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Where have we come from and where do we hope to go?**

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## **Bridging Education in the Nursing Profession: Where have we come from and where do we hope to go?**

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**Abstract:** *Each year over 50% of all immigrants to Canada choose Ontario as their home (Goldberg, 2001). Although the federal government retains the responsibility for recruitment and selection of immigrants, the provincial government oversees education, and the regulation of professions. While some statistics report low economic integration for Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs) overall, as of 2012 half of all Internationally Educated Nurses (IENs) in Canada were employed in Ontario. In the spirit of Au's comment that curriculum studies requires us to critically question and engage with different conceptions of what counts as curriculum, this paper will examine one contemporary representation of scientific curriculum: the bridging program. This paper aims to address the following questions: 1) What is included in the planned curriculum of bridging programs in Ontario today? 2) How does this planning affect the experienced curriculum of the very students these programs aim to serve? In order to address these questions this paper will provide a brief overview of the literature relevant to the topic of bridging education. It will provide context for one bridging education case site and conclude with a discussion of further curricular questioning in need of research and analysis.*

Each year over 50% of all immigrants to Canada choose Ontario as their home (Goldberg, 2001). Although the federal government retains the responsibility for recruitment and selection of immigrants, the provincial government oversees education, and the regulation of professions (Goldberg, 2001). While some statistics report low economic integration for Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs) overall, as of 2012 half of all Internationally Educated Nurses (IENs) in Canada were employed in Ontario (Walton-Roberts & Hennebry, 2012). That said the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) still estimate an attrition rate of 40% among Registered Nurses educated abroad who apply for membership (Blythe et al., 2009). This attrition rate may be attributed to the fact that IENs can withdraw their application for membership with the CNO after a

failed attempt or attempts at a licensure exam (I. Kennedy, interview, February 11 2014). Membership with the CNO signifies certification and licensure to practice in the province of Ontario. Therefore, the reported loss of IENs to the profession emphasizes a need for further research on how best to support federally recruited IENs in their pursuit of licensure and membership with the CNO and thus their subsequent economic integration.

Researchers in the field of integration have noted that “non-recognition of international credentials and challenges in satisfying...licensure and certification testing requirement[s] have been identified as the largest barriers to successful integration into the workforce, which costs the Canadian economy as much as \$5 billion a year” (Cheng et al. 2013, p. 734). One approach the Ontario provincial government has taken to address these barriers to economic integration has been to adopt bridge training programs, defined as those that:

Help skilled newcomers...find employment commensurate with their skills and experience in Ontario...in general they are designed to give internationally trained individuals: an assessment of their education and skill[s]...preparation for license or certification examination, occupation-related language training, and individual learning plans to identify any added training needed (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2013).

This general structure which sits at the core of any bridging program follows in the vein of Franklin Bobbit’s (1918) assertion in *The Curriculum* that “...by noting the kinds of shortcomings or mistakes that show themselves when training is absent or deficient...we can discover the curriculum tasks for directed vocational education” (p. 48). Bridging programs are thus a natural extension of what curriculum studies regard as ‘scientific curriculum,’ in the specificity of the courses offered, and an adherence to accountability in the form of rigorous testing to ensure predetermined learning expectations have been met.

If the concept of scientific curriculum is understood to be an old one, then this may help to provide some context for the concern that many modern curriculum theorists have expressed over the appropriacy of its use nearly one hundred years after its inception. In particular, some curriculum theorists have questioned the notion of education as a means to shape the minds of learners for the purposes of work as opposed to encouraging a wider questioning of what we work at, and why we do so. Perhaps the most notable of these theorists, concerned for the tendency of educational

institutions to narrow their objectives to career training, was Paulo Freire. Freire asserted that just such an approach to curriculum making relegated both learners and educators not only to technicians, but to the very cogs of a much larger machine.

If collectively we acknowledge that the very term, curriculum, is not synonymous with instruction, in that the word *curriculum* is commonly used to suggest what is *planned*, then it follows that the *experienced* curriculum is likely to be very much affected by the intentions behind the planning itself. Wayne Au's (2012) *Critical Curriculum Studies* suggests conflicting definitions are almost the whole point of curriculum studies: "... it is all part of a general attempt to...interrogate aspects of the curriculum that others may have missed..." (p. 32). The construction of each curricula bears the judgment of its designers on the worth of various forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, by privileging some information which must be learned and assessed over others. While two courses or programs of study may seem to offer instruction on the same topic, each may privilege one or more aspects or topics over others, to align with a host of values which view particular components as essential information.

In the spirit of Au's comment that curriculum studies requires us to critically question and engage with different conceptions of what counts as curriculum, this paper will examine one contemporary representation of scientific curriculum: the bridging program. This paper aims to address the following questions:

- 1) What is included in the planned curriculum of bridging programs in Ontario today?
- 2) How does this planning affect the experienced curriculum of the very students these programs aim to serve?

In order to address these questions this paper will provide a brief overview of the literature relevant to the topic of bridging education. It will provide context for one bridging education case site and conclude with a discussion of further curricular questioning in need of research and analysis.

### **What is included in Planned Bridging Education Curricula?**

Bridging programs are often framed as important *levelers* (Lum & Turriffin, 2007) of the field in terms of promoting equal access, to the pursuit of licensure and certification, supporting Internationally Educated Professionals in applications to professional examinations required to work in their field. However, some research has begun to question the philosophical underpinnings of an educational model which

suggests some level of supremacy of domestic (Canadian) educational standards. For example, some have suggested that:

...if employers dictate that candidates require 'Canadian' work experience, and do not recognize the knowledge and experience obtained outside of Canada, this perpetuates racist assumptions and attitudes about the 'others' skills and abilities and maintains the dominant White culture in the Canadian workplace" (Yee et al., 2007, p. 3)

By questioning the possible effects of a kind of curricular planning, Yee et al. (2007) embrace a kind of criticality that is encouraged by curriculum theorists like Au. In particular, Au suggests that we engage with what he terms *critical praxis* in our conception of curriculum wherever and whenever we intend upon enacting any curriculum (Au, 2012). Au expands on this notion of critical praxis by invoking Freire, when he describes our collective need to embrace "criticality" (Au, 2012, p. 24). Thus, Yee et al.'s concern regarding the perpetuation of "racist assumptions and attitudes about the others' skills..." (Yee et al., 2007, p. 3) beckons the reader to critically consider what it may mean to privilege a particular kind of experience over another. This call to critical consciousness may lead some to question a few of the particularly widespread aspects of bridging education curricula, such as linguistic and cultural competence and how their inclusion within planned curricula may or may not contribute to a *leveling* (Lum & Turrutin, 2007) of the professional field.

Deborah Cameron, of the Faculty of English at the University of Oxford, has criticized discourses that recommend developing uniform communication skills in the global marketplace (Chun, 2009). Specifically, Cameron is concerned that this approach has the effect of making "every language into a vehicle for the affirmation of similar values and beliefs and for the enactment by speakers of similar social identities and roles" (Chun, 2009, p. 113). A question of Au and by extension Freire's critical praxis might therefore be, whose language, values, beliefs and social identities are upheld, and to what degree are provincially funded bridging programs operating in this vein?

Some IEPs have self reported that one of the systemic level barriers to employment faced by visible minorities is that "networking in Canada is Eurocentric" (Yee et al., 2007, p.25). To be Eurocentric is to hold a perspective of "having or regarding Europe as central, focusing on Europe to the exclusion of the rest of the world" ("Eurocentric", n.d.). The use of this word in particular is interesting as perhaps it reveals an essential concept where all those with a vested interest in education must

be reminded to embrace critical praxis: the generalization. Regardless of what brings us to our personal search for knowledge in the areas of immigration and education, we must ask ourselves what is contained by a word like Eurocentric when applied to a country like Canada? What is contained by a word like Orientalism when applied to one or more continents? When Internationally Educated Canadian Professionals describe a systemic level barrier to employment faced by visible-minorities as being Eurocentrism, what we (whoever *we* may be) may take away from this sentiment is an understanding of a sense of division and exclusion that must be addressed.

It has been argued that Bridging Education stems from an educational concept that is nearly one hundred years old, a concept often referred to as scientific-curriculum. The person most closely associated with this form of curriculum making, Franklin Bobbit, intended for it to be used as a means of highlighting social deficiencies and seeking out the best available means to remedy them using explicit instruction. Of the scientific approach to curriculum making Bobbit argued:

The first task of the scientific-curriculum maker is the discovery of those social deficiencies that result from a lack of historical, literary, and geographical experiences. Each deficiency found is a call for directed training... (1918, p. 51)

Bobbit's conception of scientific curriculum as expressed here, suggests that a lack of geographic [worldly] experiences results in social deficiencies that must be addressed through conscientious training. Thus, one of the main tenets of scientific curriculum construction is to identify current deficiencies in the educational/technical experiences of learners and then systematically test approaches to resolving those problems.

To some extent modern day scientific curriculum is approaching systemic level barriers in much the same way Bobbit intended, by seeking out participant or learner feedback on the challenges they face, and testing out possible means of redress. Contemporary research has documented a potential barrier for IEPs, and bridging programs are responding to observed deficiencies in ways that recognize the diverse experiences and epistemologies that collectively define our communities and professional associations. The tools, and practices employed by bridging programs to achieve this end, will be discussed with particular attention to one Ontario wide bridging program known as CARE.

### **A Bridging Program Case: CARE Centre for Internationally Educated Nurses**

CARE Centre for Internationally Educated Nurses began as a province-wide bridging education program, but it is currently evolving into a professional development organization which works to meet the needs of IEPs as well as certified and licensed Ontario nurses. In general, the purpose of a bridging program is to identify and fill in any gaps between the credentials of professionals educated in a country outside of Canada, and the expectations for educational credentialing in Canada for the specified profession or trade. As of 2003, the CARE mission statement was to “enable internationally educated nurses to practice and excel in their chosen profession in the shortest time possible” (Care, 2013a). CARE’s bridging program is described on its website as a “multi-partner initiative that invents, coordinates, and delivers flexible, client focused education and support services” (CARE, 2013a). Historically, scientific curricula were noted as being fairly rigid, however within a contemporary context bridging programs have evolved to offer a greater level of adaptability at the level of the individual. One way in which this level of adaptability is achieved is through the case management approach, whereby each learner’s knowledge and skills are assessed in order to create an individualized learning plan. This is the model used by CARE to ensure that previous learning is recognized and built upon according to the individual needs of each IEN (CARE, 2013e).

One way in which bridging programs are able to test possible learning solutions designed to address the types of social deficiencies encountered at the intersection of education and work placement, is to seek feedback from the very individuals intended to be served by the curriculum in question. Needs assessment research conducted on the experiences of IEPs in pharmacy education in 2006 revealed “issues related to self conceptions of [one’s] professional role, and the lack of connectivity to the broader pharmacist and healthcare provider communities” (Austin & Dean, 2006, p.29). What this type of feedback reveals is a difference in the way a professional role may be thought of and enacted in a country outside of Canada, and the way in which the profession functions here. In particular, Austin and Dean’s (2006) research revealed that misunderstanding or confusion regarding the enactment of the professional role was more likely to persist where IEPs experienced limited opportunities to interact with individuals currently employed in the role in Canada.

CARE’s bridging program encourages previous students to take on a teaching role in the form of mentorship of other IENs (CARE, n.d.-b). CARE mentors perform an

essential task in “modeling [the professional role providing], support, advice and... provid[ing] a context for understanding broader social and cultural norms and nuances that are essential for practice” (Austin & Dean, 2006, p. 29). CARE pairs new IENs with successful graduates of the program, which may help to promote open dialogue between individuals from different countries and cultures. The value of mentorship then, maybe three fold. Firstly, it creates an opportunity for IENs and currently employed professionals in the field to discuss professional concerns. Secondly, by establishing an opportunity for an open dialogue there is greater opportunity to share and exchange different kinds of knowledge, and different conceptions of the professional role. Lastly, mentorship may also offer another way to mitigate Eurocentric networking practices by pairing IENs with currently employed professionals who may be born in or outside of Canada. The advantages of diverse networking opportunities are experienced not only through the mentorship program but also through more explicit opportunities to develop a professional network such as networking meetings, social events like CARE’s annual picnic (CARE, n.d.-b; CARE, 2013b), and the Observational Job Shadowing opportunity (CARE, n.d.-a).

The inclusion of diverse networking opportunities is one method of systematically working against Eurocentric networking or hiring practices, but as some researchers have noticed: “More often than not, a deficit approach to... [IEPs]...is taken by employers who assume that their English-language proficiency is not up to the standard of the Canadian workplace” (Yee et al., 2007, p.3). A view of learners as deficient, requiring the knowledge of the knowledgeable is precisely the kind of unilateral education that Freire warns against in his banking concept of education and a concern that must be addressed as it pertains to language and IEPs.

Of central importance is whether or not the philosophical underpinnings of bridging education reinforce, or destabilize systemic oppression. Freire explains:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry (1970, p. 58).

What must be addressed then, is whether or not bridging education projects an absolute ignorance onto those professionals for whom the program is intended to serve. Some have suggested that employers often take a deficit approach in the assessment of

IEPs' language skills (Yee et al., 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged here that, the scientific approach to curriculum making forms the backbone of bridging education programs, teaching those skills that workers are *deficient* in (Bobbit, 1918, p. 48). However, where IEPs are excluded from employment opportunities based on the perception of linguistic skill, a social deficiency will result in an overall lack of diversity in professional representation. Thus, a systematic approach that aims to prevent exclusive hiring practices by explicitly addressing the issue of linguistic competency seems a measured response.

Recent changes to the CNO requirements for IENs seeking membership has meant that applicants must now show language competency by completing either the CELBAN or IELTS exams (CNO, 2013). While these assessments do not constitute the totality of certification testing experienced by IENs hoping to acquire their license to work in their profession within Canada, it does constitute the formal assessment intended to address linguistic competence of IENs whose first language is not English.

In the year 2000, a survey of 50 nursing profession stakeholders, conducted by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, indicated a "strong need for a specialized English language assessment tool to evaluate the English language communication skills of internationally educated nurses seeking registration in Canada" (CELBAN, n.d.). Research has shown "when a test designed for the purposes of English for Academic Purposes and for university entrance is used for job or professional certification purposes, construct underrepresentation may occur" (Cheng & DeLuca, 2011, p. 106). In particular, for nurses, the construct underrepresented by general academic English language tests is nursing knowledge and vocabulary (Epp, 2006). To address the issue of construct underrepresentation (professional language competency), the CELBAN was developed from 2000-2004. The CELBAN was designed to specifically address the language demands or "target language use" of the nursing profession, nation-wide (Epp & Lewis, 2009, p. 285).

In the case of the CARE curriculum, IENs are required to take two English language courses (CARE, n.d.-a). These courses work from an established base of professional knowledge but provide technical linguistic support for profession specific vocabulary and jargon. Particular areas covered are: "recognizing common nursing abbreviations in English as well as lay language and intercultural communication (CARE, n.d.-a, 2013d). Without explicit education on Canadian English abbreviations, and industry jargon, international nurses could easily be put at a disadvantage within

urgent care environments, where communication is of the utmost importance in transmitting essential information using the least amount of talk time.

Bridging programs are adapting their curricula to operate from the initial premise that IEPs bring professional knowledge and experience to a place and time where social inequality and discriminatory hiring practices are ongoing. Acknowledging the role language and professional networks can play as systems of control which limit diversity in the professional sphere are the first steps to systematically breaking down these barriers.

### **Continuing the Curricular Conversation**

While bridging education is a fairly modern concept, the notion of vocational training and the scientific curriculum, which shaped some of its earliest forms has long been debated. At the heart of most curricular debates regarding vocational training is a concern for the learners and teachers of this type of curriculum. While Franklin Bobbit's scientific curriculum advocated for a systematic approach to teaching those skills which learners were deficient in, modern curriculum theorists have challenged our very notion of what it means to be deficient. The very name *bridging education* suggests a linkage from one point to another, but a bridge is meant to be a bilateral means of conveyance. As bridging education continues to evolve, a question we might still investigate is: what might be brought to Canadian professional practice by way of the international professionals whose conceptions of their respective professions may differ from the enactment of those professional roles in Canada?

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