Bridging the Gap for Recent Immigrants in Canada: Exploring the Role of Community-Based Adult Education

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Abstract: *This study investigates the role of community-based adult education in assisting immigrants with their settlement and adaptation in Canada. The study reveals that ethnic community organizations can play an important role in bridging the gap and providing accessible community-based adult education and professional services for recent immigrants and refugees to Canada.*

Introduction

In an immigrant country like Canada, the changing demographics in recent years have posed both challenges and new opportunities for further development in adult education. According to the 2006 Census of Canada, as of May 2006, 19.8% of the total population were born outside the country, and 16.2% identified themselves as visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2007). Also according to the same Census, Canada received 1.1 million new immigrants from 2001 to 2006; among them 80% were aged 15 years and older, which means that a large number of them were adults. As new citizens to Canada, they need educational programs to help them navigate the complex paths that citizenship entails and to upgrade their language, knowledge and skills. This study therefore investigates the role of community-based adult education in assisting immigrants with their settlement and adaptation in Canada. In particular, it focuses on the founding and historical development of two ethnic Chinese community organizations in Edmonton and Calgary, respectively called the Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre (now ASSIST) and the Calgary Chinese Community Service Association. The study analyzes the complexities and paradoxes of ethno-specific organizations.

Multiculturalism, Minority Rights and Immigration

Immigration has played an important role in transforming Canada into an ethno-culturally diverse and economically prosperous nation. One of the major mechanisms for accommodating immigrants' cultural differences and diversity is multiculturalism. In fact Canada was the first country to formulate an official policy for multiculturalism and to give it full legal authority in 1971. The main goal of the multicultural policy was to help immigrants and minority groups become full participating members of Canadian society without sacrificing their ethnic culture and identity. Though multicultural policy evoked enthusiasm and attracted attention of some groups in Canada, reactions were generally mixed (Fleras & Elliott, 2002). Concerns have rested on three critical points. First, the multicultural policy neutralizes the special claims of the French and the First Nations Canadians by putting them on an equal footing with numerous others (Fleras & Elliott, 2002). Second, the multiculturalism policy is based on a depoliticized and static definition of culture and ethnicity. A third noted flaw of multicultural policy lies in the separation of culture and language.

The above views largely represent the perspective of critical multiculturalism. Other critics of multiculturalism, such as Bissoondath (1994), claim that multiculturalism undermines Canadian 'core values' and 'traditions.' "In eradicating the centre, in evoking uncertainty as to

what and who is a Canadian," Bissoondath states, "it [multiculturalism] has diminished all sense of Canadian values, of what is a Canadian" (p. 71). Instead of promoting integration, Bissoondath maintains, multiculturalism encourages ethnic 'ghettoization' and separatism. Therefore, he continues, maintenance of ethnic heritage and identity is injurious to national allegiance and unity. Also according to Bissoondath, the very practice of supporting ethnic organizations is problematic. He rejects using taxpayers' money to fund ethnic organizations. He argues that allocating special resources to support such organizations will undermine Canadian democratic principles and erode norms and practices of democratic citizenship. In his vision, multiculturalism should not aim at preserving differences but at "blending them into a new vision of Canadianness, pursuing a Canada where inherent differences and inherent similarities meld easily" (p. 224).

In response to the above attacks, Kymlicka (1995) contends that the assertion that multiculturalism has increased 'ghettoization' and decreased the rate of integration of immigrants is flawed and bizarre. He maintains that multiculturalism is a "coherent, defensible, and indeed successful approach" to the integration of ethnic groups in Canada. Kymlicka argues that integration does not happen overnight; it is usually a long, difficult, and often painful process. Sometimes special institutions and programs are required to help immigrants with this process. Supports include certain services in an immigrant's mother tongue, and special support for immigrant organizations that assist in the settlement and integration process.

The debate over multiculturalism and immigrant settlement and adaptation has been extended to the rights of ethno-cultural minorities, or minority rights in short. Kymlicka and Norman (2000) define minority rights as "a wide range of public policies, legal rights, and constitutional provisions sought by ethnic groups for the accommodation of their cultural differences" (p. 2). Minority rights extend beyond the common provisions of civil and political rights of individual citizenship in a liberal democratic society, and the adoption of any minority rights is intended to recognize and accommodate the distinctive identities and needs of ethno-cultural groups. Minority groups seek these rights to allow them to do things or gain access to services which members of the majority culture already enjoy. They seek special provision because of culturally specific disadvantages, or because the desired common activity is out of the reach of members of non-dominant groups. The adoption of minority rights is intended to promote fairness and justice by correcting the disadvantages that minorities suffer within difference-blind institutions.

Research Design

Case study was chosen as a research methodology because it enabled me to focus on the particularity and complexity of a single case to understand an activity and its significance. As a case study inquiry, the project combined methods of document analysis, observations, and individual interviews. Data collected from the document analysis were used to portray the organizations' history and structure and to prepare a written descriptive profile of the organizations. The researcher also visited all research sites and observed classes and activities. A total of 41 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with executive directors, board members, administrative staff, instructors, and immigrants. All interviews emphasized the interviewees' personal and lived experiences with ethnic community organizations. The two case studies provided an in-depth analysis of the unique conditions, challenges and learning opportunities for immigrants in each case context. Multiple data sources and methods indicated

that this study adopted a triangulation approach which ensured the credibility of the research. Edmonton and Calgary were chosen because Alberta attracted a relatively large number of Chinese immigrants in the past two decades and many of them found home in these two cities. However, little is known about how they are adapting to a new life there. It is hoped that this study will fill in an important gap about the experience of immigrants in medium-sized cities and the role of community organization in assisting them with their settlement and adaptation.

Bridging the Gap: The Founding and Development

In 1977, Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre (ECCSC) was established in response to the cultural and language barriers faced by Chinese immigrants in accessing social services in Edmonton. The organization began as a Summer Student Community Project with funding from the Secretary of State. Three full-time students and one part-time student were employed to conduct city-wide surveys to assess the needs of social services needs of the Chinese population in Edmonton. As part of the project, a drop-in centre with library and referral services was established and programs for Chinese seniors were also provided. When the summer project ended, the Centre continued to operate, using volunteers comprising mainly university students with donations from local businesses for the rent and operating expenses. The first two years following its establishment were the most difficult time for the Centre. During its early stage, the organization was actively involved in providing settlement services for refugees from Vietnam, many of whom were of Chinese descent.

The founding of Calgary Chinese Community Service Association (CCCSA) had much in common with ECCSC. Like ECCSC, CCCSA was founded in 1978 by a group of enthusiastic students, and was a response to the failure of government and mainstream organizations to provide accessible social services to Chinese immigrants in Calgary. In an interview with Teresa Woo-Paw, she recalled that the organization emerged "I think primarily out of the need of first the recognition that there's no service, no accessible service for people of Chinese descent and those who cannot speak English well." Some of the services, primarily provided by bilingual volunteers who spoke English and Cantonese, included: information services, translation and interpretation, English classes, basic counseling services, and assistance with forms. People who accessed the Centre's services were a mixture of those who had been in Canada for some time as well as new immigrants from Hong Kong and Guangdong Province of China. Like those of ECCSC, most clients were Cantonese-speakers, and included many Vietnamese refugees of ethnic Chinese origin. Unlike ECCSC which received small government funding at its inception, CCCSA only received limited funding from the Chinese community to help with its rent.

An analysis of the development of ECCSC and CCCSA indicates that ethnic community organizations were more effective than mainstream organizations because they were more closely connected with and responsive to ethnic community's needs. In Edmonton, ECCSC continued to provide accessible social services throughout the 1980s to help Chinese immigrants overcome barriers to their settlement and adaptation. In its early stages, the most popular programs it provided were ESL (English as a Second Language), citizenship classes, information and referral services, language interpretation and translation, and legal services. By mid-1980s, it had "unfolded fully," according to Yvonne Chiu, who was the Executive Director of ECCSC from 1984-1985. She also pointed out that "[i]t was still small in the sense it has a small team and staff, no more than five people." To build up the profile of ESSCS, Chiu and her colleagues spent a lot of time "building bridges" at this stage. Chiu had this to say in her interview: "So I

remember during those years, it was a lot of building bridges to key funders like Canadian Heritage, to the City of Edmonton. I really tried to build up a profile and tried to position us even though I don't think we were formally recognized as a formal agency."

The early development of CCCSA was not as smooth as ECCSC, unfortunately. In 1982, the organization had to be folded temporarily because "[f]inancial support had been difficult to obtain, many funding sources did not understand nor see the value in the role of ethno-specific organizations" (CCCSA, 2006, p. 6). The organization was revived in 1984 by Teresa Woo-Paw, who was completing a university degree in social work at the University of Calgary. At this stage CCCSA was mainly providing education and cultural programs for immigrant children, the most popular of which was the summer camp program. These were also the most difficult years for the organization because they were not successful in receiving any government funding. In her interview, Woo-Paw stated that basically they were providing services "with no pay, no money, no profile." She also added: "I was rejected by every level of government. I was rejected by every single funder in town, because we're Chinese. So I came to realize at that time it's going to be very, very difficult for us to get financial support to do our work."

Eventually both organizations evolved, although changes came much later for CCCSA. Starting from early 1990s, the demographics of the Chinese community in both Edmonton and Calgary had changed. With 1997 approaching, an increasing number of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants made Calgary and Edmonton their new home. There was an increasing demand for bilingual services in both Chinese communities. Further, since the mid-1990s an unprecedented number of highly-educated immigrants arrived in Canada from the PR China, who came from different backgrounds and expectation and presented different needs and challenges. Both organizations responded to these challenges. In particular, they provided community-based adult education programs to assist them with their transition, including language training, employment programs, citizenship education, and community participation and education.

The Complexities and Paradoxes of Ethnic Community Organizations

When it comes to ethno-specific organizations, we need to consider a number of important questions: What is ethnicity? How do we assess ethnic affinity? What constitutes ethno-specific organizations? Do members of such organizations come from the same country, speak the same language, and hold the same citizenship? Unfortunately, primordialist views of culture have been identified as a common problem inherent in ethnic studies in Canada. In the context of studies in the history and development of the Chinese in Canada, Li (1998) argues, the focus was primarily on the cultural adaptation of the Chinese as a racial minority coming from an ancient culture. He further points out that research on Chinese voluntary associations in particular was influenced by this approach. Scholars coming from this perspective were interested in exploring how the Chinese used an ancient traditional culture as the basis for the development of various culturally unique social organizations in the receiving society. He posits that this approach woefully ignored the social context within which the history of Chinese Canadians was constructed, and the social relationship between the Chinese and the dominant majority.

This study contextualized the concept of ethnicity by unpacking the complexities and perplexities of ethno-specific organizations. From an early description of the founding and historical development of the two organizations, it seems clear that most of the clients who came to their services may be called Chinese. However, the study has clearly demonstrated that it was

no longer a homogeneous group consisting of Chinese from the rural areas of Mainland China; there were substantial sub-group differences. The new immigrants were diverse in origin, socio-economic status, educational background, and settlement needs, which aligns with the composition of Chinese immigrants at a national level (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006). A more in-depth analysis of the profiles of the clientele reveals that in fact Chinese immigrants in both Calgary and Edmonton came from different parts of the world (i.e., People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, etc.), representing different citizenship (Chinese, Vietnamese, Laos, British), different world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam), and different social and political systems (Communism, Capitalism, and a combination of the two). Clients and members of the two support organizations studied here did not necessarily shared the same language or culture, let alone notions of nationhood, motherland, or hometown. Can thus ECCSC and CCCSA still be counted ethno-specific organizations? The diverse backgrounds and changing needs of Chinese immigrants and the consequent shifting of these organizations illustrate the complexities and perplexities of ethno-specific organizations.

Despite the fact that ethno-specific organizations play a valuable role in immigrants' settlement and adaptation, they are not always seen as benign, self-motivated, or altruistic institutions. Often they are viewed as threatening national unity, diluting Canadian identity, and promoting ghettoization and separatism (Bissoondath 1994). Critics also argue allocating special resources to support such organizations undermines Canadian democratic principles. An analysis of the funding difficulties experienced by both ECCSC and CCCSA demonstrates how the above view has influenced the policies and attitudes of funding bodies toward ethnic organizations. Some participants in both the Edmonton and Calgary communities discussed in great length about how the state has used funding requirements to navigate its political goals away from a centered, liberalized direction toward a narrowly-defined culturally restrained approach toward ethno-specific organizations. They commented on how suspicious funders were about the collective goals of ethno-specific organizations in providing a community support network for newcomers. One participant, Lan Chan-Marples, the Executive Director of ECCSC from 1998-2001, had this to say: "In the 1980s and 1990s we had a very difficult time accessing funding, because funders do not fund single ethnic groups… I kept getting these doors slammed because we were a single ethnic group." As a consequence, the organization was underfunded and understaffed, in turn leaving many community needs unmet. To survive, in 2001, ECCSC had to change its name to ASSIST Community Services Centre, dropping Chinese from its original name so that they would appear to the funders that they were a multicultural service agency. The name change did help ASSIST meet many of its funding requirements, but this came at a heavy price. It created tension, controversy, and backlash in the Chinese community. Many Chinese leaders accused of ASSIST abandoning the Chinese community; donors threatened to withdraw donations to the organization; even ASSIST's own staff members started to question its new shift.

It seems evident that the name change and the discriminatory funding practices speak to the paradox of ethnicity. On the one hand, ethnicity has been used as a vehicle by the state to mobilize ethnic community resources and to support immigrant settlement and integration – responsibilities that fall under federal jurisdictions. On the other hand, the same ethnicity became a liability in applications for federal funding because it was also used as a device by the state to legitimize its political agenda in multiculturizing its programs with an ultimate goal of assimilation. This paradox confirms Ng's (1996) argument that ethnic organizations may also be

seen to function as an extension of the coordinated activities of the state, through funding requirements and accountability procedures, in which the state exercises a form of social control. The negative attitudes and behaviours toward ethno-specific organizations seem to contradict with Canada's national policies toward immigration, which are seemingly welcoming. They also seem to be in conflict with Canada's commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness. The co-existence of these conflicting practices and ideologies are referred to as 'democratic racism' by Henry et al. (2006). Democratic racism prevents the government from fully embracing differences or making any changes in the existing social, economic, and political order, and from supporting policies and practices that might ameliorate the low status of immigrants because these policies are perceived to be in conflict with and a threat to liberal democracy.

Conclusion and Implications for Adult Education

This study has significant implications for adult education. It demonstrates the role of community-based adult education for social change and transformation, a topic which had been addressed by a number of prominent adult educators (Cunningham, 2000: Welton, 1995). It reveals that ethnic community organizations can play an important educational role in providing accessible community-based adult education in helping immigrants and refugees with their settlement and adaptation. Furthermore, the study contextualizes the concept of ethnicity by examining its complexities and paradoxes. This discussion is particularly important in the current international context where there has been a growing assault on and subsequent retreat from multiculturalism in Australia, the US, and Western European countries. To what extent have the recent international developments influenced debates in Canada? This study has clearly demonstrated that Canada is moving backwards toward more assimilative and coercive multicultural policies and practices, which were discouraged by its official multiculturalism. If Canada intends to reclaim its original goal of helping immigrants with their full participation in Canadian society without sacrificing their ethnic identity, it needs to go beyond the superficial rhetoric of difference and diversity by adopting a framework which truly reflects Canada's social and cultural realities. More importantly, to build an inclusive adult education, it is imperative to treat ethno-specific organizations as an integral part of Canadian society, to redistribute resources equitably, and to adopt minority rights that recognize and accommodate the distinctive identities and needs of ethno-cultural groups and their ethnic communities.

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