Educator Identity Development on The Trans-cultural Journeys

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Abstract

We are three emerging educators, from the East to the West, reflecting on our lived experiences in Asian educational contexts and shaping our identities through a connection between the motherlands and the places we immigrated to. Our educator identities have been grounded on the social inequities we experienced in Asian education through the lens of culturally and socially Asian teachers studying in Canadian institutions. We story our lived experiences by using photo-voice research method to elicit our East-to-West transcultural journeys. After elaborating on our stories, we have found that our identities enable us to shed light on the influences of the Three Teachings or Religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism across Asia on teachers' mindset which causes inequities to the marginalized. Significantly, drawing on our experiences, we attempt to discuss how we reform the educator identities within us in a Canadian education context where equity, diversity, and inclusion are crucially acknowledged.

1. Introduction

Sharing the East-to-West journeys with one another, we believe there are the reciprocal relationships between a landscape and its dwellers. Our stories support and broaden the definition of landscape identity as a social and personal construction (Haartsen et al., 2000) [1]. A collage of our lived experiences through photos creates a mosaic, highlighting the inequities towards the marginalized populations caused by the impact of the Three Teachings/Religions principles in Asia and an enlightenment in our perspectives of social justice in North American education. We finally have recognized the reform of self within each of us under the influence of changing the social contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Landscape and Individual Identity

Stobbelaar and Pedroli (2011) [2] defined landscape identity "as the perceived uniqueness of a place" (p. 322) and clarified a constant interaction between people and landscape.

The identity of the inhabitants and the identity of the land where people dwell are interdependent on one another. The construction of self within people stems from interaction with the surroundings, such as social and cultural norms, religion, ethnicity, and gender (Paasi, 2002) [3].

Importantly, the social identity of people may change under the influence of changing contexts (Palang et al., 2007) [4]. We, as the immigrants from three Asian countries: Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea to Canada, brought many common values and beliefs of the East to exercise in the West by examining the unfamiliar social and educational phenomena. From the perspectives of young educators, we have defined these unfamiliarities as the conflict of the educational principles between the East and the West.

2.2. Photo-voice Research Method

If you want to know how people feel, what they experience and what they remember, what their emotions and motives are like, and reasons for acting like they do, why not ask them?

-G.W. Allport

Wang and Burris (1994) [5] coined photo-voice as a qualitative research method that explores the inner world of people who are leading different lives through photographs. This is known as a creative art form to help researchers listen to the "voice" recorded within the photos that are captured by the participants (Leavy, 2017) [6]. Photo-voice is an effective approach that allows researchers to live in the lives of the participants. This is an eye-opening experience in doing qualitative research because researchers can contrast with many different viewpoints layered in society.

3. Inequities in Asian Education

We each use the first person "I" to re-tell our stories in three different Asian countries: Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea. Conceiving the singular perceptions of time and space allows us to explore the land in different ways (Springgay, Irwin, and Kind, 2008) [7]. We embed the analysis of the impact of Three Teachings/Religions principles in Asia: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism within our shared stories.

3.1. The Marginalized Voices in Vietnamese Education: Nguyen's Story

Mother, no one likes me
Why don't they like you?
Mother, because I don't look like any of them
What makes you look different?
Mother, my body is fleshy and spiny
I am rugged and colorless
Do you want beauty for beloved?
Mother, I am afraid of loneliness
Why are you afraid of such?
Mother, I am not strong
My little succulent plant
You are strong to turn harshness into beauty
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder
Mother's holding you in the arms of the Earth.

This poem, entitled *Spinules*, is a dialogue between a mother personifying the Earth and a child personifying a succulent plant. By using a personification technique, I describe my lived experiences of a gay student and teacher in Vietnam. I was bullied by friends and teachers at schools, beaten by my parents at home, and offended by my colleagues at the workplace where I served as a teacher. Under the influences of Confucian Heritage Culture, Vietnamese Buddhism concepts, and the philosophical Taoism, having a non-conforming sexual identity is unaccepted and perceived as an indication of karma (Vuong et al., 2018) [8]. Institutionalized discrimination also happened to one of my ethnic minority fellows when she was rejected to become a teacher in the Vietnamese public schools where Kinh is the population majority and is the main medium of instruction. Another witnessed experience of dsicrimination is a female teacher's work contract was terminated because she got pregnant and would be on maternity leave in a year and noone would be able to take over her work at school. Due to the prevalence of the three teaching concepts in Vietnam, especially the Vietnamization of Confucianism, the role of women is often associated with devotion to the husband and their livelihood as a housewife. Additionally, the Vietnamese Taoism associates ethnic minorities with shamanistic and ritualistic nature which makes them underestimated in academia (Vuong et al., 2018) [8]. Therefore, my teacher identity has been constructed as a survival of the social and cultural norms which encompass my lived experiences of the oppressed.

3.2. A Seed of Art within A Teacher and Taiwanese Children with Poverty: Hsiao's Sharing

Figure 1. "Girl before a mirror" in the eye of the disadvantaged children

I was an educational assistant at a class of special needs children born in low-income families in Taiwan. Many of them did not attain formal education and were forced to quit schooling for working on the farm with their parents. I learned that the school leaders attempted to adapt Buddhist teaching philosophies and inspired teachers to have compassion for children whom we were teaching. It was sad as knowing that these children's parents lost faith in the purpose of education; accordingly, they stripped away their offspring's rights to education (Gates, 2005). I came to a small school located in an under-developed area of Taiwan with hope to bring the poor children back to classes and motivate them to learn through art-works. This collaborative Picasso artwork was created by eight children with learning and financial difficulties in a grade 5 class (Fig. 1). The piece was divided into eight sections as each created their parts before all the pieces are combined into one. Each student demonstrated their unique approach of line and texture into the artwork. My experience of teaching art to these students enabled me to understand how art-informed educational techniques can contribute to the social justice advocacy for the oppressed learners in an Asian context where Buddhism, one of the Three Teaching Philosophies, remains its profound impact on the social values and norms.

3.3. The invisibility of Special Needs Children in South Korea: Heo's Lived Experience

My first perspective of the vulnerable groups in Korea was constituted when I was in grade 7 and I met a classmate having an intellectual disability. I and others, including teachers in my class did not have much experience with this girl during high school because we chose to make her invisible in our classroom. In South Korea, there is a stigma associated with people with disabilities and this stigma answers why they should be institutionalized discriminated. Part of this stigma derived from the Buddhist belief that people are born a certain way as a result of something they did in their previous lives (Chen, Jo, & Donnell, 2004) [9]. This concept of karma has laid the foundation of Korean ideology, mine included, to decide to exclude people with physical, mental, and intellectual difficulties.

4. East-to-West Journeys: From Asian to Canadian Education Contexts

When we all met in a Canadian institutin and shared our lived and witnessed experiences of inequities in Asian education in addition to a reflection on the knowledge we have acquired in the West, we realized our educator identities have changed.

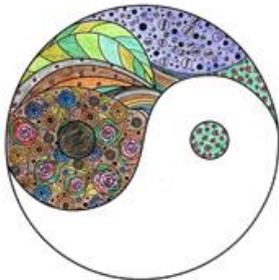### 4.1. Nguyen with Tai-Chi Concept

Figure 2. A personalized Tai-Chi image of "East-meets-West"

I express my educator identity by personalizing a Tai-Chi symbol in Taoism (Fig. 2). It demonstrates a self-in-cohabitation of two different philosophies as two contrary entities, yin and yang. Yin and yang, representing the East and West in harmony to form my identity as a wholeness, give rise to each other and interplay to one another (Taylor & Choi, 2005) [10]. During my studies in a Canadian institution, I can encounter my history of exclusion and sexual discrimination and identify myself as an advocate for social justice for the vulnerable communities in society.

4.2. Hsiao's Mindset

Throughout my journey from Taiwan to Canada, I have learned to embrace multiculturalism by recognizing the radical diversity among the Canadian culture. The Buddhist approach in teaching allows one to engage in transformative learning that involves " a transformation brought about by openness, vulnerability and compassion" (Gates, 2005, p.160) [11]. Within this context, my East-to-West experience had allowed me to understand my vulnerability as ethnic-minority learning in Western education. Nevertheless, by acknowledging the roots of my culture, I learned to become open to contributing my experience to my teaching and learning while developing empathy for people who share similar difficulties. I can form my teacher identity as an art educator with a belief in art-based approaches to inspire individuals with learning challenges.

4.3. Heo's Transformed Belief Identity

Figure 3. Every child is an artist

My epistemology has been changed when I have had experiences in the early childhood education in both the South Korea and Canada. Moving to Canada, I have enriched my educational experiences by starting to work with children aged 3-5 years old, as an early childhood educator, at a daycare centre. Five out of twenty children in my class need special educational assistants, and I am an early childhood educator who collaborate with the support workers to help those children. We have a creative art program from a Reggio Emilia approach as well as the outdoor learning activities. The photo above indicates my teaching philosophy that all children deserve the right to be included in their classes with a variety of learning support from teachers (Fig. 3).

4.4. Gathering in The West

After sharing each other's lived experiences, we have recognized the commonalities as the research findings when we analyzed our stories by breaking them into themes. This thematic analysis is to

collapse the information into themes which offer the researchers an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2015) [12]. In this empirical paper, themes representing the findings include the Three Teachings' effects over Asia and self-enlightenment about diversity, inclusion, and equity when in the West. It is important to emphasize that although we each have different lived experiences, we all have come to the same point of self-construction as we have gathered in Canada.

5. Conclusion

We conclude our paper by highlighting an interdependence of the lands and the inhabitants on one another in framing the identity of both the landscape and the dwellers. Through our lived experiences from the East to the West, we argue that not only does landscape identity change under the impact of changing contexts but also people's social identity re-shapes due to the social location changes. Identity is not a static entity for neither the landscape nor the inhabitants. The construction of the self can be reconstructed as an individual moves to a new place. Importantly, in our stories of experiencing or witnessing the inequities in different Asian education contexts, we have identified many similarities regarding the impact of three teaching ideologies: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. These concepts rather than religions cause discrimiation against the marginalized groups such as the LGBT communities, women in the workplace, and the ethnic minorities. Last but not least, the most significant finding in our study is how the educators with the lived or witnessed experienced of inequities in their original educational contexts can internalize themselves with the critical social justice principles: diversity, equity, and inclusion, in a new place through their transcultural journeys.

6. References

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