

Perspectives of Teachers from the Soviet Union in U.S. Schools

Through the Eyes of Immigrant Teachers Who “Tend to Go against the Grain”

Inna Abramova

The very notion of immigrant teachers tends to go against the grain: teachers are seen at least in part, as representatives of the culture responsible for passing it on to the new generation, and one would not expect this important task to be put in the hands of newcomers to the culture. (Elbaz, 2005, p. 174)

Introduction to the Problem

The introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 placed the issue of teacher quality at the top of the educational reform agenda as a critical factor in improving students' learning. At the same time, the reform act lowered standards of teacher quality, since it required teachers to become deliverers of content knowledge, de-emphasized the intellectual aspect of teachers' work, and made teachers accountable for students' learning (Futrell, 2008; Pinar, 2004; Townsend & Bates, 2007).

Many scholars and educators continue to criticize the act for its narrowness, practice-oriented curriculum, and dependence on assessment and standardized testing, all of which transforms education into a “business model” and school into “a skill-and-knowledge factory” (Pinar, 2004, p. 164).

Within the context of mandated measurement of students' knowledge and performance according to standards and test scores, it becomes particularly important to understand teachers' work “from within.” How do teachers feel about their work? What beliefs do they have about teaching and students' learning? How do they understand their roles as teachers?

Understanding teachers' work from their own perspectives is a critical issue because it can help to move forward

educational reforms, thus improving the educational experiences of all students (Ball & Tyson, 2011).

Although some research has examined teaching from teachers' perspectives, including research on studying teachers' autobiographies and the impact of an individual's prior experiences on the curriculum (Elbaz, 1991; Goodson, 2005; Grumet, 1990b), research on teachers' beliefs and how they guide teaching (McAllister, 1999; Turner-Vorbeck, 2004), and research of teachers' knowledge and classroom work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Phillion, 2002), few studies have focused on narratives of teachers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, especially in the U.S. context.

Researchers have explored the experiences of minority teachers (Irvine, 2003) and racial minority immigrant teachers in the context of schooling and curriculum development (Subedi, 2008). Many studies on immigrant teachers have focused on problems regarding their adjustment to the new culture and the construction of their identities; fewer studies, however, have explored their potential and how it has been reflected in their teaching practice.

Such research has not included narratives of immigrant teachers who came from Eastern Europe—in particular, from the former Soviet Union. So far, the voices of these teachers have remained silent in teacher education; consequently, it is not clear what experiences, beliefs, and practices they bring to U.S. schools.

Many immigrant teachers from the former Soviet Union do work in American schools (Malko, 2005). The number of immigrants who entered the U.S. from the former Soviet Union increased from 90,000 (in 1980-1989) to 292,000 (in 2000-2007); the number of immigrants who entered the U.S. from pre-1980 to 2007 totaled 973,000 people (Camarota, 2007). More than half of the immigrants

from the former USSR hold a college degree or higher, and many of them work in educational institutions (Malko, 2005).

Purpose of the Inquiry

The purpose of the larger study of which this report is a part was to examine the experiences and beliefs of immigrant teachers from the Soviet Union regarding teaching and learning from their personal perspectives. I explored the factors that shaped Russian-speaking immigrant teachers' beliefs about education in various contexts, including their experiences before and after immigration to the U.S.

The research questions were developed based on identified gaps in the research literature and as the result of a pilot study. The focus of this article is to present the findings that emerged in response to the following research question: “How do my participants' beliefs about their teaching roles inform their curricular decisions and practices?”

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the research was developed based on curriculum theory, multicultural theory, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of language. This allowed me to examine beliefs from several different angles. Through the lens of curriculum theory, I explored the role of a person's life experience and related it to my participants' thinking and teaching (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996). I also explored how my participants' beliefs were influenced by their current situations as immigrants.

Through the critical lens of multicultural theory, I examined my participants' beliefs and experiences and considered the impact of their sociopolitical conditions and perseverance of their cultures (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theory of language allowed me to explore language

Inna Abramova is a graduate student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of the School of Education at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

as a dynamic meaning-making process of the reconstruction of the experiences and beliefs of immigrant teachers. I used language as a social tool during my interactions with the immigrant teachers and explored the cultural and contextual meanings of language that my participants used during our conversations and when they reflected on their teaching practices.

Research Perspectives and the Method of Inquiry

I used a life history approach in combination with narrative inquiry to examine my participants' beliefs. Life history allowed me to place immigrant teachers' beliefs in a particular socio-cultural context (Goodson, 2005). Narrative inquiry was helpful in understanding experience in its own terms (He, Phillion, Chen, & Xu, 2008; Phillion, 1999) and in constructing and reconstructing its meanings. Furthermore, a qualitative research design allowed me to place the participants' beliefs in context. Since I shared the same cultural background with my participants, I became a participant in the research process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and reflected on my own beliefs and experiences.

I selected the participants using a "snowball sampling" strategy (Patton, 2002, p. 237). I emailed them once or twice inviting them to participate. All five immigrant teachers agreed to participate in the inquiry. Four were females and one was male. All of the teachers were raised and educated in the former Soviet Union in pedagogical institutions and arrived in the U.S. during or immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

All participants have had teaching experience in the United States. At the time when the research began, four participants were employed and worked in various educational institutions in the U.S. Two of the participants were music teachers, one participant worked as a teacher aide in a pre-school, and the other one taught the Russian language in college. The fifth participant was not employed when the research began but had previously worked in elementary schools in the U.S.

For the data collection, I conducted a series of interviews and observed the participants teaching in various contexts (e.g., school, college, home). I wrote comments during observations and summarized my thoughts in my reflective journals. In the data analysis process, I illuminated my participants' voices; however, I also paid attention to common themes and explored

differences in their beliefs and how they were shaped by the context.

Findings

In the larger study, I found that my participants' beliefs were shaped by family influences, experiences with authoritarian teachers, the political context of teacher education programs in the Soviet Union, and teaching experiences in their native country. Their beliefs were also shaped by their experiences with the English language, which affected their integration into U.S. society.

In responding to the third research question in the inquiry, "How do my participants' beliefs about their teaching roles inform their curricular decisions and practices?" I found that my participants were dedicated teachers who were committed to students' learning and wellbeing. Narratives and observations of teaching practices demonstrated that my participants viewed teaching as emotional, socio-cultural, and professional agency; they also considered it to be work for social justice.

My participants emphasized such aspects of their teaching role as the development of imagination and creativity in children, responsibility for their students' successes and failures and the necessity to "go an extra mile" to help them learn, nurturing attitudes, an active social position, and the necessity for teachers to constantly develop and improve professional knowledge and expertise.

Emotional Agency

Emotional aspects of teaching unified my participants' stories. During the interviews, my participants stressed that being emotional during the lesson helped them to relate to students and overcome the language barrier. As a result, students became more open and more interested in the learning process. One of the participants who worked with undergraduate students in the Russian program elaborated on her experiences:

There is no complete understanding between my students and myself because of the language barrier....I am trying to overcome this barrier by being emotional....I believe it is good...to show who you actually are. It makes an impact on the students...Previously, they were afraid to participate... they had a barrier too. I help them to overcome this barrier... Emotions help them to perceive a new material especially if they see my passion... (Interview May 19, 2010)

Several participants mentioned that emotional aspects of teaching assisted them in developing imagination and creativity in students. My observations demonstrated consistency between the participants' words and their actions. For example, when one of the participants, a music teacher, asked her students to play a musical piece, she taught them to try to emotionally perceive the music, imagine the scene and themselves in it, and then perform the piece creatively instead of mechanically engage in its recreation. During the lesson, the teacher elaborated:

You need to sound mysterious. This is an Italian music. Imagine that you are in Italy... you live in a huge castle. You hear some music at night. You are wondering what is going on... Imagine what people were doing... when you came to this place... and how they were dressed... You hear the music...it is sweet and gentle, romantic and soft. As you play this piece, can you sound very romantic? (Field Notes, March 23, 2009)

After my observation of this teacher working with undergraduate students in teacher education, I made the following note:

Although one of her common strategies was repetition and the revision of the material, the lesson was not boring because she was enthusiastic and emotional about it. She was always singing the tune, tapping her feet, using gestures, smiling, laughing, joking and making positive comments. Being a teacher myself, I realized how much effort she put in her work. (Reflective Journal, March 28, 2010)

Similarly, I have felt that emotions helped me to establish a community when I worked with undergraduate students in teacher education. I try to be open and honest, and I express my feelings, both positive and negative, regarding contradictory issues in education. By attempting to develop an atmosphere of trust and authenticity, I create conditions that allow my students to speak loudly for themselves about issues of concern and even confront me in class discussions.

Socio-Cultural Agency

My participants brought with them to the U.S. personal perspectives of what it means to be a teacher. These perspectives, however, were shaped by their socio-cultural experiences of living in their native country. For example, extracurricular activities were an important part of the educational process in the Soviet Union,

and all participants in the inquiry viewed extra-curricular activities as a useful part of teachers' work even though participation in them was considered "the exhaustive use of the teachers' time... the full exploitation of this trained resource," which, as determined by the state, was socially useful in the Soviet Union (Rosen, 1971, p. 110).

My participants, however, strongly believed that these activities—which included preparing concerts and plays that involved teachers and students; participating in schools clubs; helping students to make wall-newspapers; field trips to the countryside and going to movies and theatres on weekends with their students—helped teachers in their native country to establish a class community, develop close relationships with students, and participate in their upbringing. As one of the participants mentioned:

In spite of the hard times of Perestroika, we tried to organize school events and live happily. These events helped us because we made friends with each other and became closer to each other. It was important because our students became our friends too. This closeness helped teachers to teach and students to study...students began to treat the teacher more personally. (Interview, September 11, 2009)

As a result, my participants incorporated extra-curricular activities in their work in the U.S. in various ways. They organized gala events in teacher education programs and plays for young children and their parents at the elementary school and the Russian school; they asked students to attend a concert at least once a semester and write a report about it in undergraduate classes; and they celebrated holidays together with students and their parents in the Russian school.

Moreover, my participants strongly believed that teachers should have high expectations for students and never give up on them. During the interviews, several participants pointed out that the teacher was responsible for the students' successes and failures. One of the teachers explained:

The child can be resistant to learning and at a certain stage may suddenly understand that it is necessary, and that he was wrong. If the child had a teacher who would not give up on him in spite of his resistance, then the results would follow... Our teachers in Russia are used to getting results from every child. In American school, teachers are more neutral. They always ask the child, "What do you want?" I think children do not always know what they want and sometimes even

do not understand what they really want. (Interview, November 13, 2010)

In fact, the idea that each student had to become a successful learner has its underpinnings in Marxist philosophy, which proclaimed that there were no inherent differences between individuals in their capacity to perform mental or physical work (Rosen, 1971, p. 169). Consequently, failure to provide success for all students in a Soviet school was considered "the teacher's fault, not the student's" (p. 169).

Observations of teaching demonstrated that my participants were genuinely concerned about their students' progress. I observed how teachers stayed after classes to provide students with additional explanations of the new material and how they prepared them to participate in national and international contests.

Similarly, in my own teaching, I often felt that my students were overwhelmed with the amount of assignments they had to complete in all required courses. I tried to provide them with all available resources to make the process of learning easier. I never counted time that I spent on meetings with my students because I did not want anyone to lag behind in my classes. During the lessons, I tried to focus more on the learning process than on asking my students to complete the work and assign points for the right answers.

Although I realized that a commonly accepted phrase, "The students are supposed to know" was reasonable, I resisted it because I realized that everyone has a different academic or cultural background and that some students need more attention than others. I always remembered that the way I treated my students, they would treat their students in the future.

Another theme that recurred across all the narratives was the theme of nurturing. During my observations, I witnessed my participants caring about their students as individuals. It is not surprising because they grew up in an educational environment in which teachers often stayed with the same group of students for several years. A homeroom teacher (*klassnui rukovoditel'*) who supervised a large group of 35-to-40 students functioned as an additional parent, and teachers and students often became close to each other (Post, 2005). Post elaborates,

Because they [students] are together for many years, the homeroom teacher and her students become like a second family to one another. Such long-term relationships are beneficial, and in Russia, those

relationships often continue beyond graduation. (p. 629)

During a casual conversation, I was surprised to find out how much one of the teachers knew about her student who had a learning disability, and I observed how she used strategies from a book that she had read to address the needs of this student. My participants asked their students questions about their personal lives and talked with them privately in the office to learn more about their problems and needs.

Professional Agency

The interviews, casual conversations, and observations in formal settings revealed that my participants viewed themselves as constant learners interested in new methodologies and innovative approaches to teaching and learning. As the participants indicated, their interest in learning stemmed from their childhood experiences, in which the family played a major role. Some of the participants grew up in "teaching environments"; in other families, the teaching profession was considered "the most wonderful profession in the world" and learning was encouraged, praised, and valued.

All participants in the study expressed their desire to continue improving their professional knowledge and learning of the English language. One of the participants indicated that a professional educator must spend extra time on learning. She said:

If the teacher works extra time out-of-class, learns about innovations and new methods, and prepares for the lesson, then the teacher is good. I believe it is not important in which country you teach. If you were a good teacher in your native country, it means you will be a good teacher in another country too... (Interview, September 11, 2009)

Another participant said,

I feel the need to interact with my colleagues and ... I feel the need ... to participate in conferences, in workshops, and seminars. I think it is absolutely necessary. I think the teacher should never stop learning.

Professional membership gave this teacher an opportunity to prepare her students to participate in musical contests at the local, state, and international levels. The teacher was happy when her students achieved excellence, and she said, "I am learning so much from my students' successes..."

My own beliefs about the role of a teacher were shaped by my experiences of living, studying, and working in Russia and

by my professional experiences at a U.S. university. In the course of my studies, I began to realize how important it was for prospective teachers to possess global and cultural awareness in order to improve and enrich the educational experiences of children they will teach.

I came to realize that my students had to be knowledgeable about the changes that are taking place in schools, in their community, in their country, and in the world. They had to know how to critically analyze and synthesize information and how to perceive the world from multiple perspectives. I incorporated these ideas into my teaching and explained to my students that the combination of all these features would help them make well-informed decisions and help them become decent members of society and good citizens of the world.

Discussion

Overall, I found that the discourse of my participants, who were “newcomers to the new culture,” tended to “go against the grain” (Elbaz, 2005, p. 174), since it was focused on emotional aspects of teaching and learning, emphasized socio-cultural and professional agency, and was oriented to social justice. I argue that, taken as a whole, this discourse presents an alternative to the dominant discourse, which dictates teacher-prescribed roles with a focus on technically-oriented aspects of teaching such as scores, standards and student outcomes.

In this respect, my participants’ beliefs were congruent with the views of those educators, researchers, and theorists who emphasize the importance of care and interpersonal relations (Nieto, 2005; Noddings, 2005), claim that teaching is socio-emotional work (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000), and believe that the focus on accountability and standards limits the socio-cultural and emotional development of students and encumbers understanding them as individuals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Pinar, 2004).

Moreover, the findings of the inquiry are consistent with the findings of other scholars who have found that immigrant teachers brought to their teaching perspectives that were not emphasized in the mainstream culture. Among others, these perspectives included the development of the sense of belonging in students, or “a classroom as home” (Elbaz, 2005, p. 388); incorporating cultural and language knowledge in the curriculum (Arun, 2008;

Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Monzo, 2003; Maum, 2003; Monzo & Rueda, 2001; Ng, 2006); developing leadership positions in school and in the community (Bascia & Thiessen, 2000; Beynon, Ilieva, & Dichupa, 2001; Carrison, 2007; Chacon, 2002; Reid, 2005; Seidel, 2007); a commitment to students’ learning (Flores, 2003; Remennick, 2002); the desire to collaborate with colleagues from another culture to gain more insight into the cultural needs of students studying in the United States (de Oliveira & Richardson, 2004; de Oliveira & Shoffner, 2009); addressing teaching as a moral enterprise (Nguyen, 2004); the development of a multicultural anti-racist curriculum in schools (Beynon et al., 2001); creating new pedagogical practices that challenged the discourses of “otherness” and “whiteness” (Reid, 2005, p. 257); and producing new knowledge that expanded the ways in which the concepts of multi-cultural, global and immigrant were conceptualized (Subedi, 2008).

The study described here contributes to this body of research that discusses the advantages of immigrant teachers and further explores the possibilities that immigrant teachers bring to schooling.

Implications

This study has several implications for research, theory, and practice. Clearly, one of the major findings in the inquiry was that immigrant teachers shared many beliefs that were not emphasized in the mainstream U.S. curriculum. What does all of this mean for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners?

First, researchers should pay more attention to studying the experiences and beliefs of teachers from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These teachers can enrich the educational experiences of all students by bringing innovative ideas, perspectives, and knowledge into the curriculum.

Second, policy makers should consider teachers’ perspectives (including culturally and linguistically diverse teachers) in the process of introducing reforms and developing educational policies. Teachers’ involvement is important because, as practitioners, they can provide a new angle from which to start implementing reforms and develop strategies that address educational issues.

Third, practitioners and school administrators should provide opportunities for immigrant teachers to participate in the development of the school curriculum so

that they may incorporate their ideas in practice. This approach will help immigrant teachers demonstrate their potential and will make them feel more confident in their teaching abilities in a new cultural setting. In addition, school administrators should encourage immigrant teachers to participate in workshops and conferences so that they may share their cultural knowledge with other teachers and learn from them.

In pre-service teacher education, instructors may discuss the advantages that immigrant teachers bring to teaching. In multicultural teacher education programs, instructors should invite immigrant teachers to their classrooms and create some space for a dialogic practice, which may help students uncover prejudices and stereotypes about immigrants.

A brief snapshot of the experiences and beliefs of immigrant teachers in the U.S. context contributes to the dialogue on a question that has to be more fully explored in multicultural teacher education: “How can we enact a curriculum of global imagination?”

One of the answers is that we need to start “working from within” in the search for new possibilities in teaching and curriculum development. Listening to the voices of teachers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds will support educators in this endeavor.

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