

The Education of Immigrant and Refugee Students in NL: What Philosophy of Education Might Say

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Philosophy of education is variously understood; to some, it is the discipline in education that gets at ‘big questions’ or ‘first things,’ i.e. metaphysical and moral grounds, principles, and rules that purport to provide a foundation for teaching and learning, the curriculum, and schools. To others, it is a system that helps us to interpret scientific and social-scientific findings and put these in the context of persons, community, society, and (especially) politics. These two positions (and there are others) are not mutually exclusive. In this discussion, I will draw on both of these (disciplines and systems) as I discuss the role philosophy of education might play in discussions of the education of immigrant and refugee students in Newfoundland and Labrador (hereafter NL).

A Sketch of the Issue

Most of my discussion from here on in will be limited to the K-12 context. Let us begin with some statistics as well as advice from leading scholars committed to examining the issues. According to Statistics Canada, immigrants account for 2.4 percent of the provincial population (Statistics Canada, 2016). Of these, over half of newcomers reside in St. John’s. Amongst all newcomer immigrants to Newfoundland, 9.2 percent, or 840 people, are under 15 years of age; a further 8.1 percent or 745 newcomers are ages 15-24. Recent numbers (2011-2016) show that 23.7 percent or 870 newcomers are under the age of 15, and 11.4 percent or 420 are between 15-24. Southeast Asia and Africa represent the majority of these recent arrivals.

Regarding adult education and second language instruction, the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes are provided by a federally funded settlement service agency. In the K-12 education system, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and Literacy Enrichment and Academic Readiness for Newcomers (LEARN) programs are provided to students with language and learning needs. There are also resources for young parents to be instructed in ESL at their homes. Researchers recommend that more funding for settlement agencies, more attention to conversational English, and more recognition that language learning proceeds at different speeds for different individuals, take place (Burnaby, 2011; Doyle, Li, & Grineva, 2016; Fang et al., 2018; Li, Que, & Power, 2017). Refugee data is more difficult to come by; NL had 325 refugees resettle in 2015—an increase from 130 in 2013. According to Statistics Canada (2016) the retention rate of the 2010 cohort was only approximately 35 percent. Most of these refugees leave after five years: lack of language proficiency, discrimination, and labour shortages are given chief responsibility for the lack of retention.

As we see, overall migrant numbers are low, there are relatively few recently arrived K-12 students, either immigrant or refugee in NL, and most of these are located in St. John's. ESL educators at the K-12 level are few, though there is a mandate to increase the numbers approximately 3-fold (Collins, Philpott, Fushell, & Wakeham, 2017). Researchers report that transportation to and from schools remains a problem for students and there are insufficient resources for ESL teaching and learning in schools (Fang et al., 2018, p. 51; Li, Que, & Power, 2017). Many of the recent refugees come from the Middle East and Africa, and few existing resources specific to those cultures and languages are in place (Li & Grineva, 2016). However, the picture is not universally dismal; prospects for improvement, particularly K-12 ESL are in the works, and a number of community agencies, such as the Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Council (RIAC) and the Association for New Canadians (ANC), are available to provide support for parents and children. Recent scholarship supports continuing to build on existing resources, and to provide further and closer community relationships with immigrant and refugee populations (Collins, Philpott, Fushell, & Wakeham, 2017; Fang et al., 2018, p. 51; Li, Que, & Power, 2017).

An empirical sketch of the situation might look like this: a relatively small population of immigrants and refugees exists in NL; a population that is underserved by existing resources, including schools, community resources and government resources. Existing infrastructure (e.g. transportation) is not sufficient to meet the needs of this population. Language training, both in and out of K-12 schools, is also not sufficient to meet its needs. There is a linguistic-cultural divide between newcomer immigrants and refugees and the existing (settler and older immigrant) population of the province. Discrimination, both institutional and casual, has been noted (Baker, 2015). There is the out-migration of immigrants and refugees—often to larger centres where a stable community of the migrant population exists. A concern is a tendency for cultural groups (dominant and minority) to self-segregate.

Philosophy of Education's Task

I take it philosophy of education has two tasks, as above: the first is to search for, and isolate, good reasons for why we do what we do when we educate, and why we ought to think and act on what is good and right in the way of our decisions. The second is to bring what may seem like disparate ways of understanding events, situations, facts, and evidence together, and find the symmetry, reciprocity, and coherence therein. I proceed with these two tasks in mind. To begin with, the present state of affairs, while improving, has a long way to go if the (narrower) goal of making language education available and supportive of and for the immigrant and refugee population, together with the (wider) goal of the province as a desired place for families to live and grow, is what is wanted. I say this not on the basis of a presupposed philosophical position, but as an echo of existing scholarship. However, there is philosophical justification (good reasons) for taking this scholarship seriously.

The first task is to search for good reasons in our various and specific educational and settlement practices. Let's put this in terms of means and ends. If the end that is wanted is, for example, supportive and sufficient language education for K-12 immigrant and refugee students, then the means must be in place for this to occur. Means that do not comport with the end (I am thinking of policies that defund existing second language education initiatives or detract from the goal of

support and sufficiency) will not lead to the end. Means must be congruent with the end proposed. Likewise, the end must be congruent with the means proposed. There must be, in other words, a continuity between the means and end; a continuity that is severed when means such as policies to de-fund or concentrate on other goals to the detriment of the support and sufficiency of language education are put forward. In the scheme of means-to-ends, what counts as giving good reasons amounts to reasons that comport with the end or goal to which we ascribe. The deliberative work involved consists in ensuring that the means we adopt (whether policies, programs, or funding) comports with the end we have in view (sufficiency and support of immigrant and refugee students).

The second task is more complex, but ultimately more important. What is the symmetry, reciprocity, and coherence of the existing scholarship on immigrant and refugee children in NL? On the face of it, it is quite clear. More and further funding and resources are needed for immigrant and refugee children in NL. Nonetheless, one may think: to what end? Philosophy of education helps us to envision what is at stake beyond economic, political, and institutional ends and does so through helping us see past these to other possible ends. These may be social, cultural, moral, ethical, and/or political ends. It takes its departure from initial ends as empirical criteria. For example, pluralism is a vaunted political aim of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. What conditions are required for pluralism to enact itself in Canadian society? Here, we can turn to a variety of instruments, including the *Charter*, the *Canadian Bill of Rights*, various *U.N. Covenants and Declarations*, as well as independent scholarly tracts. There are social and cultural conditions that must be in place. There are also *philosophical conditions* that must be in place, and here I will note three. The first I call personality; the second, intersubjectivity; the third, community. I will discuss each below.

In terms of personality, we must see, and treat, each member of the Canadian community (whether settler, immigrant, or refugee) as fully human. And this means evincing a moral personality, autonomy in the way of making (free) choices and taking responsibility for their actions, and dignity (as defined by the UDHR). Persons are individuals; they are human insofar as they have character, take responsibility for their actions, and have and are accorded the dignity of every other human being. In terms of intersubjectivity, we must see and treat each member of the Canadian community as a member that exists and operates in a domain of recognition; that is, recognizing one another as human, as a person, with moral personality, autonomy, and dignity. But more than this, each member recognizes the role of conventions, norms, attitudes, rules and laws, that go into making the community of persons what it is. These roles are internalized; they become anticipated responses to one another's claims and assertions. They are up for discussion, even change when change is considered necessary. But for all that, they form the rules of discourse by which we operate; by which we give and take our reasons to think and do this or that. Finally, in terms of community, we must see that the intersubjectivity we discussed extends to groups, collectives, and even nations. For the sorts of reasons that operate at the level of intersubjectivity go into the various norms, attitudes, and conventions of the community. A community can come together over various threats and challenges *because* it shares a particular set of norms, attitudes, and conventions. Because there is a discourse common to all members of community, a discourse that takes personality and intersubjectivity as required, reasons can be given and taken in a community even when deep disagreement amongst its members occurs.

Let us turn to our community: the community of NL. If what is wanted is a community suffused with symmetry, with the balance a pluralism of memberships provides, each of these three philosophical conditions must be in place. First, the moral personality, autonomy, and dignity of each member of the community must be guaranteed. It does no good to consider immigrants and refugees as somehow less than persons until they are enculturated into the community. To do so inhibits their membership from the get-go. Second, intersubjectivity must be maintained and recognized. This means we must reciprocally recognize one another as having moral personality, autonomy, and dignity. But it means more than just this. It means helping extend the conventions, norms, attitudes, rules and laws of the community to its newest members. It means bringing new members into the fold, rather than holding them responsible for their own supposed ignorance of the linguistic discourse. Of course, this means more (and better) introduction to language and to the cultural practices of NL. Third, a genuine community must form. In a genuine community, there are no insiders and outsiders: we all share in the larger community through access to and operation with, the linguistic norms, attitudes, conventions, rules and laws of the province and nation. This genuine community is not to be thought of as exclusive. For other communities to thrive, all must have genuine relationships with one another. And this can only come about in a pluralist atmosphere in which communities are not pitted against each other, to the detriment of all. Thus, the requirement that older members be introduced to the linguistic and cultural practices of newer members.

Fortunately, the schools offer the best prospect of this latter requirement; for the schools provide a ready-made opportunity for children of different cultures and languages to be together, to interact with one another, to learn from one another. The American philosopher of education, John Dewey at one time thought schools were the ideal institutions for a self-styled democracy in miniature, because schools were the one institution that brought peoples of disparate origins together in one place, interacting with one another for extended periods of time (Dewey, 1916). I submit that if we want the sort of community that is pluralistic in more than name, and we want immigrant and refugee students to have access to supportive and sufficient language education programs, we will want to encourage more—not less—initiatives that put them in the classrooms with their peers, and we will want more—not less—social institutions that bring otherwise disparate peoples together for extended interaction, and for these (philosophical) reasons.

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