Effectiveness of Formal and Informal Processes of Learning Essential Skills: A Study of Immigrant Services Organizations

OBJECTIVES

The proposed study explores the research theme of cultural differences in how people acquire essential skills, with particular focus upon one primary research question identified for this strategic joint initiative: Can the voluntary sector be an effective instrument for delivering programs for the acquisition of essential skills to Canada’s immigrant populations? ‘Essential skills’ here refer to the nine skill areas identified by the Essential Skills Research Project (HRDC, 2003). The processes of learning essential skills among immigrant populations will be examined in both formal and informal settings created by the programs of four large non-profit immigrant services organizations, two in Edmonton, Alberta and two in Vancouver, British Columbia. We propose to conduct a case study in each of the four organizations, involving organizational participants to not only document and analyse immigrants’ learning of essential skills through their programs, but also to work collaboratively with the researchers to develop and validate an instrument for measuring the acquisition and recognition of essential skills among immigrant populations in Canada. In this way, the proposed study intends to address, as a secondary focus, another research question identified for this strategic joint initiative: What are the most accurate and feasible ways to measure the impacts of essential skills training?

The specific objectives of this project are to 1) identify the most salient dimensions and indicators, short-term and long-term, of essential skills as understood by program providers and participants in immigrant services organizations; 2) examine the providers’ and participants’ perceptions of immigrants’ different processes of acquiring essential skills, and the extent to which current programs effectively promote learning and recognition of essential skills among those they serve; 3) develop an evaluative instrument useful for measuring the impact in different contexts of these programs on immigrants’ learning of essential skills; 4) contribute to the training of four graduate students in case study research, essential skills and immigrant services; 5) build collaborative partnerships with community organizations to explore essential skills’ facilitation and evaluation; and 6) suggest policies, programs and resources to support the recognition, development and evaluation of essential skills.

CONTEXT

Context Related to Ongoing Research

This study is centrally related to what the researchers have been doing for many years. S. Guo, the principal investigator, is primarily interested in immigration and immigrant service organization. His doctoral study examined the historical development of SUCCESS (United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society), an ethnic community organization in Vancouver (Guo, 2002). The previous research reveals that SUCCESS was founded in 1973 in response to the failure of government agencies and mainstream organizations to provide accessible social services for newly arrived Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong. In its twenty-five year existence (1973-1998), the organization played a significant bridging role between the immigrant community and Canadian society at large. It has been an important stepping stone for immigrants to integrate into mainstream society, as well as an important entrance for government agencies to approach a hard-to-reach immigrant community. It has contributed tremendously to the ethnic Chinese community and Canadian society at large. Its contributions touched both practical and theoretical fields of immigration, citizenship education and integration; and its social impact was extensive (Guo, 2003a, 2003b).

Experience (2003d) explores multiple influences on informal learning including gender, race, and class structures. Campbell has examined gender-related experiences with learning technologies in formal and informal settings, including women’s shelters (Campbell, 2000). Her work with female faculty as professional learners in the workplace (Campbell, 2002b) has led to invitations to share her findings with the international community (Campbell, 2003a), and is contributing to a critical understanding of inclusiveness in learning design for adult women and other “excluded” learning communities (Campbell, 2002a, 2003a, 2003b). Y. Guo’s research interests include English as a Second Language (ESL) and literacy learning among immigrants. Her doctoral study examined the perceptions of Chinese immigrant parents and ESL teachers on second language literacy in an ESL program (Guo, 2001; 2002). This research shows that there are significant cultural differences in what count as essential skills for immigrants and how people acquire essential skills. To expand her previous work, Y. Guo is particularly interested in investigating the development of second language skills such as reading, writing and oral communication and the impact of the acquisition of such skills on the process of settlement and integration of new immigrants.

Context of Relevant Theory and Research

Role of immigrant services organizations in providing skills development

The proposed research will be informed by studies pertaining to the role of immigrant service organizations. Jenkins’s (1988) volume examines the role of immigrant service organizations in five countries: Australia, Israel, the Netherlands, USA and UK. It concludes that ethnic organizations vary from those that are well organized and offer a broad spectrum of professional services, to those less organized offering hardly any services. On the whole, they act as social service providers, maintaining ethnic identities, and promoting integration. Similarly, Benyene et al. (1996) argue that ethnic organizations can play an active role politically in combating and eliminating all forms of racism in social services. And Ng (1996), in her study of relationship with the state, contends that ethnic organizations function as an extension of the coordinated activities of the state. Thus, through funding requirements and accountability procedures, the state exercises a form of social control. On the other hand, Holder (1998) states that ethnic organizations and the state share the same goal, working together to serve immigrants. Their relationship may in fact be one of mutual dependence.

From a study of the 25 years history of SUCCESS (1973-1998), Guo (2002, 2003a, 2003b) concludes that immigrant service organizations also play an important role in providing community-based education for immigrants. It is found that programs at SUCCESS can be grouped into eight areas: airport reception, settlement services, language training, counseling services, small business development and training, employment training and services, health education, and group and community services. While some of these programs are structured more formally, a lot of learning takes place in informal settings. For example, the federally sponsored Host Program helps new immigrants learn English and Canadian culture through making friends with local Canadians. Another example of this nature is its successful volunteer programs. Currently the organization has more than 9,000 active volunteers. They help SUCCESS with its daily operation. They bring in different talents and expertise and alleviate the shortage of staff at SUCCESS. Meanwhile, volunteers also gain Canadian work experience, and interpersonal, communication, organizational and managerial skills through volunteering activities. It demonstrates that SUCCESS has been an important site for new citizens to acquire citizenship knowledge, skills and awareness.

Cultural issues in essential skills development

To achieve a successful integration into Canadian society, it is important for new immigrants to acquire the essential skills identified by HRDC. However, we must point out that many immigrants have come to Canada with skills and rich work experience. Unfortunately, many studies show that immigrants experience deskillling or decredentializing (Henry et al., 2000; Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2003). Henry et al. (2000) argue that there is little recognition in Canada of the professional qualifications, credentials, and
experiences of immigrants. Despite increases in professional standards in many occupations, immigrants appear to encounter increased skill discounting (Reitz, 2003). The situation for immigrant women is worse. Many argue that in the labour force, the category of “immigrant women” has served to commodify them to employers, reinforcing their class position in providing cheap, docile labour to the state in exploitive conditions, often permeated with racism and sexism (Ng, 1996; Gannage, 1999). There is great theoretical interest in examining what Dei (1996) calls integrative constructions of class, race and gender relations as these are interrelated with everyday work learning.

**Formal and informal learning processes of essential skills**

Adult literacy is a social and economic concern, the resolution of which becomes more urgent as the workforce ages. As Krahn and Lowe (1998) noted, although the corporate sector has expected the public school system to solve the "literacy deficit”, school is not likely to be able to keep pace with the demand for knowledge workers with a high level of essential skills. New Canadians are one source of skilled workers who may potentially replenish a workforce that will not be replaced by the low rate from domestic-born workers, and are expected to account for all net labour force growth by 2011 (HRDC, 2002). Bloom and Grant (2001) estimate that over one-half million Canadians stand to gain an average of $8,000-$12,000 in annual income from improved learning recognition. That is, these workers who include immigrants, people with prior training, and transferees between post-secondary institutions or professions, currently endure the gap between what is recognized and credentialed, and what could be rewarded in the workplace. HRDC estimates that, although entering immigrants have higher average levels of education than Canadians, poor labour market outcomes are a factor in their worsening economic conditions. Another factor is poor understanding of informal learning processes (Billett, 2002), which research has shown are embedded in everyday practices and social relations of particular activity systems (Engeström 2000, 2001; Gherardi, 2001; Wenger, 1998). This is especially true for subjugated populations (Sawchuk, 2003) such as immigrant communities. Analysts have suggested that research of skill learning requires a mix of naturalistic methods: case studies combined with personal accounts (Harrison & English, 2003; Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2002) and developmental interventions (Engeström, 2000) such as the collaborative development of skill assessment approaches that are proposed here.

**Context of the Host Organizations**

**Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Edmonton, Alberta:** The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN) is a community-based non-profit agency founded in 1981 by the Mennonite churches in Edmonton in response to the influx of Vietnamese refugees to Edmonton. With an initial focus on English classes and basic settlement services for refugees, it has grown into an organization which serves 3,000 immigrants and refugees annually with the help of 75 part-time and full-time staff, and over 200 volunteers. Its programs and services in total of 29 are organized under three major departments: English as a Second Language, Employment Services, and Community Services. In 1997, EMCN was the recipient of the Citation for Citizenship, a national award, presented by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

**ASSIST (ASSIST Community Services Centre), Edmonton, Alberta:** Formerly known as the Chinese Community Services Centre, ASSIST is a non-profit society founded in 1979 to help newcomers integrate into Canadian society. It provides a wide range of programs and services, including settlement and integration services, children, youth and family services, seniors’ programs, community development and collaborative programs, language and education programs, and volunteer development programs. While a large proportion of its clients are Chinese, many others come from Korea and South East Asia. It has a professional team of more than 30 staff members with funding from three levels of government and community organizations.
SUCCESS (The United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society), Vancouver, British Columbia: SUCCESS was established in 1973 to assist new Canadians in overcoming language and cultural barriers, achieving self-reliance, and contributing fully to Canadian society. It is the largest immigrant service organization serving the Chinese community in Vancouver with 200 professional staff members, a support network of more than 20,000 members, and over 9,000 volunteers. It provided services to more than 460,000 client contacts in 2002 through its 11 branch offices located across the Lower Mainland of Vancouver. Half of its $17 million annual budget comes from three levels of government, while the other half is derived from the community through fundraising activities.

MOSAIC (Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities), Vancouver, British Columbia: MOSAIC was founded in 1976 with the amalgamation of two separate organizations, Multicultural Social Services and Language Aid to Ethnic Groups. It is a multilingual non-profit organization dedicated to addressing issues that affect immigrants and refugees in the course of their settlement and integration into Canadian society. It has over 120 staff members and 250 contractors with an annual budget of $5 million. It offers a range of programs, including English classes, interpretation, translation, employment programs, community outreach/development programs, family support programs, and bilingual and family counseling.

Anticipated Contribution to Knowledge
Previous studies on immigrant service organizations have heavily focused on their role in providing social services. But little has been written about their educational effects. Recent changes in immigration policies have shifted more responsibilities from government agencies to ethnocultural and immigrant service organizations, including language and vocational education. This research will provide needed information in this area.

Specific anticipated contributions to theory of this proposed study include 1) expanding theory of essential skills to address cultural differences, including gender, in acquisition and the role of the voluntary sector in program delivery; 2) promoting understanding of essential skills’ development and assessment in immigrant contexts and in various formats (e.g. technology-mediated); 3) suggesting a means to evaluate essential skills in formal and informal learning contexts. This project also has policy significance. Canada’s Innovation Strategy (HRDC, 2002) states a clear agenda to improve immigrant integration into the labour market through initiatives of overcoming learning barriers, increasing literacy language learning provision in the workplace, encouraging broad acceptance of immigrants, and increasing recognition of immigrants’ prior knowledge and skills. Such initiatives require understanding of immigrants’ learning experiences and challenges in developing essential skills in Canada. Finally the immediate contribution of this study to practice is our anticipation that the research process will build collaborative partnerships among the four participating organizations and the university, for purposes of sharing strategies, information and understandings related to fostering essential skills through diverse formal and informal learning activities.

METHODOLOGY
The methodology of case study enables a focus on the particularity and complexity of a single case (Stake, 1995) to understand an activity and its significance. One case study of each of four different organizations will be conducted. These four case studies will be instrumental (examining a particular case to cast light onto something other than the case) (Stake, 1995): that is, the case study will be conducted so as to understand the unique processes and different cultural processes related to essential skills learning in each case context, for the purposes of developing indicators and eventually a flexible evaluative instrument for essential skills learning in formal and informal contexts. Methods will employ document analysis, interviews and focus groups. Interviews will draw from a narrative approach to understanding learning in organizations (Boje, 2001): participant narratives of personal learning experiences, and providers’ narratives of program outcomes, participant responses, and formal/informal
learning activities available in the organization. The four case studies should provide in-depth analysis of the unique conditions, challenges and learning opportunities available in these different contexts. The comparison of the four cases is expected to yield a matrix of themes from which can be developed a feasible assessment approach suitable to essential skills’ learning of immigrants. The research design includes four main phases: 1) preparation, and profile of four immigrant services organizations; 2) conduct of case studies; 3) development and validation of evaluative instrument; and, 4) knowledge mobilization.

Proposed Study Methods

Phase One: Preparation, and profile of four organizations (May-August, 2004)

In phase 1, four graduate student assistants will be recruited and trained for the research activities. The entire research team (four researchers, four graduate students) will then develop the infrastructure to ensure a productive collaboration and consistency of method. A profile template will be generated, interview and field note protocols will be developed, research journal formats and contents will be negotiated, and communication schedule and format (including electronic bulletin board utilized for regular communication) will be set up. Four teams of two (one researcher and one graduate student) will each undertake to document one organization’s history, values, mandate, context, clients, and learning opportunities/activities (both informal and formal) related to the nine essential skills. Organizational documents will be reviewed, and key informants identified for interviewing (such as directors/coordinators of the organization and selected board members). Relevant information about social-political-cultural contexts of the organization and its clients in place and time will also be gathered. After interviews have been transcribed and descriptive content analysis (following Ely et al., 1991) completed of all data, each team will prepare a written descriptive profile of the organization.

Phase Two: Conduct of case studies (September 2004- April 2005)

In phase 2, the researchers will conduct the in-depth case studies. First, a comparative analysis will be performed on the organizational profiles to develop a foundation of themes and further questions to guide the case studies, participant interview schedules and questions for focus groups. We will interview selected program delivery personnel as well as participants in these learning opportunities to determine their understanding of the most important dimensions for immigrants of the nine essential skills, their perceptions of the most important indicators of this learning among immigrants, and their perceptions of the programs’ effectiveness in fostering this learning among the particular populations served by the organization. Interviews will be audiotaped and fully transcribed, and transcripts sent to participants for validation. The findings will be consolidated into a matrix of themes describing the learning processes in different contexts, cross-referenced to a list of desired outcomes, evaluative criteria and indicators generated from the data. The matrix will be validated in focus groups of instructors and participants.

Throughout the case studies, the researchers and graduate research assistants plan to diligently maintain communication and reflection. Two reflective methods will be used: journals and critically reflective dialogues among researchers. All researchers, including graduate student research assistants, will keep reflective journals throughout the period of the study. Journals serve to 1) document the progress of the study, including actions taken and field notes of in-person group meeting and other observations; 2) record developing understandings, insights, patterns and questions; and, 3) reflect critically on the researcher’s own interventions, interpretations and language used to represent and thus control the emerging meanings of the research. Particularly in ethnographic or case study research, researchers must be attentive to “how our actions become folded into the collective character of the settings we study . . . the ways we participate in enlarging the space of the possible” (Sumara & Davis, 1997, p. 310). Such journals can help document – through multiple perspectives – the “trace” of researcher actions and influence in the unfolding group process, objects and practices generated, and serve as a useful base for researcher meetings, data analysis, and graduate student training.
Trustworthiness in data analysis will be strengthened through triangulation, member checks, maintaining an audit trail to help ensure the ontological and educative authenticity recommended by Lincoln and Guba (2000). Multiple data sources of documents, interviews, focus groups and researcher reflections should help achieve sufficient voice, reflexivity, and ethical relationship (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

**Phase Three: Development and validation of evaluative instrument (May 2005 - November, 2005)**

In phase 3, the evaluative instrument will be constructed. Working with key personnel in each organization, the researchers will analyse data already collected such as employment success rates of their participants, client numbers, and participant satisfaction surveys. Using the matrix of indicators, further required data as well as constraints of collecting data will be identified. The researchers then will synthesize these suggestions to formulate a feasible instrument to evaluate program impact on immigrants’ learning of essential skills. Following Patton (2002), we anticipate that this instrument may be multi-faceted and flexible, possibly including participant pre- and post-tests, participant follow-up surveys, and employer comments.

**Phase Four: Knowledge mobilization (December 2005 - April 2006)**

The project activities will be consolidated, and communication of results (described in the following section) completed. Knowledge mobilization suggests a movement beyond conventional dissemination in academic journals/presentations to include community involvement.

**COMMUNICATION OF RESULTS**

**Within the academic community:** We intend to present findings at different stages of the research to international scholarly communities such as the International Researching Work and Learning Conference, the Adult Education Research Conference, the Academy of Human Resource Development, and the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults. In Canada our first choice is the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences. Articles will be submitted to refereed international academic journals including those where we have published previously: *Work, Employment and Society, Journal of Workplace Learning, Journal of Education and Work, The International Journal of Lifelong Education, Studies in Adult Education, Studies in Continuing Education, The International Journal of Lifelong Education, Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education, Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology,* and *Journal of International Migration and Integration*. Where possible, graduate students will be involved as co-authors in publication and presentation opportunities.

**Outside the academic community:** The focus of knowledge mobilization will be first, on sharing findings back to the four host organizations, the immigrant service agencies whose programs and informal learning opportunities provided the focus for this study; and second, on making findings available to the broader community of volunteer service organizations, particularly those serving immigrants. Two primary activities for knowledge mobilization are proposed. First, for staffs and volunteers of the four host organizations, two invitational workshops are planned: one to be held in Edmonton and the other in Vancouver. The focus for these workshops will be to engage organization participants in dialogue about the study findings, including their personal and strategic responses to these findings, their priorities for further action regarding the evaluative instrument that has been piloted, and implications of other findings for the organizations’ service delivery. Funds will be sought through subsequent application for a Workshop Grant. The second primary activity is the development of a website. Funds have been budgeted for building an interactive website aimed at staff and volunteer workers in immigrant service organizations: developed with input from the research participants, the website is planned to provide information about the meaning of essential skills for immigrants, strategies for fostering essential skills development through formal and informal learning opportunities, instructions for using and adapting the essential skills evaluative instrument developed in this study, and suggestions for policy development in immigrant service organizations to foster essential skills.