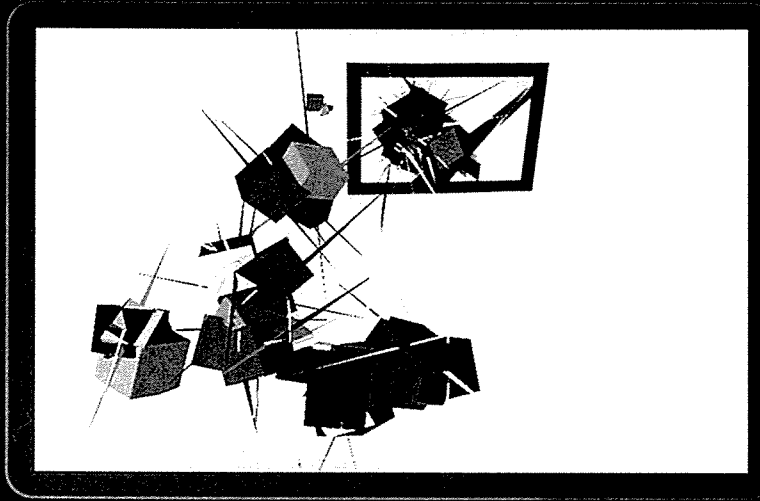




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Editorial: Re-focussing

Andy Begg

Education is always about change and for me 'refocussing' signals the first step of a conscious change process. As I see it, there are currently three areas within education that need considerable re-focussing, these are:

- the structure of teacher education
- reinterpreting the school curriculum in terms of its aims
- de-emphasizing assessment

When considering the structure of teacher education the question is, should teacher education become postgraduate? The issue was on the Ministry's agenda for a few weeks this year, but was later dropped. However, at least one New Zealand universities has already withdrawn from undergraduate teacher education, and other teacher education providers will no doubt consider the advantages and disadvantages of a postgraduate pathway.

A number of teacher education qualifications already exist at the graduate level rather than the undergraduate level. These include qualifications for secondary and tertiary teaching in most universities, and one-year graduate diplomas for graduates who wish to become early years or primary teacher educators. For all these students who have graduate status (level 7) it seems reasonable to upgrade their programmes to postgraduate level (8 or 9).

If such a move occurred it would be interesting to see if early years and primary teachers would continue to opt for a three-year teacher education bachelors degree or would prefer a more general three-year bachelors degree followed by a year or so of postgraduate study. The postgraduate option would certainly give students more time to consider their career options, and provide them with a bachelors degree that was not primarily a qualification to teach, but rather, a liberal arts degree that could lead them to numerous pathways in the future.

Some people seem threatened by such a change, but it is worth remembering that education is about change—changing our learners, changing ourselves, and changing what we all do. Personally I welcome this debate as it means that we all have to confront the possibility of change and have the opportunity to construct a curriculum that better prepares our students for their future in teaching.

Educational Provocations, 2012, pp. 1–4.

Immigrant students in the classroom: a spiral-threads-of-transition model

Jyoti Jhagroo

Abstract This paper presents my rationale for the development and use of a spiral-threads-of-transition model in the doctoral study that I completed this year. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach I examined the lived experiences of ten immigrant students in their mathematics classrooms at an Auckland secondary school. The study focused on these students' perceptions of their experiences rather than how their experiences might have been theorised. This approach gained its impetus from the notion that for teaching and learning, our most valuable resources are not abstract theories and principles but the untapped experiences of real students in the classroom (Sanchez, 2007).

Introduction

As a teacher for over 24 years I have been the recipient of different groups of students that entered and left my classroom, and during this time I observed them constantly trying to find their place in the classroom. I was particularly intrigued at how immigrant students seemed to transition in their new secondary school classroom environment. Consequently my study took shape and was guided by my pre-conceptions, experiences, and wonderings that are encapsulated in the question: "How do the perceived past and present lived experiences of immigrant students influence their transition in the mathematics classrooms?"

What became apparent in the voices of the immigrant students was that their past, present and future worldviews are fluid and continue to be influenced by their lived experiences. According to Berry (2003) and Shim and Schwartz (2007) the degree of merging of their past and present experiences affects whether their integration takes the form of assimilation, acculturation or bicultural integration. Hastings, Clelland and Danielson (1982) asserted that assimilation occurred when immigrant students chose to replace their past experiences with their new experiences to identify with their new culture. Acculturation, on the other hand, referred to students accepting aspects of their past and present experiences to enhance their existence in their new cultural environment (Berry, 2003; Moyerman &

Educational Provocations, 2012, pp. 31–41.

Forman, 1992; Wong-Rieger & Quintana, 1987). And, for some students merging their past and their present cultures may seem unnatural and thus prompted them to exist between two different cultures; Shim and Schwartz (2007) refer to this as bicultural integration. The acceptance or non-acceptance that immigrant students showed towards their new learning environment determines their level of integration (Shim & Schwartz, 2007) and the form of assimilation, acculturation or bicultural integration that they may choose.

As a teacher I am a role model to or the "educational parent" (Igoa, 1995, p. 103) of students in my charge and through my position of power I determine the ethos of the classroom environment (Bishop, 2002; Kirova, 2001). An inclusive learning environment is fundamental and involves my understanding the lived experiences of the students because, when the learning is unfamiliar for the student, it would be like looking into a mirror and not seeing their own reflection, that is, the student would be invisible (Davidson & Kramer, 1997; Igoa, 1995). Additionally, according to van Manen (1990, p. 101) lived experiences are unique to the individual and they present "multiple and different lifeworlds that belong to different human existences and realities."

While the literature suggested these different existences and realities, through my examination of the data, came the realisation that our perceptions of our lived-experiences may be altered and dependent on our existential being at specific times. This gave rise to the spiral-threads-of-transition model that formed the structure of my doctoral study. The following sections discuss the context of the model, its development and examples of its use in interpreting the voices of immigrant student in my study.

The context of the model

According to van Manen (1990), despite the individual's cultural or social differences, the four lifeworld existentials that transcend human existence and provide a reflective structure for research are: the lived space, the lived body, the lived time, and the lived human relation. In my study the lived space or spatiality refers to the psychological or mental state of being in an environment—that is, the perceptions that each student had about their experiences in their mathematics classroom environment. The lived body or corporeality refers to the physical being in the world in response to the "gaze" of others (van Manen, 1990, p. 104); and in my study this referred

to the perceptions that the students had about their own being or academic self-concept in the social milieu of the classroom. The lived time or temporality refers to the being within the past, present and future dimensions of time, and referred to the immigrant students in my study comparing their past and present lived experience and negotiating their space in the classroom. The lived human relation refers to the interpersonal space that people share, and this referred to the relationships that the immigrant students formed with teachers and peers (van Manen, 1990).

The association between time and conversation has been captured in the work of Ricoeur (1990) who explained this as a three-fold mimesis within three domains: past, present and future (Herda, 1999). Mimesis_{past} refers to the world one enters with cultural values and norms already formed and this was particularly relevant to the immigrant students' diverse backgrounds that they brought into their mathematics classrooms. Mimesis_{present} refers to how one makes sense of the present world, thus it referred to the interactions and relationships of the ten immigrant students in their classrooms. Mimesis_{future} refers to one finding one's place in this new world (Herda, 1999), and was relevant to the development of the students' academic self-concept and their efforts in negotiating their place in their mathematics classrooms.

Development of the model

While examining the data, it became apparent that my interpretations changed each time I listened to the recorded interviews or read the transcripts. With this fluidity of interpretations I became aware of how my own being at different times influenced my understandings. The idea of the past, present and future being intertwined, and my existence within these temporalities, induced the formation of the existential temporal framework. The spiral threads of the model depicted how our existence in the different times influences our perceptions of our experiences. This provided a basis from which interpretations emerged, not just my own interpretations, but the realisation that the immigrant students' perceptions of their experiences must be viewed within their existential temporalities. Such an existential temporal focus provided a frame within which the nature and essence of the immigrant students' experiences in their mathematics classrooms were interpreted and understood. The three-spiral-threads-of-transition model (see Fig. 1) that developed from van Manen's (1990) lifeworld existentials and Ricoeur's (1990) three-fold temporal mimesis aptly encased the assumptions and the structure of the study.

My first focus with the study was to gain an understanding of the students' past experiences in the mathematics classroom through their comparisons of their lived experiences in their past and present environments. The second focus was to understand how they integrate their past experiences with their new environments, and thirdly, to understand how the two threads helped them conceptualise the third, the self, in finding their place in their new environment. As suggested by the model these existential temporal experiences were viewed as inseparable and intertwined because the past, the present and the future, together influence lived experiences (Herda, 1999).

Assumption Three

Negotiating one's place



Assumption One

Comparing past and present lived experiences

Assumption Two

these experiences in the present

Figure 1: The spiral threads of transition

These spiral threads represented the following three questions that steered the path of the study.

- How do perceived similarities and differences between immigrant students' past and present experiences influence their understandings of their mathematics classroom environment?;
- How do immigrant students integrate past experiences into their present mathematics classroom environment with regards to forming relationships with their teachers and peers?;
- How do the past and present experiences of immigrant students affect their perceived academic self-concept in finding their place in the mathematics classroom?

A comparison of the present to the past involved the students drawing parallels between their experiences of mathematics learning in their home country compared to their experiences of mathematics learning in New Zealand. This focused on the curriculum, teaching approaches, expectations

of lessons, classroom environments, resources and equipment, student involvement and cooperation, peer group learning, use of textbook (and other resources and task sheets), and other factors that the students mentioned. The assumption from which this comparison stemmed was that the differences in the mathematics curriculum and teaching approaches influenced how the students perceived mathematics in their new environments.

The second thread that underpinned the study was that both the past and present experiences of the immigrant students in a mathematics classroom influenced their interactions with the subject, other students, their teachers and their learning. The third thread encapsulated the idea that immigrant students' transition in a mathematics classroom may have been premised on a culmination of their past experiences and present experiences together with their own attitudes and importance they attached to their learning of mathematics. The third question was devised to gain a comprehensive, yet not exhaustive, understanding of the immigrant students' academic self-concept in a new environment. This is consistent with Ricouer's (1990) idea of one's relational existence in a three-fold plane; past, present and future.

Using the model

The model provided the framework for my interpretations of the perceived lived experiences of immigrant students at a particular point in time by both, the students and myself. While the perceived lived experiences and interpretations of the voices of immigrant students are discussed within a backdrop of literature, I reiterate that these interpretations must be viewed within the spiral-threads-of-transition model. These realities have been offered from multiple perspectives: the perceived experiences of the ten immigrant students, the researcher's interpretations of the experiences, and the countless interpretations that may be extracted by the readers of this study (Cresswell, 1995), and they have the potential to offer new knowledge with each interpretation.

The following words by a participant is indicative of how students move spontaneously from one temporal frame to another in an attempt to construct meaning and make sense of their world: *I think in English when learn work in New Zealand. I think in Nigerian [Igbo] if learn work in Nigeria, and if work in New Zealand is same as one I learn in Nigeria, I think about it in Nigerian.* In this existence between the past and the present, this student seemed to have bridged the gap between his

mathematics thinking and learning in Nigeria and in New Zealand. This statement also suggested that he thought about mathematics concepts in the language in which they were taught to him and that his language of choice was his mother tongue. This affirms Yushau's (2009) study that speaks of mathematical language being technically specific and dense in any native language and therefore second language learners experience problems when trying to translate the mathematics content into another language.

The perceptions that immigrant students hold of the teacher may be influenced by their perceived past experiences. The idea of the teacher being an unchallenged authority of knowledge (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez Orozco, 2001) was exemplified by the student who felt that he would have been able to understand the mathematical concepts if he had *listen[ed] to the teacher*. In such school environments "you just listen to the teacher and go home and do your homework" (Gunderson, 2000, p. 695). Another student's description of his teacher in China mirrors the assertion made by Gunderson (2000) about the background from which some immigrant students come, *when in class I listen to teachers ... I can go home and ask my mum for help*. This behaviour may also suggest that the student had perceived his teacher to be a figure of authority (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez Orozco, 2001) who knew best.

Immigrant students' interactions with their teacher may also be influenced by their past classroom interactions. A Saudi Arabian student demonstrated non-verbal interactions with his mathematics teacher when his teacher communicated directly with him without the assistance of the student interpreter. Irrespective of whether the teacher was making a comment or asking Abdulla a question he would nod his head without saying anything. While his nod may be interpreted as his acknowledgement of what the teacher is saying, it is important to understand his silence. Another student who had also been observed as not verbally interacting with his teacher, however, his interactions, although silent, were evident in his compliance with all the teacher's instructions. While students' silence may be interpreted as respect for the teacher, Endo (2010) has attributed immigrant students' silence in the classroom to immigrant students feeling a sense of alienation from the learning experience because the teacher often avoided asking them questions. This avoidance, according to Endo (2010) may be attributed to the teacher's inability to comprehend the immigrant students' responses because of their accents. Wickett (1997), on the other hand, interpreted this deliberate avoidance as the teacher allowing second language students more time to process the questions.

While according to Endo (2010) silence is often construed negatively as unwillingness to interact with other participants in the classroom or a feeling of intimidation, other studies by Igoa (1995), Esmonde (2009) and Wickett (1997) suggest that silence is an important incubatory phase for some immigrant students to develop their language skills and confidence to communicate. During this phase when students seem to be "trapped in helpless silence" they begin to understand their own being in the world and develop greater listening skills in order to communicate with others and develop mainstream acculturation (Igoa, 1995, p. 38).

The interactions between two other students with their respective teachers may be attributed to their observed quiet nature and that they were, perhaps too self-conscious to communicate with the teacher while the other students were listening. According to Kirova (2001) immigrant students often exhibit self-conscious behaviour because of their inability to communicate effectively in the dominant language. However, contrary to Kaufman's (2004) study where immigrant students were too shy to ask for help from their tutors, both these students approached their teachers seeking individual help.

Immigrant students are often very realistic about what to change from their past learning patterns in order to succeed in their present new learning environment. This was evident in a Chinese student's words: *... in China I did not work hard in maths ... I spent more time learning science or Chinese ... I'm not good at English so I work harder in New Zealand*. This may be interpreted as an increase in the student's academic self-confidence that may have resulted from his "need to expend greater effort" (Bishop, 2002, p. 63) because of his perceived limited proficiency in English.

Parents of immigrant students may sometimes influence the transitional experience of their child. An interesting piece of information that one student shared when explaining why he had perceived his mum's rating to be average was that: *my mum ask her Chinese friend to post Chinese [mathematics] tests to New Zealand then I will write them*. Besides being suggestive of his mum's active involvement and her high expectations, this statement also seemed to imply that the parent felt that exposing him to Chinese mathematics would be beneficial. This may be interpreted as perhaps conservative, in her desire to hold on to the past and what she valued (Bishop, 2002; Civil, Planas & Quintos, 2005), rather than allowing her son to be exposed only to New Zealand mathematics. In this way

advancing the notion that some parents perceive their children to be cultured and learning anything of substance only if their children are engaged in learning their own language and content (Roer-Strier & Strier, 2007). In other words, they seem to want to preserve their home culture traditions that may sometimes be in conflict with their host culture (Roer-Strier & Strier, 2007). The student's perception of his mum's covert non-acceptance of New Zealand mathematics may impact on his academic self-concept.

The study affirms the findings of other studies that immigrant students face a myriad of social and cultural pressures while trying to settle into a new school environment (Ahluquist, 2001; Bishop, 2002; Huang, 2000; Perkins & Flores, 2002; Shan & Bailey, 1991); and these pressures may present obstacles to their learning. Incoherence between their past and present lived experiences may result in immigrant students residing in "the margins of two cultures" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 92) because they never truly belong to either.

Conclusion

Understanding the transitional experiences of immigrant students is fundamental for teachers purposefully attempting to provide an inclusive learning environment where learners of diverse backgrounds feel a sense of belonging. The spiral-threads-of-transition model has enhanced my awareness of the diverse worldviews that immigrant students bring into the teaching and learning environment, from their past. As a teacher, I see this diversity not as a problem to be fixed, but as a fundamental potentiality of the present classroom learning environment.

My study has made me more mindful of how my own presence, background and culture may influence the teaching and learning environment. Therefore, as the researcher I acknowledge that, while my interpretations of the lived classroom experiences from the immigrant students' perspectives provided an insight into their transition in their new environment, these understandings have been influenced by the lifeworlds inhabited by the ten students and by myself at the time.

Finally, as suggested by the spiral-thread-of-transition model these amorphous past, present and future lived experiences determine how immigrant students negotiate their place in the classroom.

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