Multicultural Perspectives, *13*(4), 209–214
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ISSN: 1521-0960 print / 1532-7892
DOI: 10.1080/15210960.2011.616833

Making Meaning of Work: Uncovering the Complexity of Immigrant Experience in a Multicultural Landscape

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Introduction

Many educators draw the public's attention to the need for diversifying the teaching force. They argue that teachers from diverse cultures offer a variety of perspectives (Delpit, 2001), encourage students to participate in community work, and exhibit cultural awareness and appreciation of differences (Torres, Santos, Peck, & Cortes, 2004). In 2003–2004 across the United States, however, minority teachers represented only 16% of K–12 teachers, less than one-third of the percentage of culturally diverse students (NCES, 2006). Furthermore, the majority of teachers were monolingual English speakers unprepared to work with linguistically diverse children (Nieto, 2002), and they had limited experiences with cultures other than their own (Hollins & Guzman, 2005).

One of the ways to diversify the teaching force includes involving more minority students in teacher education programs (Torres et al., 2004). Another strategy is to hire immigrant teachers who have teaching qualifications from their countries of origin. Alternative certification programs allow immigrant teachers to obtain certification without completing a campus-based teacher education program. Some educators believe that alternative routes allow allegedly unqualified people with no classroom experience to fill teaching positions (Cochran–Smith, 2002). Others argue that university-based teacher education programs do not allow many talented individuals to enter the profession (Zeichner, 2003). In reality, many immigrants work in schools. Some of them had to overcome obstacles to become teachers and adjust to existing cultural norms (Elbaz, 2004; Phillion, 2003); others occupy secondary positions in schools (Michael, 2006) and are viewed as linguistically incompetent due to their accents (Myles, Cheng & Wang, 2006). Many minority immigrant teachers are marginalized due to their racial differences (Reid, 2005). At the same time, immigrant teachers are empathetic and caring teachers (Bascia & Thiessen, 2000), exhibit leadership skills (Carrison, 2007) and show commitment to students' learning experiences (Flores, 2003). Discussions of their occupational integration remain scarce, however, and responses from research communities to changes in their social profiles are slow (Remennick, 2002).

Mapping the Study

In the present study, I examined the dynamics of a Russian-speaking, educated professional's integration into a school community. The Russian-speaking population represents a large group of immigrants in the United States. More than half of these immigrants have a college degree or an advanced degree, which makes them the third most educated immigrant group after immigrants

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from India and Japan (Camarota, 2007). Although a large number of researchers have explored the experiences of racial minority immigrant teachers in the United States, only a few were focused on immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Theoretical Frame

Multiculturalism is a condition of life, the reality of today's world (Duarte & Smith, 2000). Immigrant teachers who find themselves between two or more cultures are in a multicultural condition. On the one hand, they carry values and beliefs that are shaped by the environments where they were brought up and educated. On the other hand, they are influenced by people who surround them, their views, and culture. Finding themselves in the midst of cultures, immigrant teachers learn to establish themselves and cope with cultural differences in a multicultural situation. This process is complex and may cause discontinuities between teachers' ideals and the curriculum (Knowles, 1992). From a multicultural perspective, communities of practice have to acknowledge cultural differences and encourage the right of an individual to preserve his or her cultural heritage, including beliefs (Nieto, 2002). Collaboration between representatives of different cultures creates opportunities for dialoguing and helps to bridge the gap between cultural differences.

Research Scenario

One of the ways to learn about the experience of an individual is through stories or narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories of experience help to enrich cultural understanding and critically examine one's own perceptions and behaviors. Data for this study included a series of three semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Seidman, 2006). The participant was asked to: (a) share her story of becoming a teacher; (b) describe her work as a teacher; and (c) recount what it meant for her to be a teacher in a new country. Other data sources included the school's Web site, the participant's personal statement and reflective journals for the Alternative Certification Program, five recommendation letters, diplomas and certificates, students' work and class preparation materials, and a personal diary. The data from the interviews were triangulated through thematic analysis strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes that emerged from the interviews were combined and compared with the data from other sources.

Marina's Journey of Becoming a Teacher

The participant in this study is a white female in her early forties. Marina—the pseudonym that she chose for herself—graduated from the State Technical University in Russia with the equivalent of a Master's Degree in mechanical engineering and worked for 11 years as an engineer in the defense industry in her native country. She was doing private tutoring in the English language for 12 years and passed the Advanced Certificate Exam in English. The certificate, a high-level qualification in the knowledge of English, is recognized by employers all over the world.

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Upon her arrival in the United States in 2005, Marina enrolled in online classes in Statistics, and Calculus I and II in a local community college. She wanted to gain more knowledge and to familiarize herself with specific English terms in mathematics. Another goal was to obtain her teaching certificate in the future. Marina participated in a statewide math contest and won the top position. In 2007, she successfully completed the Alternative Route to Certification summer program and received her Initial Educator Certificate. She passed the Praxis II Content area test in Mathematics. Marina also completed a student-teaching experience and worked as a substitute teacher for a year in a low-income school in a small town; 21% of students were eligible for free lunch in 2008–2009. Among students, 91% were white, 4% were Hispanic, and 2% were black. There were many students with learning disabilities. Marina was hired as a Math teacher in 2008 in the same school and began teaching three different subjects: Geometry, Pre-Algebra, and Algebra. She shared her classroom with the Special Education teacher. After working in the school for a year, the administration suggested that Marina should find another job. What experiences did Marina have in school? Why did she have to leave?

Marina's Experience With the Curriculum

Throughout our conversations, I followed Marina's thoughts trying to understand what it meant for her to be a teacher in a new school community. I saw her struggles in

attempting to interpret her new professional role, which appeared to be so different from what she had known and experienced as a child, a student, and a tutor in Russia.

Theme 1: Always remember . . . school reflects culture! Marina's journals, which she completed while attending the Alternative Route to Certification Program, are an example of her desire to absorb all possible information about U.S. schools, including school culture. Marina compared her personal beliefs about schooling with the new knowledge she was gaining. Many issues were new to her: issues of confidentiality and "calling the whole class" instead of one particular student; a ban on presents to teachers and on discussions with anyone—especially parents—about other students' abilities, and other issues. She wrote:

> We—Russian teachers—have never dealt with such issues in my country. In our schools all information about students' achievements and failures is open and sometimes it is discussed at parents–teachers meetings . . . But this is a different country, other rules which I have to respect and follow and always remember about them!!!!! Always remember . . . school reflects culture.

Culture to Marina is "the way people solve problems; it reflects their actions in certain situations." After the program completion, which—by her account—gave her "a sparkle," Marina was ready to continue her educational journey.

Theme 2: Dedication is a word that comes to mind when describing Marina. I read excellent recommendations from Marina's colleagues. A special education teacher wrote, "She spends countless hours after the school day tutoring students, she has understanding and skill, and she loves her profession. Dedication is a word that comes to mind when describing Marina." This opinion resonated with the school principal's opinion: "Marina showed a genuine desire to educate students as she spent long hours preparing lesson plans and working with individuals after school."

From recommendations and conversations with Marina, I learned that she was actively involved in school life. She participated in professional development activities. Together with her husband, she volunteered to chaperone a senior ball. Marina believed she acquired these leadership skills when she was young. As a student, she helped teachers organize extra-curricular activities in school; in college, she was the leader of a youth organization. One of her most enduring memories was the project to find and to commemorate unknown soldiers who perished during World War II: "We had special expeditions, we worked in archives, we even did research in the local prison and at cemeteries . . . and we found their traces. Then we prepared reports about this. It was a very interesting research experience."

The new school community seemed welcoming. Marina always came to school meetings with an "open heart" and shared her problems with her colleagues. She appreciated support from the school personnel, stating:

> He [the principal] was very helpful. He always helped me to solve problems, and explained to me what I had to do . . . they [the school personnel] definitely helped me and encouraged me . . . I felt very comfortable to come to them the next time . . . with my problem, and to share.

Marina considered herself a highly-motivated person, "extremely patient, encouraging, and capable of determining the students' weak points and to work hard in order to eliminate them." She believed she was able to adapt her lessons to students' needs, which was a key point in creating a productive learning environment in her classroom.

Theme 3: I made many mistakes . . . I need to keep a low profile . . . I have to clench my teeth and try to survive. Marina often felt emotionally exhausted and disoriented, or "lost," in many school situations. After her first year, her contract was not renewed. She believed that occurred as a result of mistakes she had made.

Her first mistake was an argument with the Department Head. Marina thought she was overloaded with work teaching three different subjects and began to consider the possibility of changes in her workload for the spring semester. She found a teacher who agreed to switch classes and received the principal's approval. However, she failed to realize one simple thing: it was the Department Head's responsibility to approve and implement workload changes. Eventually, the Department Head, who was Marina's mentor and who learned about the situation two days before the beginning of the semester, refused to change Marina's workload.

She made the second mistake when she discussed a cheating problem with a student instead of immediately reporting the incident. When the principal found out, he did not support Marina's attempt to solve the problem on her own. When I asked her why she did not go to the principal immediately after the incident, Marina said that in Russia teachers never reported students to school authorities until they talked to the student because "it [reporting to authorities] was the last resort as the child could be punished." She maintained a strong belief that "teachers educate students, administrators punish them." Also, in Russian schools, she added, the principal always supported the teacher, rather than students or parents.

The third mistake reflected Marina's perception of her teaching role, which was a part of her personal history. She wanted to be "strict but fair," as her teachers had been. Marina established the following rule in her classroom: "If you are in class, you have to work." Once she gave detention to a student for daydreaming. "Why? I did not

do anything," the student said. "Exactly . . . because you did not do anything," Marina responded. Marina believed she made a mistake because "the administration probably thought that I was too strict. Can you imagine . . . I shared this story and other stories with the teachers because I was looking for their help and advice in these situations."

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A few other mistakes were related to her classroom behavior and teaching. When the students refused to follow her instructions, she would invite the principal to her classroom to help resolve the problem. Also, Marina realized that she was not prepared to work with a large group of students and needed more training. Moreover, she felt that her relations with students were "superficial" because of her strong accent and because she did not understand jokes. She elaborated, stating:

> They [the students] could go to the principal any time and say that they did not understand my accent . . . I did not understand humor. As a result, my relations with students were too official. I was unable to show them that I cared about them and wanted them to succeed.

Marina tried to analyze every fact and incident, asking me to help her understand what she had done wrong. She was "lost" and devastated. Finally, she admitted:

> I need to keep "a low profile" . . . not to talk much, be satisfied with what I have . . . They give you this curriculum, be happy . . . They give you this group of children, be happy too. I have to clench my teeth and try to survive.

It seemed to me that the message that Marina wanted to convey was, "I made all efforts to become the best teacher possible. Why didn't they understand it?" I was a witness to her frustration. It became evident that her "mistakes" were the result of what she believed it meant to be a teacher, the belief that was based on her previous life experiences, or the "baggage" that she had brought from Russia. Her beliefs and actions turned out to be at odds with what was expected from her at her new workplace.

Theme 4: When in Rome, do as Romans do. Marina was often confused and gradually became more and more skeptical. She had to develop a survival technique, explaining:

> I understand that I am a foreigner. I know that I have to adjust, to change myself and to be more flexible. I realize that nobody is interested in my habits. I know that if I do not change, I will not survive. However, I already learned how to smile.

She was often critical, which was reflected in her expectations of other people, her mediations regarding her teaching, and the school culture in general. For example, she mentioned that she did not receive enough support from the mentoring program. Her mentor helped her learn how to use the computer and the grade book but did not provide her with enough guidance in teaching and did not care about her progress.

At times, Marina questioned some aspects of teaching. She believed that focusing too much on "students' engagement" was often detrimental to acquiring content knowledge, which, in her view, was part of a high quality education. She believed that having a new group of students every semester was not beneficial for her as a teacher and for her students because she did not see the results of her work and her students did not have time to realize that she cared about them. She often referred to the system in Russian schools where teachers usually taught the same group of students for a number of years: "Teachers knew everything about their students . . . We were like a family . . . But here . . . there is no attachment!" In addition, Marina thought that the teachers were not open; they preferred to silence problems, which led to a lack of cooperation among colleagues: "They are by themselves, and you are alone."

It seems that with time, however, Marina gained more confidence, as she remarked, "I will try to become an excellent teacher . . . I will help them [my students] to grow and mature." When I asked Marina what advice she would give to a novice teacher, she said, "Try to understand people and culture, and what is expected from you."

Inquiry Outcomes

This study sheds light on enormous challenges that the immigrant teacher faced in her first year of teaching. Marina's integration into the school community appeared

to be impeded by her attempts to uncritically apply her traditional normative behaviors to a new social and cultural environment. She failed to deconstruct meanings (e.g., engagement, knowledge, or discipline) and practices that were so relevant to her own experience and to properly reformulate them in new contexts. Marina's understanding of what it means to be a good classroom teacher came into conflict with the reality shaped by others' visions of a good teacher. For example, Marina believed that students' engagement in class work was not an effective teaching strategy. In her native country, teachers were supposed to provide students with content knowledge; the role of students was to passively receive this knowledge (Stetsenko & Little, 1995). Eventually, failure to renegotiate the meanings cost Marina her position.

Coming to school with her own understandings about the nature of teaching and interpersonal relationships, Marina tried to establish herself as a *legitimate* member of the community from day one. In her struggle for professional recognition and by aspiring to a powerful position in the community, Marina did not understand asymmetrical relations of power and did not recognize her subordinate position, which placed her at the bottom of a hierarchical ladder in the community. Lacking specific knowledge about the micro-politics of the school, Marina became emotionally overwhelmed and frustrated in the attempt to understand why her knowledge, commitment to work, dedication to students, and openness to the professional community were not recognized.

This study brings back the quintessential question, "What is a culture?" Is it an obstacle, a liability that prevented Marina from adequate understanding of new norms, or is it an asset that the school failed to recognize and absorb? This study and my personal experience demonstrate that a reflective collaborative dialogue between an individual immigrant teacher, who is highly motivated and strives for success, and genuinely interested administration, can help both sides. The teacher could benefit from genuine conversations regarding dilemmas in understanding her professional role. In turn, the teacher's colleagues will gain from the dialogue by being exposed to new cultural and pedagogical experiences. These new learned experiences then turn into new practices in the classroom and eventually, through the multiplier effect, influence every student.

Implications

In the course of this project, I realized that this study was not about Marina's professionalism or her professional experience but about a human being who tried to make every possible effort to be accepted and recognized. Overall, Marina's example demonstrates that teachers from various cultural backgrounds need emotional support from colleagues and school administration; they need extensive mentoring programs that include not only direction in the organization of teaching activities but also guidance in becoming reflective practitioners; they also need time and opportunities to adjust to a new cultural environment.

This research illuminates a dialectical problem that most immigrant teachers face. On the one hand, Marina failed to recognize and absorb the power structure in her school, the phenomenon that is metaphorically called a school culture. Was this failure to properly contextualize her undoubtedly unique experience that she had brought from Russia actually a mistake, as she called it? Or was it a counter-intuitive but persistent and selfish intent to prove everybody wrong? In other words, was it an honest misunderstanding, or was it a purposeful attempt to establish oneself by ignoring the existing rules? On the other hand, was it really Marina's failure, or was it a systemic mistake? Did the school community, represented by all its members including students, teachers, parents, and most importantly, administrators, do all they could to accommodate a new member who was ostensibly overwhelmed with problems in a new country?

This study raises important questions regarding the emotional, pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural needs of immigrant teachers who strive to work to their full potential and struggle for acceptance and recognition in professional communities. Apart from this, the study questions communities' responsibility to acknowledge the needs of immigrant teachers. Societies all over the world are becoming more and more multicultural, and it is imperative that communities of practice become more culturally inclusive. Community members must develop respectful attitudes, nurturing conditions, strong mentoring programs, and caring multicultural curricula for newcomers, which will help them feel that they "belong" and that their efforts are recognized and valued. If openness to diversity, mutual support and collegiality, sharing and collaboration, emotions, and dialogue become the norm, we may admit that multicultural education has achieved its goal.

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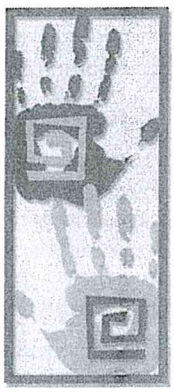
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