

Teaching in elementary school: Perceptions of foreign-trained teacher candidates on their teaching practicum

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Abstract

The Alternative Teacher Accreditation Program for Teachers with International Experience (ATAPTIE) is a special Bachelor of Education program funded by the Ontario government in Canada to provide new immigrants with the skills and knowledge needed to re-certify and find jobs in Ontario elementary schools. This paper presents interview data that explores the opportunities and challenges ATAPTIE teacher candidates experienced in their teaching practicum. Lave and Wenger's notion of situated learning [(1991). *Situated learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press] was used to understand the candidates' learning and acculturation into the teaching profession. Findings contribute to how professional immigrants from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds adapt to Canadian elementary classrooms.

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1. Introduction

In Ontario, particularly in large urban schools, there are increasing numbers of students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Such a population can pose significant challenges for many educators who are directly dealing with these students' academic, social, emotional, and physical needs. In order to meet these challenges, there has been the development of new multicultural and antiracist curricula, English as a second language support, bilingual education, and improved school community relationships (Corson, 2001). One recommendation has also been to

increase the number and proportion of racial and ethnocultural minority teachers in the workforce. Although foreign-trained teachers bring invaluable expertise and experience to their new country, it has been virtually impossible for them to work in Ontario because their foreign credentials do not meet the requirements for an Ontario Teaching Certificate. As a result, in April 2002, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) launched the Alternative Teacher Accreditation Program for Teachers with International Experience (ATAPTIE), as part of nine bridging education and training programs. The intention is to provide foreign-trained immigrants with the skills and knowledge needed to continue to practice their professions in the province. ATAPTIE involves the collaboration of three organizations: the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, the

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Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, and a non-governmental organization, Local Agencies Serving Immigrants (LASI) World Skills Ottawa, all of which are responsible for different aspects of the planning and implementation of the program.

ATAPTIE is a 3-year initiative with an intake of approximately 25–30 candidates per cohort. During the 1-year program, candidates need to integrate the theoretical and methodological features of Canadian teacher education into their own philosophy and pedagogy. In order to be successful, they are also required to demonstrate this learning to their professors, associate teachers, the Ontario College of Teachers, and potential employers. The ultimate program goals are determined by the ATAPTIE candidates in acquiring (a) a degree in education, (b) an Ontario teaching certificate, and (c) employment in Ontario schools. The degree in education consists of a successful completion of eight academic courses and 70 days of school-based practicum. The teaching practicum, during which time candidates work with associate teachers and principals in Ontario elementary schools, is by far the most essential element. It contributes directly to the accomplishment of the other two goals. As speculated in the program initiative, achieving the three goals will enhance the lives of these immigrant professionals, enrich the schools and communities in which they live and work, and contribute to the social and economic life of the province. The findings reported in this paper focus only on the first cohort of the ATAPTIE program, which started in 2002. This cohort consisted of 27 candidates who have qualifications at both the elementary and secondary levels and come from 17 different countries.

1.1. Conceptions about teacher learning

Conceptual understanding in relation to the role of the teacher, prior knowledge, and models for teacher education are somewhat different in the North American and international contexts. The differences to a large extent pose greater challenges to foreign-trained teacher candidates when they immigrate to Canada to continue their professional careers in education. Indeed, the skills that candidates learn on the practicum are strongly influenced by what they bring to the experience, such as their assumptions, conceptions, beliefs, dispositions and capabilities (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

In the North American context, teacher educators have framed their programs on non-transmission-based conceptions of knowledge and teaching with an emphasis on learning by doing within a context. The idea that experience-based learning is an effective way of learning about a new discipline, subject, or characteristics of a particular culture is well documented in the teacher education literature (McBee, 1998; Moore, 2003). Learning by doing and related forms of experience in teacher education began with Dewey (1938), who was a strong advocate of learning through experience. Vygotsky (1978), in turn, promoted cognitive development rooted in social experience with other adults. Built on Vygotskian theory, is the notion of situated cognition, whereby learning is perceived as a social phenomenon rather than occurring within the mind of the individual (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997). Reflected in this sociocultural theory of learning is Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of situated learning, which suggests that all learning should be understood as a process of participation in communities of practice. Learning occurs through apprenticing with others who are already part of a particular community or culture. The knowledge gained is a direct result of participation, which requires performance opportunities. In this manner, models of teacher education are based on the premise that teacher candidates need to address and solve problems within the context in which they occur—the field experience (Alley, Furtwengler, & Potthoff, 1997). The facilitation of teacher learning thus has to do with understanding and providing a field experience, that is, contexts that provide specific types of knowing (Putnam & Borko, 2000). A large portion of teacher learning occurs within classrooms with the aid of associates or co-operating teachers, faculty and the use of instructional materials that encourage candidates to enact instructional content within their own educational contexts. In order to bring implicit features of knowledge to the surface, candidates are encouraged to consult with colleagues, try out of new techniques, and reflect on their experiences (Lucas, 1999). It is the associates' interaction with candidates that leads to co-constructed knowledge among both parties and ultimately to the candidates' understanding about the nature of teaching (Arlin, 1999). In fact, teacher candidates often regard their relationship with their associates as the most important element of their teacher preparation (Blakey, Everett-Turner, Massing, & Scott, 1988).

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