

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Citation:

Lam, M. (2019). Language education for newcomers in rural Canada: Needs, opportunities, and innovations. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 14(1), 77–97.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

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Language Education for Newcomers in Rural Canada: Needs, Opportunities, and Innovations

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Abstract

The vast majority of scholarship on the integration of newcomers to Canada takes place within the large urban centres of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014). In recent decades, however, higher numbers of immigrants are choosing to settle in rural areas for lower costs of living, local job opportunities, and quality of life (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2015). In addition, larger numbers of privately sponsored refugees are being sponsored into smaller towns and cities (Rural Development Institute, 2016). Finally, the Government of Canada uses immigration as an intentional strategy to grow regional centres (Burstein, 2010). These shifts mean that rural areas are seeing larger numbers of immigration, without the benefit of years of extensive research to know how these areas are uniquely positioned to welcome newcomers, and what barriers and opportunities exist for integrating newcomers in rural areas.

This article will explore the topic of newcomer integration in rural areas as it relates to language learning. Language is one aspect of integration that can promote all other aspects of integration in an intersectional (Anthias, 2008) way. As a newcomer has more language ability, they can have easier access in social integration, economic integration, cultural integration, as well as political and civic integration (Derwing & Waugh, 2012). This article will examine the existing literature on rural immigration, related theory, and the unique nature of rural areas, including common barriers and opportunities. Finally the article will explore promising practices and innovations that are being used in Canada that have potential for impact in smaller centres, practical considerations for education and teacher preparation, and a critical analysis of teacher education programs.

Keywords: Human migration; integration; language learning; settlement

1.0 Introduction

The vast majority of scholarship on the integration of newcomers to Canada takes place within the large urban centres of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014). In recent decades, however, higher numbers of immigrants are choosing to settle in rural areas for lower costs of living, local job opportunities, and quality of life (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2015). In addition, larger numbers of privately sponsored refugees are being sponsored into smaller towns and

cities (Rural Development Institute, 2016). Finally, the Government of Canada uses immigration as an intentional strategy to grow regional centres (Burstein, 2010; Keung, 2017; Keung, 2019). These shifts mean that rural areas are seeing larger numbers of immigration, without the benefit of years of extensive research to know how these areas are uniquely positioned to welcome newcomers, and what barriers and opportunities exist for integrating newcomers in rural areas.

This article will explore the topic of newcomer integration in rural areas as it relates to language learning with particular focus on the Manitoba context. Although I will draw from other rural locations to provide insight, I will focus on Manitoba as it hosts the second largest share (15%) of privately sponsored refugees, with many settling outside of Winnipeg (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018). Beyond the strong history of refugee sponsorship, Manitoba focuses on population-building through immigration, and has done so through the Provincial Nominee Program since 1999 (Alboim, 2016). Language is one aspect of integration that can promote all other aspects of integration in an intersectional way (Anthias, 2008). As a newcomer has more language ability, they can have easier access in social integration, economic integration, cultural integration, as well as political and civic integration (Derwing & Waugh, 2012).

This article explores existing literature on rural immigration, using critical race theory and intersectionality to deepen understanding of the unique nature of rural areas, including common barriers and opportunities. The article discusses literature related to promising practices and innovations that are being used in Canada that have potential for impact in smaller centres, practical considerations for education and teacher preparation, and a critical analysis of teacher education programs.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Rural Immigration is Increasing in Canada

Although most research on immigrants and refugees in Canada is conducted in the three largest immigrant-receiving centres of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Alboim, 2016), small centre settlement and immigration is growing, as is the research related to rural migration. Rural communities are becoming an attractive destination for newcomers looking for lower costs of living, affordable housing, and as policy makers in government choose to attract labour and investment through immigration in order to grow regional centres (Burstein, 2010; Keung, 2017; Keung, 2019). In addition, rural communities are welcoming newcomers through the private sponsorship model.

In a paper on the evolution of Canada's immigration policy, the authors note a policy shift that came about from "a desire to shift immigration away from the three largest cities to other regions of the country" (Ferrer, Picot, & Riddell, 2014, p. 846). This regionalization is seen as a way to strengthen communities, fill shortages, rejuvenate local economies, and ease pressure on larger urban centres (Burstein, 2010; Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005; Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014). This shift is noted in a 2014 synthesis of settlement and integration research, which documents substantial increases of newcomers settling outside of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014).

In a recent policy brief on the state of privately sponsored refugees in Canada, it was noted that further research on comparisons between urban and rural refugees is

necessary (Hyndman, Payne, & Jimenez, 2017). In addition, in a broad survey of settlement services across Canada's Western region, it was noted that more immigrants are choosing to migrate to rural areas, with just over 130,000 permanent residents choosing to move to nonurban centres between 2004 and 2013 (Ashton et al., 2015).

2.2 Mutual Benefits of Rural Immigration

Immigration does not only benefit those coming into the country. For smaller centres, one advantage of newcomers is that it offsets out-migration, or the exodus of rural dwellers for larger cities. An increase in population through immigration allows local services and resources to stay local, such as a local dentist or pharmacist with dwindling numbers being able to stay viable in a small town thanks to an influx of newcomers. New immigrants bring investments in housing, property taxes, more products sold, new businesses started, younger population averages, and diversity (Clement, Carter, & Vineberg, 2013).

Immigration to smaller centres has a positive effect on newcomers as well. In some communities, economic opportunities bring newcomers to the area (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014), as well as lower costs of living, slower pace of life, and a general sense of well-being and safety (Rural Development Institute, 2016).

2.3 Manitoba Context

In Manitoba specifically, the provincial government has strategized to use immigration to grow regional centres and attract labour and investment, with an average of 23% of newcomers settling outside of Winnipeg between 1999 and 2012 (Clement, et al., 2013). The Provincial Nominee Program, as a targeted policy initiative, sees higher numbers of immigrants coming to rural areas (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2015; Shields, Türegün, & Lowe 2014). In a 2014 Statistical Report from the Government of Manitoba, it states that since 2000, over 150,000 immigrants have arrived in Canada, of whom more than 30,000 have settled in rural communities and that the rates of retention within Manitoba are high (86.7 percent) but it is not discussed whether the rates of retention are equally high across urban and rural locations (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2015).

From January 2015 to December 2018, the province of Manitoba resettled 8875 refugees with 565 of these refugees settling outside of Winnipeg (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2019). Although Manitoba comprises only 3.6% of the total population of Canada, it plays an important role in resettlement, hosting the second largest share (15%) of Privately Sponsored Refugees (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017).

2.4 Language is Essential for Successful Integration

Although integration is a contested and complex term which has been problematized as being too linear and simplistic and too emphasized on outcomes and measures (Guo, 2015; Lam, 2018; Li, 2003), when defined broadly, integration means “the ability to contribute, free of barriers, to every dimension of Canadian life, that is, economic, social, cultural, and political” (Shields, et al., 2016). This ‘ability to contribute’ is greatly impacted by language ability and the importance of language learning for both economic and social integration has been well documented (Derwing & Waugh, 2012). According to the Canadian index of measuring integration, there are four major dimensions of integration: economic, social, civic

and democratic participation, and health (Jedwab et al., 2017). Although paths to integration are individual and complex, all four dimensions are greatly impacted by level of language ability. This may be particularly noticeable in rural centres, where access to interpretation and translation services, as well as access to specific ethnocultural communities may be limited or nonexistent. In these locations, language learning becomes essential.

2.5 Positionality

I do not approach this review abstractly, but as someone who has worked in rural settlement for over a decade. I have taught adult EAL through a rural settlement office, and over the years have seen the impacts that policy shifts have made on my students. Although I aim to present a critical engagement with literature related to rural settlement and the importance of language learning services, it is important to recognize that I speak as someone for whom the topics of this literature are keenly felt. For example, when discussing the necessity of foreign credential recognition, I instantly call to mind students for whom this has been a major barrier. Both challenges and strengths in rural areas are ones I have lived and experienced with students.

3.0 Barriers and Opportunities

3.1 Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Areas

Rural areas are not without strengths. Communities may be tightly knit, supportive, or have high levels of volunteer activity (Sawatzky, 2018). Yet due to their small size, there are challenges associated with welcoming and integrating newcomers. Although significant barriers exist for newcomer integration in Canada, some barriers are unique in rural areas. Wide geographical distance creates problems for service delivery, since few immigrants are spread over a wide area (Clement et al., 2013) and there is a mismatch between the location of services and the residence of newcomers (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014). Because of low overall numbers, rural areas do not have access to the same levels of funding as urban centres and so settlement services are limited, as federal funding is contingent on client numbers and student enrollment (Levitz, 2016).

Rural areas may face challenges with a lack of public transportation, available housing, accessibility of interpreters or translators, limited employment opportunities, and childcare (Sawatzky, 2018). In a recent report on the economic integration of refugees in Canada, Wilkinson and Garcea (2017) reiterated the lack of transportation as a significant challenge in rural areas, as it affects access to services. In places with smaller infrastructure and fewer services, it can take time for infrastructure to catch up to an increase in numbers, as well as services such as health care, education, recreation, police, and others (Clement et al., 2013).

Numerous studies point to the fact that smaller towns may also have remained relatively homogenous and an influx of newcomers may be met with attitudes of racism and discrimination (Clement et al., 2013; Esses, Hamilton, Bennett-AbuAyyash, & Burstein, 2010; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Hellstrom, 2018). In areas of scarcity, or in smaller communities facing economic decline, newcomers may be viewed as competing for jobs and resources (Epp, 2018; Epp & Whitson, 2001; Perry, 2018). Ironically, although immigration is presented as a way to rejuvenate economies in rural communities (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship

Canada, 2019; Keung, 2019), when immigrants are hired to work, they may be viewed as taking jobs away from locals, which leads to hostility (Perry, 2018).

Mental health, particularly for refugees, has been shown to be an urgent need not fully met even in large urban centres. The need for affordable, available, culturally sensitive mental health approaches that deal with both pre-arrival trauma and post-arrival concerns needs to be addressed (Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans, & Asic-Kobe, 2011). Barriers to accessing help for sensitive topics, such as domestic violence (Jayasuriya-Illesinghe, 2018) or mental health (Handschuh, 2017) exist everywhere, but particularly in rural areas (Hallström, 2018). These issues are compounded by a lack of interpreters and culturally sensitive practitioners, as well as other barriers such as childcare and transportation (Jayasuriya-Illesinghe, 2018).

In rural areas, meeting educational needs can be a challenge in both K-12 schools and language learning classes (Rural Development Institute, 2016; Azano, 2015). In both urban and rural education, educational participation is impacted by social class, gender, geography, and family perceptions (Piquemal, 2017), and there may be gaps or discontinuity between the home culture and the school culture (Kumar, 2009; Piquemal, 2004; Vickers, 2002). Refugees may find language learning challenging because of the need to balance language training with employment (Cronkrite, 2017), or because of other factors, such as the need to first attend to trauma (Tilson, 2010). There are also challenges associated with language *retention*, which is a valuable focus as it is associated with affirming identities, scaffolding learning, and promoting deeper engagement (Leung, 2016; Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera, & Cummins, 2014; Stille & Cummins, 2013). Although language retention is a need in both urban and rural settings, in smaller areas the need is more pronounced due to the smaller size of the ethnocultural community (Varma, 2003). Yet despite these challenges, education and language learning—both charter language and home language learning—remain key factors in facilitating ‘two-way street integration’ for both the host society and newcomers, as education can help newcomers meet their own goals as well as challenge damaging stereotypes and racism (Ali, 2012; Apple, 2008; Clark, Zygmunt, & Howard, 2016; Gorski, 2008).

3.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

The critical social theories of critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality can inform understandings of newcomer integration in rural areas both by examining inequality and by highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity and belonging. CRT forms a valuable backdrop to understanding the experiences of rural newcomers as it examines the “structural roots of racism and the persistence of collective White control over power and material resources” (Sleeter, 2012, p. 572). Just as CRT grew out of the limitations of a binary Black–White understanding in critical legal studies (Yosso, 2005), binaries such as native speaker–language learner, or mainstream Canadian–newcomer are also limiting and do not take into account the multiple ways that newcomers learn and belong.

The idea of ‘interest convergence’ (Zion & Blanchett, 2011) from CRT also provides a useful framework in understanding how the interests of government, industry, economics, and the needs of smaller centres in Canada have overlapped with the needs of immigrants and refugees to Canada. As economic immigration increases (Reitz, 2016), and as rural areas become the target of focused government initiatives to regionalize immigration (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2019; Keung, 2019), it is important to recognize that these shifts are not the result of an

altruistic or benevolent government but rather the convergence of interests related to pressures in urban immigrant-receiving centres, pressures of an ageing and declining population, and the need for rural laborers. Interest convergence can illuminate understandings of the multiple interests that are served by increasing immigration in rural areas.

Intersectionality (Anthias, 2008) views the marginalization of groups as complex and multifaceted based on intersections among numerous and varied identity markers, layers of systemic discrimination as well as larger sociopolitical forces. Viewed through this theoretical lens, a newcomer may face layers of marginalization based on intersecting aspects of identity. For example, a black Muslim woman may face discrimination based on her gender, her religion, or her ethnicity, and these may intersect at different points. Both critical race theory and intersectionality can inform understandings of settlement and integration, by focusing on ways that race and social positioning advantage or disadvantage, and ways that social identities interact to form multiple inequalities.

4.0 The Importance of Studying Rural Areas

4.1 Rural Areas Offer Insight

Numbers of newcomers in rural areas may be smaller, but in some communities per capita, the percentage compared to the larger population is often comparable or even higher than in larger urban centres. For example, the town of Brooks, Alberta has a population of 13,500, and due to a large meat-packing plant, 10% of the town's population is made up of newcomers, all of whom arrived within the last two decades (Fong, 2010). Brooks has a higher per-capita immigration rate than anywhere else in Canada (Inkster, 2007). As such, Brooks is not *representative* of current rural areas, but as immigration numbers increase outside of large urban centres, it can offer important insights of the ways integration is affected by rural location. Smaller communities are becoming “important incubators for innovative settlement programming initiatives that larger, immigrant rich centres also need to learn from” (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014, p. 23).

4.2 Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative

Canada is a leader in migration policy and is currently involved in sharing the model of refugee sponsorship globally. To date, several countries (Germany, New Zealand, Ireland, United Kingdom) have announced plans to implement the Canadian model of community sponsorship and others (Switzerland, Spain) are exploring it as something that has potential for their own countries (Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, 2018).

As Canada exports this model, it is essential to ensure the success of the model not only in bringing in refugees but in making sure that communities have the capacity to welcome and integrate these newcomers. Each individual newcomer deserves success, not only those who settle in large urban centres. As privately sponsored refugee numbers increase, the success of newcomers increasingly depends on the role of smaller communities, with their focus on population building through immigration.

It is also important to note that the private sponsorship model has been criticized for the way those with relatives or connections are able to sponsor those individuals,

thus limiting opportunities for more vulnerable refugees (Denton, 2013). The Blended-Visa Office Referred (BVOR) program is one way that private sponsors can still sponsor refugees, but they must choose from refugees who are selected by the government for urgent resettlement (Hyndman, Payne, & Jimenez, 2017). The private sponsorship model has also been problematized over concerns about privacy, paternalistic relationships, and the potential for sponsors to act in unethical ways (Levitz, 2017; Smith, Hadziristic, & Alipour, 2017).

5.0 Critical Analysis

5.1 Funding Cuts to Language Classes for Newcomers

In 2016, federal funding for language learning beyond Canadian Language Benchmark 4—a low intermediate level—was reduced (DeBooy, 2017; Purdy, 2017). This funding cut happened even though there was a greater emphasis on economic immigration, with skilled immigrants coming into Canada in higher than ever numbers (Purdy, 2017). Although language ability is a factor in selecting immigrants under the provincial nominee’s points system, it is only one factor among many, and as such, the level of language ability varies greatly. It is counterintuitive to entice foreign professionals to enter Canada only to cut access to the levels of language classes needed to recognize their certifications or upgrade their skills.

If the argument for increased immigration is focused on counteracting Canada’s ageing population and boosting the economy, it is necessary to do everything possible to ensure that newcomers and immigrants can fully integrate, which means investing in language classes, ensuring smooth pathways to professional certification recognition, and working to remove systemic barriers such as racism and discrimination in the workforce and in society at large. If the future success of Canada depends on immigration, this investment is an investment in our own future.

5.2 Deficit Perspective

Although language for newcomers is an essential part of a welcoming community, in an extensive analysis of Canadian media coverage of Syrian refugees, researchers found that language and cultural issues were nearly always addressed as the shortcomings of the refugees, with the structural issues such as *access to education* being largely overlooked (Tyyskä, Blower, DeBoer, Kawai, & Walcott, 2017). Drawing on critical race theory which reminds researchers of the strengths of cultural knowledges (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), it becomes necessary to question interpretations that view “White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of ‘culture’ are judged in comparison to this ‘norm’” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76).

In regards to education, “educators most often assume that schools work and that students, parents and community need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). This can be seen in the assumption that education is necessary for newcomers, but not needed for mainstream Canadians, rather than a critical analysis of what aspects of our education system need to be adjusted to consider both the strengths and the needs of newcomer students.

5.3 Addressing Larger Systemic Factors

It must also be noted that the task of educators is not only meeting the needs of individual newcomers. A balance between an individualized perspective and a system-wide view needs to be maintained in order to fulfill the mandate of a true two-way street of integration (Government of Canada, 2012). Helping an individual newcomer or refugee find a needed job or qualifications recognition or enroll in a language class is necessary but it is not the whole picture. We need to simultaneously work with the individual *and* work towards changing the system to be fairer, more equitable, and more just. We must be aware of the system in which we operate, as well our own complicity in maintaining a system that marginalizes some students. We are imbedded in a “legend that is shaped by patriarchy and colonialism and is driven by free market forces of capitalism” (Pashby, 2011, p. 433). Education, when viewed as the amassing of knowledge can be “linked to the consolidation of power” (Shahjahan, 2011, p. 184). As language teachers we are not only responsible to meet the needs of the individual students in our classes, but also to challenge and change any system which oppresses them (Gorski, 2008).

Neoliberal influences, globalization, and lack of long-term funding have all impacted settlement services and education (Blum & Ullman, 2012; Bragg & Wong, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Epp & Whitson, 2001; Hiebert, 2006; Li, 2002; Spooner & McNinch, 2018). Although teachers may have the best of intentions, they still operate within a system which develops in response to economic and political factors. For example, limiting supports for settlement by only allowing permanent residents to access government settlement supports excludes all temporary newcomer classes, such as refugee claimants or those on temporary visas. This decreases government expenditures, but also decreases local per-capita funding, which in turn reduces available services and puts administrators in the position of scrambling to secure appropriate long-term funding from other sources.

In the case of private refugee sponsorship, Canada has been lauded as an example to follow, and is actively promoting the private sponsorship model to other countries. One of the reasons this model is attractive to governments is because it offloads the cost of refugee sponsorship onto private citizens. Although sponsors can be praised for their altruistic goodwill, it is important to recognize the larger neoliberal narrative of marketing the nation as a country of welcome, while simultaneously decreasing government supports for settlement services and asking private citizens to ‘foot the bill.’

5.4 Celebrate Successes, Not ‘Poor Refugee Narratives’

As researchers and educators, we also need to be wary of exploitative tendencies in our research and educational practices. We need to ensure that we are not promoting a simplistic binary view of ‘good compassionate Canadians’ and ‘poor, needy refugees’ but rather are able to offer more accurate and nuanced views of both groups (Kyriakides, Bajjali, McLuhan, & Anderson, 2018; Tyyskä et al., 2017). Newcomer and refugee participants and students need to feel their participation is valuable and “not as serving an alternate agenda” (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012, p. 314). We also need to be aware of how we promote our research. For example, in highlighting refugee artwork, photographs, or stories, refugees may feel that their success is “only acknowledged because of *who they are* and not *because of what they have achieved* [emphasis in original] (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012, p. 314). This is exploitative and colonialist, using the background of newcomers to ‘sell’ research or educational activities.

6.0 Promising Practices and Innovations

6.1 Volunteer Engagement

While volunteerism is not new in Canada, the engagement of volunteers in rural areas has always been a pillar of community living. From volunteer fire-departments to volunteer parades, the method of using volunteers to offset costs of providing services has been a successful strategy in rural areas and rates of volunteerism are higher in rural areas (Vézina & Crompton, 2012). Language teaching for newcomers may also benefit from the strength of volunteerism in small centres, although a way to provide training, accurate information, and to ensure quality of volunteer services remains a concern. Although the volunteerism in rural areas is admirable, it is important to note that this ‘community spirit’ is in response to underfunding and a gradual devolvement of settlement services from a government responsibility to one supported by community partners.

6.2 Technology

In lower mainland British Columbia and parts of Ontario, accessing settlement services and information about settlement needs can be done through text messaging (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2017; Immigrant Services Society of BC, 2015). For example, a newcomer who needs to find a house can text the hotline and a settlement advisor will answer with accurate information within twenty-four hours. This practice ensures that the information received is true, timely, and accurate and also removes barriers such as transportation and childcare, as texting for information can be done from home.

This practice may be useful to implement in rural areas, where access to settlement services is limited, because it could provide a bridge to access services in larger urban centres, capitalizing on the expertise and experience of longer-term settlement facilitators.

In terms of language learning, technology may provide a way to provide services while eliminating or reducing the effect of barriers due to geography and low overall student numbers. Language learning through technology is not a new phenomenon (Chapelle & Voss, 2016) but in the settlement service sector, it is still primarily thought of and offered as an analog experience. Although traditional classes have strengths, in rural areas with lower numbers of students and few, if any, trained English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers, technology may provide an excellent opportunity to supplement traditional classes.

It is necessary to note that technology is not a one-size fits all solution. While access to technology may be able to increase service delivery for some in smaller centres, it creates additional barriers for those who do not have access to technology or find it difficult to use for various reasons (Shields, Türegün, & Lowe, 2014; Zijlstra & van Liempt, 2017). This in turn creates a ‘digital divide’ between those who have access and ability to use and afford technology, and those who do not (Alam & Imran, 2015).

6.3 Local Immigration Partnerships

Local immigration partnerships (LIPs) are partnerships aimed at coordinating services, engaging employers, leveraging resources, and creating welcoming communities. They are a:

...means to systematize local engagement with resources available to hire individuals to coordinate the activities of the LIP, build on existing local initiatives, contribute to the enhanced planning envisioned in the 2008 modernized approach to settlement, and augment engagement of ‘host’ populations in the two-way street model of integration. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013, p.3)

In rural areas, LIPs may provide a vehicle to help meet the settlement and educational needs of newcomers by organizing local resources across different levels of governance and by leveraging the skills and experience of partners in order to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees in rural areas.

6.4 Welcoming Communities Initiative

A study in 2010 detailed seventeen characteristics of a welcoming community (Esses, et al., 2010). These seventeen characteristics are:

- employment opportunities;
- fostering of social capital;
- affordable and suitable housing;
- positive attitudes towards immigrants, cultural diversity, and the presence of newcomers in the community
- presence of newcomer-serving agencies that can successfully meet the needs of newcomers;
- links between main actors working towards welcoming communities;
- municipal features and services sensitive to the presence and needs of newcomers;
- educational opportunities;
- accessible and suitable health care;
- available and accessible public transit;
- presence of diverse religious organizations;
- social engagement opportunities;
- political participation opportunities;
- positive relationships with the police and the justice system;
- safety;
- opportunity for use of public space and recreation facilities; and
- favourable media coverage and representation (Esses et al., 2010).

In rural areas, due to the limitations of geography and smaller population numbers, many characteristics of those used to describe the welcoming communities above are non-existent. For example, public transit has been identified as a major barrier in rural areas (Ashton et al., 2015), and often diverse religious organizations are not

available in small Canadian towns. On the other hand, many of the factors driving immigration towards smaller towns may increase the level of welcome, such as the presence of affordable housing, a closer-knit community, job opportunities, and a stronger sense of safety.

Of course, each community will have a unique context, and conclusions such as ‘all small communities have stronger job opportunities’ cannot be made. Just as each individual newcomer is unique, so also each rural community is unique and assumptions cannot be made. The welcoming communities initiative is helpful in providing a framework to understand what a welcoming community looks like, and to provide goals for rural areas to work towards, but the solutions in rural areas will be unique.

6.5 Innovations in Communications

In response to the upsurge in private refugee sponsorships in 2015, there was a large need for timely and accessible information for people wishing to help or get involved with refugee sponsorship. In Ottawa, Louisa Taylor, together with a large group of key community members and stakeholders, founded Refugee 613 (“Refugee 613,” n.d.), a hub designed to inform, connect, and inspire. They use a website, a blog, social media, and public events to educate and raise awareness within the community and have quickly become known locally as a place to find accurate answers to questions, solutions to problems, and to connect. They answer public inquiries via phone, email, and social media, offer referrals to services, plan and coordinate events, workshops, lectures, and provide resources and speakers for events.

A similar response in Ottawa was the founding of The Refugee Hub (“The Refugee Hub Practices,” n.d.), focused on providing training volunteer lawyers, providing lawyer services for refugees, and offering advocacy for refugees. These innovations both centre on connecting communities, supporters, and services with newcomers. They address the need for communication and information to be accessible, accurate, and timely for both newcomers and Canadians. Since this group is new, there is no long-term evaluation of its effectiveness, however it shows promise as a way to address the concern of a lack of information.

6.6 Employer-driven Settlement

There are workplace settlement practices which encourage employment while simultaneously furthering settlement and integration goals. Some examples include employer incentives, tailored orientations, exploratory internships, and pre-employment training (Immigrant Employment Council of BC, 2017). Cooperating with local settlement services and increasing information and tools available to employers are practices that can increase settlement, integration, and retention (Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, 2012). Job-shadowing, mentoring programs, internships, and networking with ethno-cultural community groups are also considered best practices (Surrey Local Immigration Partnership, 2015).

6.7 Altona, Manitoba, Case Study

In 2015, the town of Altona, MB sponsored 45 refugees. Although this number may at first glance seem minor, when compared to the overall population of Altona, it can be observed that the entire population of the town increased by 1% over a very

short period. In terms of infrastructure, this put a strain on the existing services in the community, including local schools. A large percentage of the newcomers were under the age of 18 and almost an entire class was added to the local school (Sawatzky, 2018).

The town responded to the needs of these newcomers in a variety of ways. They organized a fleet of volunteer drivers, willing to drive the hour and a half to Winnipeg for various appointments and other needs. They relied on Google translate to help communicate. They organized English conversation practice in the basement of a local church and held classes three times a week in the local mall (Anderssen, 2017).

The atmosphere of the town was reported as being largely positive, although concerns were still occasionally raised regarding the vetting of newcomers and safety and there were frustrations regarding communication barriers, finding appropriate housing (Sawatzky, 2018), as well as the timing of arrival, because of the short notice given by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (Rural Development Institute, 2016). However, those in opposition learned to not voice their opinions loudly, because of the overall environment of support in the town (Anderssen, 2017). Racism and discrimination were also mentioned as a challenge (Rural Development Institute, 2016).

After reflecting on their experience, Laurie Sawatzky, the executive director of Regional Connections Immigrant Services, a service provider in Southern Manitoba whose service area covers Altona, noted needs of greater training for sponsorship groups, more communication and connections between settlement services and sponsors, as well as ongoing partnerships (Sawatzky, 2018). A study on the region supported these conclusions, adding that more funding to offer more services and staff would be helpful (Rural Development Institute, 2016).

The town of Altona provides an excellent example of how small towns can be viewed as microcosms of broader trends in Canada. Through this example, we can see barriers to integration, as well as innovations in eliminating those barriers. We see a diversity of opinions, including some opposition to change. And we hear a call for greater communication, training, and partnerships.

7.0 Future Needs and Opportunities

7.1 Future Needs: Partnerships, Training, Information

Beyond the calls for greater training, connections, and partnerships across sectors, there is also a need for more pre-departure information, providing accurate and timely information to newcomers before they arrive. Ongoing information, and effective ways of communicating that information are needed. Communities also need long-term growth strategies (Clement et al., 2013) which will enable them to plan for the future.

7.2 Integration as a ‘Two-way Street’

As the Canadian government has defined integration as a ‘two-way street’ (Government of Canada, 2012), education and information must not only be provided to newcomers but must also be provided to Canadian citizens as well. A good example of this in practice is the Calgary Centre for Newcomers, where half of their programs and services are directed to newcomers, and the other half is

directed to Canadians, and to fostering a welcoming environment. As McKinney (2005), echoing Freire, writes, “true social change is dependent on the re-education of the privileged, as well as the disempowered” (2005, p. 380). Moving forward towards diversity and respect will require more emphasis on both sides of the ‘two-way street’ mentioned above.

7.3 Training Teachers for Diversity

In decades past, it was only educators in large urban centres who needed a foundational knowledge of working with newcomers and language learner students. However, in today’s educational landscape, even rural areas are experiencing higher levels of immigration, and *all* teachers need to be equipped to understand and work with students from diverse backgrounds.

Ongoing professional development for rural teachers on matters related to newcomer students, working with trauma, understanding cultural diversity as a strength and not a deficit, and including language learners in the classroom would all be useful topics. In the words of Kubanyiova and Crookes (2016), we need to open up new possibilities for “preparing teachers able and willing to serve diverse student populations with diverse language learning needs across interlinguistic, sociopolitical, and historical contexts of language teaching” (p. 118) and call into question “instructional practices that may feed motivations for the study of languages that are tied to mere profit or power” (p. 120). Teachers and pre-service teachers may feel reluctant to read and engage with texts which de-centre them as the ‘hero’ of the narrative, and they may resist such representations because it causes feelings of discomfort and anxiety, contradicting their own personal narratives (McKinney, 2005), but it is a necessary part of learning to value alternate narratives.

8.0 Education in Rural Areas

8.1 Positioning the Teacher

Teachers’ roles and identities have shifted from a passive technician, to a reflective practitioner to a transformative intellectual (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). The implications of this shift are that teachers are simultaneously required to attend to outward dynamics, such as political, structural, and societal dimensions as well as inward focus, including reflective practices. Whether they realize it or not, teachers teach a socio-culturally embedded language, which is tied to their “embodied lived experiences” (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016, p. 123).

Teacher preparation and professional development must take into consideration the identity of the teacher as a socially and culturally embedded agent, and then turn a critical eye towards issues of power relations, ideologies, social constructs, and how the various social constructs and multicultural backgrounds in the classroom interact and intersect. Both critical race theory and intersectionality can inform this process, by focusing on ways that race and social positioning advantage or disadvantage, and ways that social identities interact to form multiple inequalities.

Reflective practices are needed. For example, McKinney (2005) describes a personal conflict between her democratic teaching style which gives students opportunity to express themselves and an ethical or ideological imperative to promote particular values such as anti-racism or anti-sexism. She discusses a gap between what she thinks she does, and what she actually does, pointing to the necessity of reflective

practices. Critical pedagogy in education contains a fundamental tension between creating a democratic space while at the same time, “promoting particular egalitarian values and a social justice agenda” (Mckinney, 2005, p. 386). Part of responding to this tension is in viewing the teacher as an individual with particular beliefs, values, and cultural background, teaching in a classroom of individuals who each hold their own beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds as well rather than as an objective, distanced third party. Positioning teachers this way allows them to hold their own views while simultaneously creating a democratic space in which all views can be shared, debated, and discussed respectfully.

9.0 Conclusions

In conclusion, language education and integration in rural areas are worthy of our attention for several reasons. Increasing numbers of newcomers, viewing rural areas as an opportunity for learning and innovation, and ensuring that refugee sponsorship program currently being promoted to other countries can meet success in all geographic areas all point to the need for greater focus on rural immigration and integration.

By examining how newcomers learn language in rural areas we will be able to see unique opportunities and innovative ways to overcome barriers that may provide insights for future directions across Canada. For example, focusing on partnerships, creating unique hubs and pathways to ensure timely and accurate information, developing a local ethos of welcome, educating both newcomers and local populations, and embracing the usefulness of technology can all be directions worth pursuing in other contexts.

In education, we must critically examine our own positions and motivations, and make sure that we are not using the background stories of newcomers to further our own agendas. It is necessary to ensure that we are not only looking at the needs of individual newcomers but are also taking a broader look to ensure that we are not perpetuating an unjust system but are actively involved in working towards a system that is fair and equitable and to the benefit of all.

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