

Innovating in the Margins of Teacher Education: Developing a Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Teachers

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss our recent and current efforts to offer an innovative form of ongoing teacher education designed explicitly for Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs), which might be considered a type of in-service teacher education. We share some of the observations of IETs who have completed the Faculty of Education's Bridging Program at the University of Alberta as well as our own experiences. Aspects of the program's curriculum are described such as its framework including the organization of a bridging seminar and field experiences/practicum. To provide context, we review relevant policies and the limited but valuable research from other Canadian bridging programs for IETs. We conclude with a discussion of the most significant changes we have made to practices at the University of Alberta and address the issue of sustainability.

Keywords: Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs); immigrant teachers; foreign-trained teachers; recertification; bridging programs for international teachers; teacher education; professional education; in-service teacher education for international teachers.



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An article published by *University Affairs* (Gordon, October 5, 2016) reported that occupational underemployment is a significant problem for immigrants and said that four years after their arrival in Canada, the majority of immigrants still work in jobs that are not commensurate with either their education or the jobs they had in their homeland. Further, Gordon (2016) stated that several Canadian universities have developed bridging programs to help foreign-trained professionals overcome barriers to accreditation and integrate successfully into Canadian society. The programs not only upgrade their academic qualifications but also expose them to how their profession is practised in Canada. Our program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta (U of A) was one of four programs reviewed by *University Affairs*.

Early in this work, it became apparent to us that information and procedures regarding such bridging programs are often difficult for anyone (including us as experienced researchers and teacher educators) to locate, let alone for teachers who are new to Canada. Likewise, the challenges related to credential assessment and academic upgrading in provincial and university institutional settings can be difficult to navigate and, at times, overwhelming. As researchers, teacher educators, and citizens, we believe that it is unethical for Canada to welcome newcomer professionals, knowing there are considerable—often insurmountable—challenges involved in seeking and obtaining the credentials needed to practise their professions in their new homeland. The challenges for newcomers to Canada are significant and highly complex. However, we also know that there are social, cultural, and economic benefits to having as many newcomers practise their professions as soon as possible. And, it is critical that Canadian professions increase the diversity of their membership in order to better reflect Canadian society. We believe, then, that places of higher education need to be as accessible and facilitative as possible for newcomers with professional backgrounds who are seeking Canadian credentials.

In September 2013, the Faculty of Education at the U of A launched an initiative, a pilot cohort in the Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs) Bridging Project (now called a program), which was our Faculty's first attempt to address systematically the needs of IETs—who are immigrants who arrived in Canada as qualified and experienced teachers from another country and are seeking certification in Alberta. We sought to combine facilitation and support for the IETs, individually and as a cohort, with their integration as part of the regular Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program. As a companion goal, we hoped to improve our overall student services processes for working with IETs. To achieve these goals, we worked as collaboratively as possible with various units and individuals within the University. As a way to obtain feedback to continue to improve and refine the program, we engaged in a research project involving the authors of this article and volunteer IETs who had completed the Bridging Program at the U of A.

The purpose of this article is to discuss our recent and current efforts to offer a unique form of ongoing teacher education designed explicitly for IETs, what might be considered a type of continuing professional education. We describe our Bridging Program, with a focus on curriculum, including framework, course development, and the organization of field experiences/practicum. While the primary purpose of this article is to discuss the development of an innovation in teacher education, we include some experiences and views of the IETs who have participated in the Bridging Program. The quotations included in this article are excerpts from interviews with IETs who had completed the program. These IETs chose to be a part of a research study intended to

gather information about IETs' careers as teachers before coming to Canada and their experiences in locating and participating in the Bridging Program. We begin by setting a context for this article by reviewing the limited but valuable research from other Canadian bridging programs in teacher education as well as relevant policies.

Overview of Existing Research

We delimited our review of existing research and literature to Canadian research that is specific to IETs. The literature specific to IET programs is quite recent. Generally speaking, we found that while helpful, the literature related to IETs in Canada is relatively small. An article providing a literature review of immigrant teachers' integration into school systems supports this claim. Those authors found their "review of literature showed very few studies on immigrant teachers' professional integration" (Niyubahwe, Mukamurera, & Jutras, 2013, p. 282).

We used the search term *Internationally Educated Teachers* or *IETs* as it became evident that this was the main term being used in the more recent scholarship. However, we were aware this is not the only term used in the literature and therefore this delimitation may have excluded scholarly works using other terms. We were not convinced that scholars or practitioners in teacher education and, more importantly, IETs themselves would necessarily use this term in searching for literature and programs. For example, this is not necessarily a term used in government policy and practice related documents. In Alberta, the term *Foreign-Trained Teachers* is used rather than IETs. As well, while we appreciated scholars' decisions about terminology, we worried that some of the names and titles attached to programs might hinder rather than facilitate searches for relevant programs and information. In other words, as experienced researchers we found it a challenge to ferret out information about existing bridging programs and/or research related to them. Surely then, teachers who are new to teaching in Canada and to resources for ongoing teacher education would also find this an obstacle. Here, we remind readers of the point made in our introduction about the challenge of searching for, and locating, bridging programs and we note how problematic that is, as we think about accessibility.

Nested within the broader Canadian scholarly literature relating to the lives and careers of "racial minority immigrant teachers," (Thiessen, Bascia, & Goodson, 1996) is a subset of research literature that reports on the experiences of IETs. The reported studies (eg. Beynon, Ilieva, & Dichupa, 2004; Block, 2012; Cho, 2010; El Bouhali, 2019; Faez, 2010; Marom, 2017; Mawhinney & Xu, 1997; Myles, Cheng, & Wang, 2006; Phillion, 2003; Schmidt, 2010; Walsh, Brigham, & Wang, 2011; Zhao, 2012,) covered aspects of IETs' experiences during the process of seeking teacher certification and employment in Canada. We situated our article within this scholarly literature, which documents a variety of barriers and challenges that some, if not most, IETs have faced. Many of the above authors documented issues around English language proficiency, work-life balance, and financial need in the context of systemic obstacles such as subtle and overt racism and the effects of neo-liberalism. We knew from interactions with the IETs who participated in our program that they have faced similar issues, with individual variations, sometimes voicing their anger and frustration to us. Certain Canadian researchers (eg. Beynon et al., 2004; Block, 2012; Cho, 2010) have also referred to IETs' roles as active agents who draw on a range of personal and cultural resources in order to address these daunting challenges and, in the process, to reflect on their own evolving sense of professional identity as teachers. Our research builds on those sources, exploring with IETs their own agency and "resiliencies" (Walsh, Brigham, & Wang, 2011, p. 663) as they navigated these new worlds. Mayer, Luke, and Luke (2008) envision, "the

making of a world teacher who can teach in and about the complex dynamic socio-demographic and industrial conditions, knowledge, and technological relations” (p. 89).

From our review of research and literature in the Canadian context, it appears that other than our own emerging scholarship on IETs, Marom (2017) and more recently, El Bouhali (2019) provided the most recent Canadian research on IETs. Marom (2017) drew on the literature we reviewed elsewhere for presentations to the Canadian Society for the Study of Education and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, paying particular attention to structural boundaries IETs face when engaging what she refers to as the “recertification” process. Like much of the other work we have reviewed that is situated in other provinces, Marom used a social justice/critical theory lens to describe issues, barriers, and challenges faced for IETs in British Columbia. Marom’s work followed and extended earlier work in this tradition. However, Marom did not interview IETs and instead used policy documents to illustrate what is known about challenges and issues faced by IETs.

Based on her analysis of structural barriers in the IETs’ recertification process in the province of British Columbia, Marom (2017) suggested that many of the barriers that the IETs face are at the intersection of multiple institutional spaces. She also noted that the institutional barriers for IETs are rooted in the misperception of difference as deficiency. Since most IETs are new immigrants coming from non-Western societies, their language and cultural differences are often perceived as knowledge deficiency by Canadian institutions, both schools and universities. Similarly, Walsh (2008) noted that IETs encountered discourses that IETs are “not good enough English speakers” (p. 402) to teach in Canadian schools. Further, Cho’s (2010) analysis revealed that IETs’ cultural wealth and their ability to speak multiple languages are not always valued as an asset but instead “accent” is perceived as deficiency in terms of teaching qualifications. The IETs in our program experienced similar attitudes and misperceptions. In the process of becoming Canadian teachers, the IETs had to break down barriers and constantly make “adjustment[s]” to meet host institution norms (Marginson, 2014) in order to re-form their ongoing professional identities. Similarly, Deters (2015) found that IETs “through their persistence and agency, were able to overcome constraints” (p. 417). Finally, El Bouhali (2019) sought “to understand the meanings that IETs in Alberta give to their experiences of being certified teachers in Alberta and critically interpreted relevant policies of teacher certification and employment” (p. 2).

The extant literature noted here focused almost exclusively on barriers and critical interpretations of notions of systemic discrimination. However, the teachers in our research blended a stronger sense of personal agency and supportive sources with their acknowledgement of systemic barriers. And, although the literature included many references to challenges, there is little detailed documentation of IETs’ perspectives on the (material, human, financial) resources that they drew on in order to move through this process to recertification and employment in Canada. Our work adds a different perspective to the current literature and research concerned with IETs in Canada.

Finally, in reviewing the literature, we came across the work of Simon Marginson (2014) and were drawn to his concept of “student self-formation” as a way to think conceptually about our work with IETs. Marginson (2014) described “higher education, and within that international education, as a process of self-formation within conditions of disequilibrium in which students manage their lives reflexively, fashioning their own changing identities” (p. 6). Marginson’s work

highlighted the need for international education to strengthen the agency freedom of students, to facilitate the educational process of self-formation.

Provincial and National Policy Directions

A number of policies and policy directions offered a substantial foundation and support for the work we are doing with IETs. For instance, “Canada’s immigration policies have increasingly focused on attracting highly skilled and well-educated immigrants. Unfortunately, despite high levels of education, 46% of immigrants reported that finding adequate employment is the greatest difficulty they encounter after immigrating” (Government of Alberta, 2012, p. 15). In Alberta, there are policy statements within both the Advanced Education (the department concerned with postsecondary programs) and Alberta Education (the department responsible for teacher certification among other things). In 2007, Advanced Education and Technology (now Advanced Education), launched *Roles and Mandates: Policy Framework for Alberta’s Publicly Funded Advanced Education System*. In addition to being highly relevant to our Bridging Program, we viewed that document as historic in that it was the Province’s first attempt to coordinate and clarify what Alberta’s postsecondary institutions were responsible for, or who does what. This was significant, given that the Provincial Government is one of the main sources of funding for the Bridging Program.

Specific to our Program, the International Education section in Advanced Education and Technology’s (2007)’s *Roles and Mandates*, offers the following nearly perfect alignment with the U of A Bridging Program: “It is important to ensure that Advanced Education providers are offering adequate supports and are responding to the needs of a growing immigrant population” (p. 15). Even more relevant for our work, Advanced Education and Technology (AET) (2007) states:

In tandem with other efforts intended to encourage the recognition and accreditation of overseas credentials, (the Government of Alberta) encourages postsecondary institutions to design and deliver programs specifically intended to adapt foreign credentials, either by programs delivered on campuses or, where appropriate, through programs delivered in co-learning and internship programs. (p. 15)

Additionally, there are policies and policy directions from Alberta Education that offer further support to our work. In *Campus Alberta Planning Framework* (AET, 2010), clear direction is provided to teacher education programs: “There is a need to maintain flexibility and responsiveness to a changing social, demographic context in Alberta to maintain the levels of access and quality Albertans have come to expect” (p. ii). In Alberta, immigration trends are similar to Canadian trends: “Recent figures indicate that immigration will be the main source of population growth in Alberta” (Government of Alberta, 2012, p. 15). With regards to key policy directions, AET (2010) states, “It is important to strengthen strategies to support increased participation of learners traditionally under-represented in Alberta’s higher education system” (p. iv). Finally, the work of a Government of Alberta committee aimed at exploring teacher workforce needs states as its vision that, in partnership with its stakeholders, the Government of Alberta will develop strategies, policies, and actions to build the capacity of the education sector to help Albertans reach their full potential. Specifically the Government of Alberta (2008) committee stated the need for bridging programs for teachers who hold teaching certificates from countries outside of Canada: “In 2008, a number of key initiatives were completed...bridging foreign-

prepared teachers to certification and employment was designed to provide foreign-prepared teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in Alberta Schools” (p. 1). In sum, at a provincial level, there is explicit policy support for the work we are doing with IETs. Developing the program for IETs is a timely and critical innovation at both policy and practice levels.

The Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) has set some pertinent policy directions at the national level. The Association, which hosts more than 60 deans of education in postsecondary institutions in Canada, has made considerable efforts to provide directions to teacher education about what they collectively deem important, resulting in a set of useful documents referred to as *Accords*. The Association of Canadian Deans of Education’s “Accord on Initial Teacher Education” (2006/2016) and the “Accord on International Education” (ACDE, 2014/2016) have provided further foundational support for our Bridging Program. The Accords describe Canadian society as increasingly diverse: “Canadian teachers must be equipped to prepare all students for their roles in this diverse world” (ACDE, 2006/2016, p. 1). The same Accord describes “an effective teacher education program [as one that] promotes diversity, inclusion, understanding, and social responsibility with local, national, and global communities” (ACDE, 2006/2016, p. 4). To varying degrees, the entire *Accord on International Education* applied, and provided solid support, to our work. One such support is the following statement:

Transnational knowledge should be seen as a social, cultural, and institutional asset that enriches the educational experiences of all students rather than providing a barrier to learning in host institutions. This Accord promotes intercultural awareness ...equity to education and that incoming international students should be fully supported to navigate local organizational, linguistic, academic, and cultural systems, norms, and practices. (pp. 6–7)

Similarly, Mayer, Luke, and Luke (2008) argue:

What is needed is nothing short of the re-visioning of a transcultural and cosmopolitan teacher: a teacher with the capacity to shunt between the local and the global. What is needed is a new community of teachers that could and would work across national and regional boundaries. (pp. 80–81)

Original Research Project: Design and Data Sources

While the purpose of this article is to describe what we view to be an innovative program in teacher education, the content for this article and the IET statements we use, emanate from a research project we undertook as a part of the Bridging Project. The purpose of that research was to explore and document IETs’ career and personal histories, with a focus on their professional experiences in the years leading to their applications for admission to the Bridging Program as well as their experiences during participation in the original project. In October 2014, we received ethics approval from the U of A to conduct that study. We used data from two phases of this research project: Phase 1 data included the journal entries written as assignments by five of the six participants in the 2013–2014 pilot cohort and two rounds of loosely structured follow up interviews with the same IETs. The first set of interviews was conducted eight months after the IETs’ completion of their programs and the second about 18 months later. Phase 2 data included subsequent interviews with additional IETs, after they completed the program. In total, our research findings were based on interviews with 18 IETs over a three-year period. The interview

and journal data were analysed using line-by-line thematic coding. While the intent of this article is not to share the findings of the study as a whole, the ideas emanating from that research along with the quotations we use in the following discussion, were a result of that research project.

Developing the Bridging Program

The Teachers in the Program

The IETs in our study showed themselves to be resilient, active agents who were drawing on a range of personal and cultural resources. They were driven by their own love of both teaching and learning to overcome, or at least to manage, daunting challenges in their quest to “qualify” as teachers in an entirely new—and not always welcoming—context. Many voiced a certain amount of resentment and frustration that their existing qualifications, skills, and experience were not considered “enough” (or closer to sufficient). An IET remarked, “I was kind of frustrated that why do I have to go for another year when I have already done so much?” However, once in the program, this teacher was able to offer the following:

But when I started and began to learn, I could make out why it was required. And I say now it is definitely important for everyone to study in this program even though they might not need the additional credits. They still should return to university and understand what teaching is all about in Canada.

Several aspects of the IETs’ lives enabled them to make the transition to, and succeed in, the Bridging Program. They drew on their already substantial life and professional experiences when addressing the multi-layered challenges of border crossing. Many of them emphasized that they benefited from a range of support and assistance offered by spouses, children, ethnic communities, and settlement agencies. Most IETs had preceding exposure to studies and to schools in Canada or North America. Almost all of them had taken some ESL studies (in Canada or in their countries of origin), and in a few cases, they had already completed some university courses, or an occupational training course in a paraprofessional field. A few had taught or were teaching in private schools. Some had been employed in childcare centres or as teachers’ aides. A number had engaged in volunteer work (in schools especially) and/or had children attending schools or universities. These experiences had provided some knowledge of local school and postsecondary contexts.

But the IETs also had complex day-to-day financial and domestic responsibilities in Canada, and sometimes abroad, adding to the various societal and institutional constraints. For example, many of the IETs, while full-time in the program, worked part- or full-time out of financial necessity; several IETs had children or elders to care for. In a few instances, IETs had to leave the program temporarily to return to their homeland to care for aging parents. Within the context of existing constraints—and sometimes in opposition to them—we tried to take these realities into account as we organized and administered our program.

The IETs’ individually differentiated “multiple identities” (Marginson, 2014, p. 6) had a bearing on their experiences within the Bridging Program and the efficacy of our various efforts to facilitate their progress. These teachers are a particular variation on the international students to whom Marginson refers, in that they are adult immigrant learners and experienced teaching professionals. Some of them have been away from academics for years. They are in many ways a self-selected group, overcoming many social, financial, and bureaucratic obstacles even to arrive

at the Bridging Program, let alone to succeed in it. They are, in effect, colleagues who are engaging reflectively in continuing professional education rather than students who are being initiated into the profession through teacher preparation.

Program Framework

IETs in our Bridging Program enroll in selected existing course offerings and a 9-week, full-time practicum (referred to as Field Experiences at the U of A) that are a part of the regular B.Ed. program, but they also participate in a weekly Bridging and Professional Growth Seminar designed exclusively for the IET cohort.

As part of our work creating the program, and for our research, we spent time seeking online program information and speaking with teacher educators and administrators about other bridging programs in Canada. As noted earlier, it was not easy to obtain information about such programs, but we gleaned it from websites and conversations as well as descriptions published in scholarly articles. While there are similarities between our program and others, we believe that there are also unique features to our program.

Unique Program Features of the Bridging Program

In this section, we expand on unique program features and include pertinent comments from the IETs themselves. We focus on three components of the program: key leadership and staff roles in support of learning experiences, the partial cohort approach (including the Bridging Seminar), and field experiences (practicum).

Leadership and Staff Roles

We strove for well-supported learning experiences for the IETs both on campus and during student teaching in schools. In a general sense, academic leaders who were committed to this Program shared information about the Bridging Program as widely as possible within our Faculty, on our campus, with Government colleagues, and with nearby school districts and community agencies involved with newcomers to Canada. At the beginning of the project, Randy was the associate dean of teacher education at the U of A. While at the initial planning meeting, a colleague warned him, “We can’t do that!” Randy immediately embraced the project knowing the challenges ahead. From the beginning, he and Beth brought the University, Government, and School District staff together to collectively plan and build a program. Randy recruited Beth, a retired colleague who shared his values, as the initial program coordinator, and they worked together throughout the developmental phase. In addition, while there were varying degrees of caution and apprehension, all people involved offered support to the initiative and provided differing levels of assistance. These early efforts were successful in that these offices still provide support to the program and provide a much better set of directions and resources to inquiring IETs. As discussed later, school boards offered support in that they freely offered their time, knowledge, and information to IETs both in the Bridging Seminar and informally when needed. Over time, staff in the Registrar’s Office as well as academic departments within the Faculty of Education showed considerable cooperation and support to the program; they now have the knowledge to direct IETs in more appropriate ways. Finally, staff involved with the credential assessment in the Government continue to offer much support to this program and direct IETs who are a good fit for the program to the appropriate office at the U of A. This direction and level of information sharing had

previously been lacking. These collective efforts consistently align with Marginson's (2014) set of recommendations to provide more and better supports to international students.

On a day-to-day level, we revised a staff member's work assignment to ensure program-coordination and student-advising resources existed that are dedicated to aspects of the IET program. The IETs whom we interviewed all spoke to the importance of having both a dedicated academic (program) advisor and a program coordinator who had many years of teaching experience in the Alberta school system. One of our academic/program advisors in undergraduate student services is now formally assigned, as a part of their regular assignment, the role of working closely with faculty, administrators, and IETs concerning admissions, course selections, and registration. This is an essential source of support in our program. IETs receive an assessment of their credentials from Alberta Education, indicating the gaps that the individual would be required to fill for certification. Using this assessment, our program advisor guides IETs' choices of regularly scheduled B.Ed. courses, where they study alongside preservice teachers in the regular B.Ed. program. In as many cases as possible, we reviewed these courses to ensure they satisfy certification requirements and to provide an appropriate fit for the Program. We felt that our work in reviewing the now long lists of course possibilities not only provided information, direction, and assistance to IETs beginning the program it also provided clarity and direction to student services staff and especially student advisors in university offices, which enhanced their expertise in dealing with IETs. Overwhelmingly, IETs drew our attention to our specialized academic/program advisor's work with them and spoke with great appreciation of their efforts. IETs spoke about how much the advisor's work contributed to their success in completing the program and to their high regard for the overall program. Nearly all of the IETs remarked on how helpful and essential it is to have knowledgeable staff dedicated to the Bridging Program. Many attributed their successful completion of the program to this support. As one of the IETs said,

Catherine was amazing. She was so optimistic right from the first moment we met. When she told me I was a good fit, it made me feel so good and it was the first time I realized I have a chance at teaching again. This was the beginning of my great experience with the Program.

Likewise, we revised the work assignment of one of our faculty practicum advisors to serve as program coordinator, seminar leader, and professional mentor to the IETs in the Bridging Program. This individual brings to the program a deep understanding of the Alberta school system, the teaching profession, and a knowledge of the challenges and potentialities international learners bring to our program and to Alberta schools. The program coordinator also had an excellent set of relationships with human resource units within school districts as well as with the Government. In one of our interviews, an IET talked about the value of the experience and knowledge of the program coordinator: "Brent helped us a lot. Even with the minutiae of what happens in schools. He told us everything we needed to know. It's not something we just get out of websites."

In addition to providing day-to-day support to IETs and the undergraduate program office, the coordinator teaches the Bridging Seminar and organizes an introductory meeting in the form of an informal interview with each IET well before the application process begins. Here we ascertained not only language and academic readiness, but we also began to understand the complexity of each IET's context. Here too, the IETs we interviewed spoke highly about the program coordinator's role in their success. Among many supportive comments, an IET remarked:

Brent is awesome...he is so supportive and even today I continue to call him, regardless of what my decisions are. Even though we come from many different countries, he brings us together, like a family. He created a place we looked forward to coming to, a place where we could talk about our experiences as a group. I was blessed with good people around me.

Another IET said:

It [the seminar] is the only opportunity to actually gather together as a group and then talk about each other's struggles. Each of us has different lives and all of us have different things that we need to consider. Brent helped us a lot in this way.

We urge that teacher education programs and support agencies such as teacher certification and human resource units dedicate specific resources to supporting internationally educated professionals. As Marginson (2014) stressed there is a need in higher education "to enhance resources facilitating agency" (p. 18).

The Partial Cohort Approach

The IETs are organized each year as a partial cohort. We believe that IETs need to take courses alongside preservice teachers in regular B.Ed. coursework. This fulfills a need in higher education for beginning teachers from different parts of the world to learn from each other. As noted above, IETs are advised to register in carefully and purposefully selected courses that are a part of the regular B.Ed. Program. These courses provide the content required for an Alberta teaching certificate and an academically rigorous experience for IETs. Our standard was that IETs would meet or exceed the expectations the University of Alberta has for its beginning teachers. Most IETs have met, and in some cases exceeded, this expectation. In addition, by doing coursework in the regular program, the IETs have official university transcripts as a permanent record of their success.

The Bridging Seminar

We also believe and have learned that a key strength of the Program is the Bridging and Professional Growth seminar. Led by the Bridging Program Coordinator (whose role we introduced above), this weekly gathering was dedicated exclusively to the IETs. The seminar was the only course that was separate from the regular Bachelor of Education program, intended to offer what we refer to as a *safe space* somewhat analogous to a *homeroom* within a large Faculty. When including this seminar as an element of the Program, Randy drew on years he had spent working alongside beginning teachers in two Canadian aboriginal teacher education programs. He had learned how important it is for marginalized beginning teachers to work together in a cohort, one of the key sources of support and catalysts for program completion.

Beth designed the seminar to provide the IETs with opportunities to process, interrogate, and integrate what they were experiencing during the program as a whole. In the seminar, IETs came together to compare notes, share experiences and questions, discuss selected research articles, write personal reflections, and interact with guest speakers. They also participated in, and then debriefed, their structured school visits. For example, IETs could consider, grapple with, and make sense of the largely Western, Eurocentric materials, ideas, and pedagogical approaches that were presented to them in the on-campus course work and field experiences. These sessions also had the effect of decreasing trepidation, and offered reassurance and support as the program

proceeded. As well, the coordinator of the program, an experienced teacher educator who facilitated these activities, found that the seminar sessions were an invaluable source of information about the needs and wants of IETs. And, there are celebrations! When asked about the seminar, an IET remarked “Getting together to celebrate our achievement and success means a lot to me.”

The readings for the seminar were usually on the topic of IET research and other transition programs, mainly in Canada. Some of these readings also helped to prepare the IETs for issues that they might encounter during their teaching practicum and when seeking employment as teachers. As well as providing information about others’ experiences, they provoked discussion and reflection about the participants’ own experiences and prospects. As one IET commented during an interview, “[The seminar] motivates and inspires me to work hard and tells me that I am not alone.” We invited guests into the seminar to address topics such as technology in today’s classrooms, preparing for the upcoming practicum, and the process of applying for teaching positions. The teachers made direct personal contact with these guests and felt the advice they received facilitated the transition to their practicums, and even to teaching employment in some cases.

As their central ongoing assignment for the seminar, IETs wrote a series of reflections on suggested topics, including commentaries on the required readings and on their visits to different schools. The concept of reflective practice was new to many of them, and some testify that they continue to engage habitually in reflective practice as part of their professional activities since completing the program.

The school visits organized as a part of the seminar provoked considerable discussion and reflection about the culture, organization, and teaching/learning assumptions and practices in local schools. These visits illustrated the wide variation and professional discretion between different schools. We gave much consideration to the selection of particular schools, drawing on the expertise of the Faculty’s seconded teachers who had experience in, and understanding of, the unique professional needs of IETs. As with the student advisor and program coordinator, we specifically assigned a portion of one seconded teacher’s work time to with the Bridging Program. Again, this was consistent with Marginson’s (2014) recommendation that, in higher education, specific resources should be allocated to international students.

Based on the comments of the IETs, the seminar served its intended purposes and, for many of the teachers, was a highlight of the program. One teacher remarked, “The seminar ... that’s the best. We used to look forward to our Friday class when we could discuss our experiences with each other.” Upon completing his program and securing a full-time teaching position in Edmonton, another teacher reflected: “I miss our weekly get togethers. We need a reunion of the seminar.” Another remarked:

I just miss everyone. I wish that there would be an opportunity where we could all meet again, talk about our lives right now and how much we changed. I could definitely say that my life has changed so much in the past three years. When I started in 2014, I had no direction. Because of this program, I am where I am right now. It has significantly changed my life.

This, together with their other teacher education coursework aided the IETs’ transitions to their practicums. For example, they adopted ideas from their seminar reading, such as offering to give

presentations during their practicums about their countries of origin. They also enacted linguistic and cultural bridging with parents and students from their own ethnic communities.

Field Experiences (Practicum)

IETs in the Bridging Program complete a full-time, 9-week practicum, even though in many cases, the credential assessment process requires less. As is the case with on-campus coursework, we felt it imperative that these teachers meet expectations similar to the ones for regular program preservice teachers. We also knew that schools and mentor (supervising) teachers are most familiar with a nine-week placement as this is a part of the field experience requirement for the regular B.Ed. program.

Field experience placements are highly contextual, and therefore, like the school visits during the seminar, great care and attention was given to these arrangements and, as described above, we sought the current knowledge of practicing teachers when making selections. We made explicit that we likely provided more attention and support to IETs' placements than is the case for the hundreds (2,000 annually) of other placements our University makes, knowing that IETs are more vulnerable and come to these experiences from a "less even playing field." We explain our approach in making field experience placements for IETs as guided by a principle of equity, providing more support and resources upfront. Randy has much administrative and teaching experience in the area of field experiences. He recalled from his early days of work in this area (about 20 years before the Bridging Program) his frustrations and sadness in having to work with many IETs who had managed to complete university course work but who were later asked to leave their practicum schools. Often this seemed to be related to a lack of familiarity with Canadian teaching and organization of schools and/or to "accent." These were reasons frequently cited in the literature we have reviewed.

While the IETs in the program had significant levels of anxiety and nervousness beginning their field experiences (as is the case with most beginning teachers), they also came to these experiences with an increased sense of personal agency and teacher identity. Based on our interview data, we believed the latter was attributable to several factors including their years of successful teaching experience in their homelands, personal and professional experiences with Alberta schools (as described earlier), close attention to matching IETs to particular schools, and the school visits and other components of the Bridging Seminar that served as preparation. Like students in the regular B.Ed. program, the IETs faced challenges during the field experience. However, each IET completed the field experience successfully on the first attempt.

The IETs we interviewed shared mostly positive comments about their experience in schools. Most of the IETs felt that they were treated as colleagues rather than student teachers. "I was considered a colleague rather than a beginner even though I know I had challenges. I feel this was another advantage of being in the program." The field experiences provided an opportunity for IETs to physically and emotionally face the contextual differences of teaching in Canada.

Similar to what we found in our literature review, several of the IETs spoke about their apprehension with language proficiency and accent. However, our analysis suggested that with this awareness, the IETs we interviewed described their accent as a resource rather than a deficit, as one IET expressed:

This was important for us to know and we embraced it, knowing that many of the students we were teaching had accents and came from families who learned English when they came to Canada. We feel it's okay to know another language, embrace that, and learn from other cultures.

When thinking about accent another IET admitted, “looking back at how nervous I was about my accent, maybe I was just too hard on myself about my accent. It seems they don't care, actually, because I found that Canadian students have accents too. The Canadian accent.” Another IET remarked, “When I was in my practicum, talking with children and their parents, I realized that I have a responsibility to help my whole community, to teach and to keep the language alive for all of our children.”

During the field experience, both the IETs and their students had to learn how to trust each other. An IET said, “It's natural when you are new to the school to have students behave in a different way. But I was able to find ways to get their trust.” In a similar way, another IET remarked, “I know from my previous years of teaching that the work becomes easier when students believe in me, and trust me.”

In general, the IETs reflected on their field experiences as being well supported and positive: “I am happy with the experience and had a lot of support.” In some instances, the field experience led to employment: “Prior to finishing my practicum, a school board offered me a job after an interview I had with them.” He concluded our interview saying, “I am so thankful for this opportunity to be a teacher again. This is my passion, and my vocation.” Finally, another IET reflected, “My practicum was a great experience for me. Nothing that we learned in this program was a waste of time. I have new insights into my own life, and learning is never over.”

Conclusion: Thoughts About Sustainability Amid Uncertainties

The purpose of this paper was to share our experiences in developing an innovative program for IETs who wish to teach in Alberta. We described to readers the research and policy landscape for this work, as well as what we view to be the key and unique features of the Bridging Program. We discussed the curriculum framework of the Program paying particular attention to what we see as the strengths of the Bridging Seminar, and to the support and attention we give to field experiences in the Program. In keeping with the recommendations from research (e.g., Marginson, 2014), we drew readers' attention to the changes we have made to administrative processes related to our teacher education program. While the purpose of this article was to share what we learned as we developed the Bridging Program, we supported the discussion with insights and experiences we documented through our continuing research project.

Yet despite the need as revealed through the literature, policy, and our own experiences as teacher educators, we find ourselves left with a sense of uncertainty about the future of the Bridging Program at the U of A. We have shifting Government priorities with our recent change in Government. Within our institution, our Faculty's International Office—which had recently become home to the Bridging Program—was closed, and its functions were moved to an administrative office. Ongoing financial challenges in our University have resulted in the elimination of the program coordinator role. Like much in higher education today, working in the margins of teacher education means working amidst much uncertainty.

However, such realities do not dampen our passion, research, and commitment to the Bridging Program. The stories of the IETs fuel our passion. Drawing on one of those IET stories seems the best way to conclude this article:

The IET Program has been life changing. I escaped [from my homeland] as a refugee. When I was in a refugee camp, I realized many of the people had no education so as a teacher I started to teach them to read. Since arriving to Canada, I've had to work in a variety of jobs including loading and unloading trucks in order to support my family. Now I have finished this program, I have returned to my dream, my hope, and have found my confidence again.

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