience is consistently undervalued in Canada. Reitz (2001) analyzed census data from 1970 to 1996 and demonstrated that the labour market integration and earnings ratio of immigrants has worsened over time despite the fact that education and skill levels have increased. Although graduates from the ECE Bridging Program are able to find employment, there remain a number of questions regarding the type and quality of employment the internationally trained educators are getting in Ontario, despite having more advanced training and significant professional experience.

Against this backdrop, the current study explored experiences of internationally trained ECEs in a program designed to address some of the difficulties. The current study utilized a mixed-methods design that included semi-structured interviews and the collection of demographic information on employment and education from graduates who successfully completed the Bridging Program between 2007-2009. Data was collected between January – June 2011. The specific aim of the study was to examine the factors that influence employability in early childhood education for internationally trained educators. It investigated if undergraduate training in early education and professional experience outside Canada had any impact on the type of employment gained and what the barriers and supports existed in finding employment and professional satisfaction.

Participants were asked to share their experiences applying to early childhood education jobs in Ontario and whether this experience was different after the completion of the ECE Bridging Program. Further, the study explored the satisfaction of participants in their current positions, and whether participants have met their employment goals. Participants were given the opportunity to provide recommendations for improvement to the ECE Bridging Program.

The following report begins with a review of relevant research in immigrant workers' employment patterns in Canada, and the barriers immigrants face when seeking secure employment. This is followed by an overview of the study, the methodology, and the findings.

Literature Review

Immigrants comprise approximately 20% of Canada's entire population with more than half coming from Asian countries and the Middle East; most of which reside in Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). Many newcomers arrive in Canada equipped with the necessary skills, experiences and educational background to enter the Canadian labour market within their respective fields of expertise (Gurcham & Li, 1998). However, once immigrants arrive in Canada, they face several barriers both personally and professionally as they establish themselves in a new country.

When applying for employment, some of the barriers immigrants face include the assumed need for Canadian experience, English-language skill mastery, and the lack of recognition for their foreign credentials (Kustee, Thompson & Xue, 2007). As a result, newcomers are forced into positions unrelated to their field, may engage in further schooling or leave the country to find better opportunities elsewhere (Houle & Yssaad, 2010). Immigrants who do find employment often work for lower wages, experience a lack of job security, are only offered contract or supply positions and receive no benefits (Basran & Zong, 1998). In the teaching profession, many internationally educated immigrants meet teaching requirements but their lack of Canadian experience and international education limit their ability to secure teaching positions (Phillion, 2003). Similarly, according to Kolowale (2009), a total of 1,992 internationally educated nurses applied to register with the Ontario College of Nurses but only 6% were able to complete the registration process within a year of application suggesting significant barriers for nurses who had been trained outside Canada.

This study on internationally trained early childhood educators was carried out at a time when the ECE sector is experiencing a number of changes and challenges. The early childhood sector continues to face a labour shortage of qualified educators combined with a need for an expanded publicly delivered system (CCHRSC 2007; Friendly & Prentice 2009). There is clear recognition across the Canadian landscape that access to early childhood programs is a fundamental need of families with young children. According to (Fortin 2011) over seventy percent of mothers with young children participate in the workforce – a trend that is unlikely to change due to increasing economic pressures on families. In Ontario, the expansion of full day kindergarten in all of Ontario's schools will require additional early childhood educators. As a result, there is growing demand for the expansion of high quality early childhood programs and the need for more early childhood educators remains unprecedented.

In order to address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Canada, the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council Report on Recruitment and Retention (2007) suggests that the early childhood profession may be attractive to a number of groups including educated immigrants who have foreign credentials. Although there is a desire to diversify the early childhood profession, a recruitment strategy that focuses on immigrant professionals also has deeper implications given that the profession remains a low wage sector.

Ninety-six percent of childcare workers are women and as a group they are ethnically diverse, have greater educational backgrounds than the general public and receive some of the lowest wages (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2007). Phillion (2003) outlines barriers that some female teachers face when immigrating to Canada including not having their credentials assessed accurately creating further barriers for full recognition by educational institutions and employers. Many newcomers are told they must enrol in further schooling which is costly and requires more time. When applying for jobs, internationally trained educators are challenged by a lack of Canadian experience, creating a systemic barrier for internationally trained professionals. Phillion (2003) argues that these systemic barriers are accompanied by social barriers such as racism and discrimination in schools and in the wider community. In addition, their foreign credentials and professional experience are not assigned any value and their language proficiency and accents trigger discrimination.

In the related field of public education teaching, Bascia (2006) found both male and female immigrant teachers experience social isolation and alienation in the schools they work in and many of them also experience discrimination and do not feel a part of having a Canadian identity which is common across professions for new immigrants. Many feel a sense of isolation and marginalization when they arrive due to the lack of support, information and employment opportunities (Houle & Yssaad, 2010).

According to Bascia (2006), immigration status, English-language proficiency, experience, teacher beliefs and visible minority differences shape immigrant teachers career paths because it affects whether they are accepted as teachers, what positions they receive, career advancement possibilities and how they are treated on the organizational and individual level. She also argues that teachers who are visible minorities experience, rejection, isolation, fewer opportunities for professional development, a lack of involvement with curriculum development and decision making. Furthermore, they are forced to work in other positions or roles such as being English language teachers or counsellors (i.e. positions with less power) and are rarely considered for administrative positions irrespective of their credentials and training. Teacher candidates who are visible minorities also experience devaluation of their abilities and many feel the need to conform to the normative teacher identity in Canada which means their unique experiences and skills are not demonstrated. These are significant lessons for the early childhood profession to consider as well.

Galabuzi (2008) identifies the persistent income disparity of racialized communities and its social-political implications. Further, a recent Statistics Canada (2008) report on employment demonstrates that unemployment is higher for immigrant women than for non-immigrant women and that wages for immigrant women are lower than for non-immigrant women. One could argue that the CCHRSC recruitment strategy would alleviate unemployment for some immigrant women. However, in the field of ECE the possibility of gaining employment in an obviously low wage sector, adds to the social and economic marginalization that immigrant women already experience (Langford & Janmohamed 2008). Canada aims to attract very skilled and educated immigrants however, once they arrive, the deskilling of immigrant women is apparent and quite clear that the labor market demonstrates no need for such workers (Mojab, 1999).

Methods

The current study included twenty-five participants (n=25). All participants were female and their age ranged from 38-45 years of age. The majority of participants immigrated from different parts of India. Some of the participants were from China, and some from both Western and Eastern Europe. All the participants had either a combination of diploma and/or degree completion from outside Canada and a letter of equivalency from the AECEO, indicating the successful completion of the program before 2009.

Four key questions were addressed during the interviews with participants:

- a. Experience in the ECE Bridging Program. What new knowledge did you gain? Describe any challenges you experienced and what improvements would you recommend?
- b. Experience applying for jobs in Canada prior to completing the Bridging Program. What was your experience after completing the program? Describe any challenges you experienced and what supports you utilized to gain current job positions
- c. Describe your satisfaction with your current position. What are your employment goals and future aspirations for career development in the field of early childhood education?
- d. What suggestions do you have for the early childhood community regarding internationally trained educators?

In an effort to complete the data collection in a timely and sensitive manner, face to face interviews were supplemented with telephone interviews as necessary. Often, the telephone interviews were arranged if the participant indicated that was their preference. Semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on the experiences in the ECE Bridging Program, experiences applying for jobs before completing the Bridging Program, current job experience and job satisfaction. Additional questions explored personal employment goals, future aspirations and potential barriers to meeting the goals.

Most interviews were conducted by the senior author, a trained graduate student and a few by the first co-investigator. Interviews varied in length from 20 minutes to approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with consent from participants. Participants were also asked to fill out a demographics form in person or to be returned through mail. Questions included demographic information such as age, languages spoken and years in Canada as well as questions about foreign job positions and Canadian job positions (e.g. job title, location, length of employment and salary range). Audio files were transcribed by another trained student following the completion of each interview.

Transcripts were analyzed and coded based on common themes and patterns in responses. Coding of data included a focus on the employment experience and whether graduates of the ECE Bridging Program were satisfied with their career trajectories. In addition, the analyses coded for barriers and supports that have impeded or helped gain secure employment. As well, analyses explored the tensions between goals of employment for immigrants and equity/low wages for this labour sector.

Research Findings: Telling the story

When asked whether the ECE Bridging Program was useful, 71% of participants reported that it was extremely useful (See Figure 1). The majority of participants (90%) felt that they gained knowledge of about early childhood in the Canadian context; new health and safety regulations, nutritional guidelines and valuable information on the Day Nursery Act. Approximately 40% of participants found travel and mobility to classes extremely difficult and the workload for courses was overwhelming. Over half the participants also found difficulty balancing family obligations and course work and experienced financial stress. Less than 1/3rd of the participants had previous knowledge of the Bridging Program. Seventy percent of the participants found the English language proficiency test and the entry process major barriers or challenges.

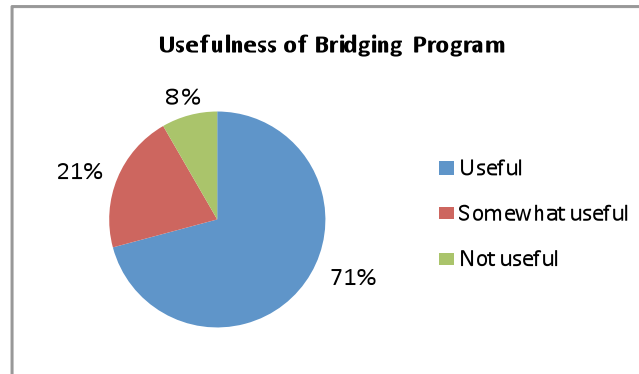


Figure 1: Usefulness of the Bridging Program

Based on these initial findings, there is an ongoing need to provide contextual and legislative course work related to early childhood education. There is an obvious problem with the English proficiency test and entry process that needs to be addressed by the organizational partners.

Juggling responsibilities

One participant shared her struggles with managing her job, school and family.

When I started the Bridging Program, it was really useful. Though I had a hard time because I was working full-time in a warehouse I used to finish work at 3 pm, just go home and take a shower, grab a cup of tea and I used to leave for Toronto because you know it's rush hour and I could never find parking in the building itself. I used to wait at least an hour for a spot and had to pay a lot for it

Managing work, school and family responsibility is a common challenge for most people in the workforce. However, for many immigrants, they face additional language and financial barriers. Another participant revealed that, "the biggest problem for me [in the Bridging Program] was language. More language training or assistance would have made it more useful. Also, I felt that the placement was too short and I needed more time for more information about Canada".

The Job Search

Participants also shared their experiences applying for jobs in the Greater Toronto Area. A number of participants applied for jobs at Montessori schools, some volunteered and others took on supply or assistant positions. Almost all applied for several jobs and were not successful in achieving their goals of working in a stable position. Many ended up working in private centers for less pay and found that the major barriers they experienced were lack of Canadian experience, English proficiency or accent discrimination. Additional challenges included a lack of recognition of former credentials, racism, difficulty searching for jobs and going through the interview process. Often, they received no response at all from potential employers.

One participant shared her experiences of inequality in Canada:

To be very honest, the big challenges as international professionals is we are always criticized from whatever background we come from. Like if we are South Asian, we are criticized about our South Asian cultural backgrounds. Even the principal sometimes has [negative] attitudes towards our accents. Sometimes they see your cultural background, and which country you come from and the colour of your skin and don't give you a job based on that. I have seen this with principals too, they hire who they know, the unions know about this too.

Within unionized environments, collective agreements and seniority ranks often guide who gets hired. However, the experience of racism or discrimination cannot be ignored in these circumstances and collectively, we need to recognize and work toward a common solution.

In terms of current job satisfaction and future employment goals, most participants indicated they were somewhat satisfied with their current positions but it was not where they envisioned they would be working. Many desire full-time positions with benefits; several participants hope to work for a school board and used this avenue (ECE equivalency) as a stepping stone to becoming a teacher in Ontario. Many of the participants work part-time and split shifts which they found

difficult. The majority of ECE Bridging graduates were employed in part time, precarious employment despite the combination of ECE equivalency from Ontario and additional post secondary education from outside Canada (See Figure 2).

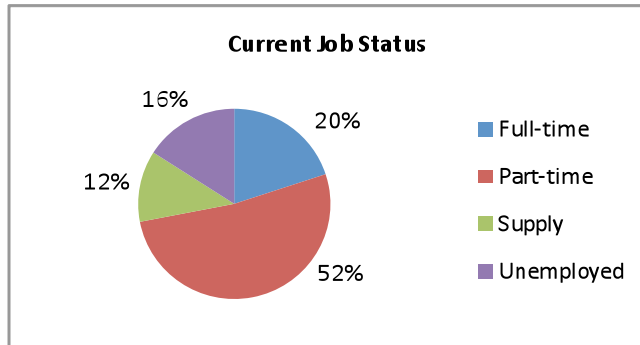


Figure 2: Current Job Status in Canada

Several participants stated that they would like to have more support, greater teamwork and more acknowledgement of their credentials in curriculum planning, decision making and leading the room. Quite a few participants hoped to do further education and obtain more supervisory or higher-level positions.

Limited Career Opportunities

When asked whether she felt she achieved her full potential in Canada, one participant shared that she would like to go on to do further schooling. "I know I can still go further. I would definitely like to get my Bachelor of Education and if I get a chance I would like to do my Masters in early childhood education".

Another participant shares her dedication to the field and all the hard work and motivation she has put into achieving her goal of full-time employment. "I work hard, I have 3 jobs, do supply and in different rooms all the time so it is very tiring. I will do more school to move further, I have tried so hard to obtain my OCT (Ontario College of Teachers certification in Ontario)." The desire for additional education was a common theme for a number of participants.

All participants wanted more opportunity for varied positions and more responsibility. Sixty five percent of the participants were not in full-time ECE positions even after completing the Bridging Program. Forty percent believe that working in full-time in a school board full-day early learning environment, would be optimal. Participants who did receive these jobs attributed it to luck. One participant shared, "I don't know I got lucky because I work in the full-day kindergarten program and I would say I was very lucky because I was already in the field and got a job and I find that George Brown College helped get this job (Bridging Program)".

Ninety-percent of participants felt that their credentials were not recognized and many felt that they were not supported as newcomers in the early childhood community. Seventy five percent of the participants suggested increasing wages and hiring more full-time staff from foreign countries could improve an understanding of different cultures. The majority of participants

suggested more opportunities for experience in centers and greater English-language support during and after the Bridging Program.

Conclusion:

Two main objectives of this study were to document the employment patterns of internationally trained early childhood educators who have completed the ECE Bridging Program and to analyze the differential in employability of internationally trained early childhood educators that have an undergraduate degree from outside Canada to investigate if their advanced post-secondary training was recognized by employers.

All the students entering the Bridging Program have completed some form of post secondary studies outside Canada. In fact, some of them have completed undergraduate degrees and a few have completed graduate degrees. Many of the participants either worked as full-time teachers or held higher positions in the education sector in their home countries. Research evidence points to the value of early childhood degree training, yet many of these students were unable to receive recognition for their educational credentials.

According to Bellm & Whitebrook (2006) teachers with four-year degrees in early childhood education rated higher in positive interaction with children than those without these credentials, and were less detached, less authoritarian and less punitive. Children who had teachers with a bachelor's or associate's in early childhood education demonstrated stronger receptive vocabularies than those with teachers holding only a high school diploma. Retaining the greatest number of teachers with bachelor's degrees or more was the strongest predictor of whether a center maintained a high level of quality over time. Despite the higher level of education that internationally trained educators hold, many of these educational qualifications are not sought after by early childhood employers in Ontario. Although the current Day Nurseries Act only requires a minimum of an ECE diploma, the early childhood profession may benefit from the additional knowledge and expertise advanced education brings.

Despite the desire to have well trained early childhood educators lead early years programs, there is some resistance by early childhood education employers to recognize international credentials that may not fit a traditional standard of what is considered appropriate educational standards in Canada. As much as the early childhood community touts the value of diversity, equity and inclusion, we have much work to do when responding to internationally trained early childhood educators. Further consideration should be given to employers' knowledge of foreign credentials and the value that this training could add to the labour market. Employers may have the misconception that the quality of instruction outside of Canada is lower and preference is given to individuals educated domestically (Sawchuk, 2009).

Similar to early childhood, educational and entry requirements established for professions such as nursing, engineering, teaching, and law, need to be revisited where greater acknowledgement is given to foreign qualifications and credentials (Gurcham & Li, 1998; Sawchuk, 2009). The procedure used to evaluate foreign credentials by partnering organizations is incomplete and inadequate and could be more streamlined in early childhood education.

Many of the participants found the Bridging Program useful and recommended more emphasis on Canadian legislation and context, richer experiences in placements, with reduced workload

and more training with English skills (accents were stated as a barrier). Bridging courses and programs need to be tailored to fit the needs of internationally trained educators and financial support for newcomers needs to be taken into consideration.

Almost all participants stated that they have not reached their employment goals they had envisioned for themselves. Many participants wanted to work for a school board and stated that they would do further schooling despite their former credentials. Immigrants tend to have limited access to employer sponsored training despite higher levels of education (Sawchuk, 2009). However, in the early childhood profession, post secondary institutions and professional organizations could potentially fill this void.

The participants noted that they needed more employment experience and language support. Training programs that assist immigrants to upgrade their skills are often not enough and do not assist in gaining employment experience in Canada (Khan, 2007). These barriers and difficulties increase if immigrants are a visible minority (Esses, Dietz, Bennett-Abuayyash & Joshi, 2007).

Esses, Dietz, Bennett-Abuayyash & Joshi (2007) suggest that in order for Canada to be an inclusive society, it must investigate subtle prejudices and discriminatory practices when hiring immigrants. Guo (2007) argues that recognizing all knowledge and experience can contribute to this inclusive framework.

However, based on the findings in this study, racism and discrimination is sadly more overt in early childhood and needs to be addressed more openly. Many of the practices employed with immigrant workers are often violations to human rights legislation (Gurcham & Li, 1998) and this may be somewhat more apparent in the early childhood community. The requirement for Canadian experience is a barrier to hiring qualified professionals (Esses, Dietz, Bennett-Abuayyash & Joshi, 2007). It is possible to eliminate that requirement as organizations such as Family Services of Toronto have done recently. Providing immigrants with more opportunities to become involved in internships and placements can enable them to gain the Canadian work experience that employers' desire (Guo, 2007). However, unpaid work experiences also add a financial burden for new immigrants.

Although Ontario schools and early childhood programs claim to be making an attempt to hire more diverse educators, this study reveals that there is a lack of acceptance and discrimination. Immigrant teachers have suggested more professional development for school staff with respect to racism, cultural awareness and sensitivity would be helpful (Bascia, 2006). Likewise, in early childhood education, a combined critical pedagogical approach and revisiting discriminatory hiring practices should be embedded in training, human resource policy and practice.

Based on the findings of this study, the authors agree with the recommendations by Schmidt, Young & Mandzuk (2010) on increasing the recognition of internationally trained educators' credentials and job attainment. To effectively integrate immigrants into the teaching field, the accreditation process and credential assessment criteria need to include an advocacy and advisory component. In addition, Bridging Programs and employment opportunities need to embed anti-discriminatory practices. For participants in the ECE Bridging program, language support is fundamental as is help with navigating employment search. These research findings

trouble the assumption of diversity, equity and inclusion in early childhood and forces the field to critically examine existing practices to ensure they are free of discrimination. Working with children and families requires a complex understanding of human rights. Both the early childhood and education professions need to understand and value the skills, experiences and expertise internationally trained educators bring to the education system and consider the opportunities to support diverse learners in Ontario through the integration of diverse educators in the workplace.

Summary of Recommendations from the ECE Bridging Program participants:

1. More in-depth courses in topics such as ECE in the Canadian context; legislation and longer field placements.
2. Greater English language skill support.
3. Travel considerations (having courses available in many parts of the city or online)
4. Adapting the course work to reduce the workload.
5. Networking opportunities and job search training.
6. Provide professional development for early childhood employers on issues of discrimination.

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