

Immigrant Integration and ESL support in Atlantic Canada: The Case of Newfoundland

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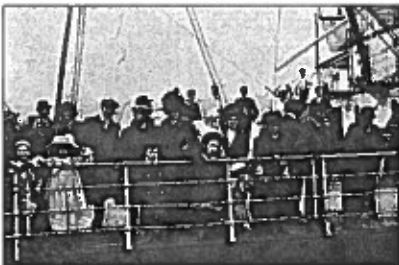
Context

If you hear people talk about MTV being the multicultural hubs of Canada, you know they are talking about Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Immigrants to Canada have historically clustered in and around these big urban centers. In recent years, however, a noticeable trend has begun to develop. A growing number of immigrants choose to settle down in non-metropolitan areas. Atlantic Canada has seen a significant increase in immigrant population in the past 10 years. The total number of immigrants in these provinces in 2000 was 2424, and the number soared up to 6663 in 2009 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010). Retention and integration of immigrants has become part of the Atlantic Population Strategy (ARAISA Settlement Conference 2006).

Despite the rapid increase in immigrant population, the percentage distribution of immigrants in Atlantic Canada remains apparently low compared to other areas. Let us take a look at the recent statistics. In 2009, 42.4% of the newcomers to Canada lived in Ontario, 19.6 in Quebec, 16.4 in British Columbia, 10.7 in Alberta, 5.4 in Manitoba, and 2.7 in Saskatchewan. That did not leave much for the Atlantic region. The numbers were 0.7% in PEI, 0.8% in New Brunswick, 1.0% in Nova Scotia, and only 0.2% in Newfoundland and Labrador (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010).

In addition to the low distribution percentage, retention of newcomers is a big issue. Take Newfoundland for example. A report by Goss Gilroy Inc. (2005) points out that in the decade before 2005, an average of 464 immigrants came to Newfoundland and Labrador each year; however, only 36% of them stayed—a lower retention rate than in any other province.² One has to ask why. The report attributes the low profile of immigration to “limited sustained—and funded—effort to engage the community at large in these matters” (p. ii).

What are the sustained efforts made by the government, communities, and educational sectors to integrate newcomers into the local society? What is the current status quo of immigrant support in communities and of ESL teaching in schools in Newfoundland? What are the areas for improvement to attract more newcomers and to make them call Newfoundland home?



Immigrants waiting to go ashore

Credit: William James Topley / Library and Archives Canada / PA-010235

NOTES

²Prepared for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and Coordinating Committee on Newcomer Integration.

Immigrant Support in Newfoundland

As the capital city, St John's takes in the majority of the immigrants in Newfoundland and Labrador and houses most of the services available. Up to 1990, there were 4 language programs that catered to immigrants and refugees in St John's (Bassler, 1990, p. 101). These programs served the different needs of specific communities at the time, but they were far from sufficient to help retain the immigrants who landed in St John's. In recent years, more services and programs have been established, including the Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism (OIM), the Association for New Canadians (ANC), the Coalition on Richer Diversity (CORD), and the Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Council (RIAC). The purposes of these and other government and non-government organizations are to implement the Provincial Immigration Strategy, build cross-cultural awareness in immigrants and local residents, and provide language instruction and settlement support for immigrants. The government aims at retaining 70% of the immigrants in the near future. How far is Newfoundland toward this goal with the existing support programs?

The government of Newfoundland and Labrador, in response to the population decrease caused by migration outflows, launched the Provincial Nominee Program to recruit immigrants with specialized skills that will benefit the Province in fulfilling specific economic and industrial development goals. From April 1, 2007 to April 1, 2010, the province nominated 1,279 individuals from 76 different countries. The Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism conducted a survey in November and December 2010 to determine the retention rate of nominees. The result indicated that a total of 179 out of 221 (81%) of the nominee respondents were still in the province (Power, 2011). However, these numbers can be misleading because the nominees were the individuals who came with good educational backgrounds and language skills, as well as promising employment opportunities. What about those without such blessings and in need of more support, such as refugees and families of immigrants?

The Association for New Canadians in St John's not only provides Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs, but also offers a variety of settlement services to connect immigrants to local communities, and to support immigrants in many other ways—childcare, job-hunting, and cultural integration. However, the adequacy of such programs in meeting immigrants' needs is yet to be determined. As indicated in the Goss Gilroy Inc. (2005) report, "the services (offered by ANC) cannot help all immigrants and refugees overcome the personal or systemic barriers they face to integration into the community and economy" (p. iv). What is more problematic is the fact that hardly any documents can be found on support for immigrants outside of the St John's area. Substantial research is needed to look into immigrant lives and their connections with the local, immigrant services, and ESL support in non-urban Newfoundland.

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ESL Teaching at Schools

In the education sector, apart from Memorial University's ESL department offered to international students and ANC's ESL programs offered to adult immigrants, the Eastern District School Board offers ESL programs for international and immigrant students in primary and secondary schools.

The K-12 ESL student population in the province is concentrated primarily in the Eastern School District, according to the provincial immigration strategy 2007 document entitled *Diversity—“Opportunity and Growth.”* As of June 2006, there were 193 ESL students from Colombia (42), Sudan (29), Liberia (15), China (11), Libya (9), Egypt (7), Russia (7), Turkmenistan (6), and other places. Among them 42 were studying in the only high school offering ESL courses in St John's—Holy Heart of Mary (OIM, 2007, p. 10). In 2010, the ESL students' number went up to 277 and around 60 of them were in Holy Heart.

Let's take a closer look at the numbers of students and their home countries and see what researchers have said about cross-cultural migration and students' success in education.

Among the factors influencing academic performance, language proficiency and family influence are most frequently discussed. A higher level of English proficiency is a significant factor in academic performance (Chow, 2000; Mullins, 2010). Family support is another crucial factor in students' achievement. East Asian students work harder to live up to parental expectations, and newcomers from China, Taiwan, and Korea out-perform students from other places and are the most likely to attend university (with a rate of 70%) while their Caribbean and African classmates tend to drop out of high school (Chow, 2000; Crystal, et al., 1994; Mullins, 2010; Wong, 1990).

Moreover, the socio-economic status of the family is strongly correlated to ESL students' grades. Students from refugee families that lack financial resources are more vulnerable to dropout (Chow, 2000; Duffy, 2004). Immigrant students with traumatic experiences may face additional language challenges and mental health issues that need to be addressed (Beiser, Dion, Gotowiec, Hyman, & Vu, 1995; Cole, 1998; Stermac, Brazeau, & Martin, 2008). War-zone refugees, particularly ones from some African countries, experience difficulties in school as a result of cultural clashes and social struggles (Berthold, 2000; De Gourville, 2002; Hersi, 2005).

Considering the above research findings, we have to assume that most of the immigrant students in Newfoundland are faced with big academic challenges.

The Department of Education of Newfoundland and Labrador published a handbook in 2002 “to guide administrators and classroom teachers in the reception and orientation of ESL students and families into schools and communities” (OIM, 2007, p. 10). The high school curriculum was revised and a new English Second Language Literature course (ESL 3206) was implemented in 2006. Meanwhile, “stakeholders have identified the need to

increase access to ESL and to better prepare classroom teachers to address other cultural issues faced by students from other countries” (p. 10).

However, challenges remain in spite of the above efforts. On the one hand, classroom teachers, who are not generally trained to teach multicultural classrooms, are under pressure to help their newcomer students cope with the new learning context when they themselves feel helpless of what to do. On the other hand, students sitting in such classrooms are placed at an immense disadvantage when they do not share common past or cultural practices with local classmates and teachers, not to mention the fact that they have to deal with a new language. In particular, refugee children who have a range of special needs challenge the capacity of the school system.

Limited ESL support and services available at schools in smaller cities hinder immigrant students’ learning (Karanja, 2007). There is urgency for the provincial government to update its education policy and for the education sector to enhance support for immigrant students at schools. Bridge programs need to be established to allow students and parents to interact with schools and local communities more closely than a few meetings or gatherings in the year, and at the same time to assist school staff, teachers, and community service providers in understanding and appreciating cultural differences and diversity. Sound research involving the stakeholders—immigrant students, their parents, classmates, teachers, school administration, community supporting staff, and government agencies is called upon to look into such issues.



CHELO SEBASTIAN, HAMILTON ON

Shelter from the Storm by Chelo Sebastian

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