

LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP:

Re-Framing Settlement Challenges and Opportunities in Chilliwack, B.C.



Submitted to: Chilliwack Community Services

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Services**

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INTRODUCTION

Building on the work undertaken through the Welcoming Communities Action Plan, this project explored key challenges and opportunities experienced by immigrants as they settle in their communities. The research captured in the previous report entitled, “Welcoming Communities Program Community Partnership: Framing Welcoming within a Local Context”¹ highlighted the views of service providers working with these client groups and laid the foundation for some of the work undertaken through the newly established Local Immigrant Partnership (LIP). The recommendations made in that report informed the four key objectives in Chilliwack’s Local Settlement Strategy:

- Maximize the functioning of the Local Immigrant Partnership through an increased awareness of immigrant services in all sectors of the community;
- Establish sustainable linkages with broader community initiatives to raise the profile of immigrant issues and reflect the intersectionality of these issues;
- Develop a media and social media strategy focused on educating the general public, informing clients, and engaging service providers in information sharing;
- Establish a service networking plan to include annual or semi-annual workshops for the purpose of information-sharing. Explore the capacity of this group through partnerships, to develop professional development opportunities in relation to those events.

These objectives continue to guide the work of the LIP and contextualized the conversations with participants undertaken in this project and the subsequent analysis and framing of those contributions.

According to the 2011 census there were 11,440 immigrants residing in Chilliwack, representing 12.7% of the population. Interestingly, since 1986 the proportion of the population represented by immigrants has declined from 18.1% to the current 12.7%. While immigrant settlement in Chilliwack is well below the provincial average of 27.6%, there continue to be important issues faced by immigrants residing in the Chilliwack community.²

¹ A report prepared by Dr. Martha Dow.

² http://www.welcomebc.ca/welcome_bc/media/Media-Gallery/docs/immigration/2006/Chilliwack.pdf

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The results of this project will inform the Local Settlement Strategy for Chilliwack, as a fluid, grounded, and responsive instrument for planning and service delivery.

METHOD

The focus of this study was to build on the contributions made by service providers in the Welcoming Communities project by accessing the voices of immigrants themselves. Six focus groups and two interviews, representing a total of 45 participants, were conducted. Participants were accessed through ESL classes, community leisure programs, community-based social gatherings, and purposeful invitations through service delivery agents and community partners. The participants had migrated from over 15 different countries and had been residing in Canada between three months and 16 years.³

The recruitment strategy was developed in consultation with the LIP committee and staff at Chilliwack Community Services. The sampling strategy was not meant to facilitate generalizability; however, based on the results, the experiences of these individuals and the consequent lessons learned are transferable and consistent with the literature. During the focus groups notes were taken and subsequently analyzed using a thematic approach grounded in a model of qualitative data coding.⁴ In order to maintain the assurances provided to the participants with respect to anonymity, the researcher elected not to use pseudonyms in order to further protect against any possible attribution of quotes. All of the quotes from participants included in the report are indicated by the designation of “participant” and are used as indicative of more general themes.

DISCUSSION

While there were a variety of issues discussed by the participants, the comments made overwhelmingly centered on economic participation in their community. Issues associated with the relationship between social isolation and language and health barriers were raised; however, they were consistently framed within an economic context. The literature highlights that there is a “devaluation of [immigrant] prior learning and work experience after

³ All of the participants were over 18 years of age. Seven of the participants were male and 38 were female.

⁴ Strauss, A. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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immigrating to Canada, resulting in unemployment and underemployment, poor economic performance, and downward social mobility, which adversely hindered their integration process”.⁵ As participants discussed the challenges in various sectors of their lives, a sense of economic marginalization persistently grounded their stories.

Canada, like other countries around the world, has become increasingly reliant on immigrants to bolster its population growth and address critical economic demands that would otherwise be unmet. In fact, “immigration could account for virtually all labour force growth in the coming years”.⁶ This reality coupled with evidence indicating that newcomers are facing formidable obstacles to full and meaningful participation in the labour force continues to be a critical challenge for local, provincial and federal organizations and agencies. It is this “underutilization of the skills of Canada’s immigrants --- ‘brain waste’”⁷ that is the critical thread of this project representing the most consistent and pressing issue raised by participants.

This report uses Guo’s “triple glass effect”⁸ to discuss these economic disadvantages within a systemic analysis. Guo’s fundamental argument is that “immigrant professionals potentially face three layers of glass in their integration process”⁹ that may come together to create *the triple glass effect*. These three aspects are the *glass gate*, the *glass door*, and the *glass ceiling*.

“The Glass Gate”

The literature presents a juxtaposition of two arguments: 1) that credential recognition systems are essential as employers assess skillsets of potential employees, or 2) that “the devaluation and denigration of the past education and experiences of these professionals, and the manner in which immigrant professionals are always positioned in need of retraining, are modern forms of exclusion in Canadian society”.¹⁰ The process of credential recognition was consistently cited by participants as a critical barrier in their efforts to become gainfully and meaningfully

⁵ Guo, Shibao. 2013. *Economic integration of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada’s second-tier cities: The Triple Glass Effect and immigrants’ downward social mobility*. CES 45(3):111.

⁶ Campolieti, Michele, Morley Gunderson, Olga Timofeeva & Evguenia Tsirounitchenko. 2013. “Immigrant Assimilation, Has the tide turned?” *Journal of Labor Research* 34:456.

⁷ Reitz, Jeffrey, Josh Curtis & Jennifer Elrick. 2014. “Immigrant skill utilization: Trends and policy issues.” *International Migration & Integration* 15: 1-26.

⁸ Guo, Shibao. 2013. “Economic integration of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada’s second-tier cities: The Triple Glass Effect and immigrants’ downward social mobility”. CES 45(3):112.

⁹ Guo, Shibao. 2013. *Economic integration of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada’s second-tier cities: The Triple Glass Effect and immigrants’ downward social mobility*. CES 45(3):112.

¹⁰ George, Usha & Ferzana Chaze. 2012. “Credential assessment of international trained professionals: How effective is the process for the purpose of securing employment.” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 10: 125.

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employed. Many immigrants experience “significant difficulty finding employment in line with their qualifications and experience due to a disregard and devaluing of their experience and credentials”.¹¹

Attaining professional memberships and the credentialing required to access regulated professions is *the glass gate*. The participants reinforced the assertion that “it seems clear that immigrant professionals hit a *glass gate* which denies them access to the guarded professional communities because their knowledge and experiences are deemed different, deficient, and hence need to be devalued”.¹²

Participants referred to their experiences with this gatekeeping function in a variety of ways but the consistent threads were woven into stories of frustration and invisibility in their encounters with these barriers:

“We’re good enough to let in but then our credentials aren’t good enough to get a job.”
(Participant)

“We are professionals in our countries, but not qualified here.” (Participant)

“You tell us we have enough to come but then there’s nothing for us here.”
(Participant)

“I’m feeling like I’m starting from zero.” (Participant)

“It was a shock not to be working, not to be busy.” (Participant)

One of the most critical consequences of not having their credentials recognized is that many immigrants are working in *survivor-type* jobs as they are not able to find any other employment. This is important as those who enter the workforce at this level are not able to make up the lost ground and experience a significantly more economic and social disadvantage than their counterparts who had greater success navigating the credentialing process.

¹¹ Banerjee, Rupa & Mai Phan. 2014. “Licensing requirements and occupational mobility among highly skilled new immigrants in Canada.” *Industrial Relations* 69(2):290-315.

¹² Guo, Shibao. 2013. *Economic integration of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada’s second-tier cities: The Triple Glass Effect and immigrants’ downward social mobility*. *CES* 45(3):111.

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The economic and social consequences of reduced income due to this *glass gate* are particularly significant if immigrants “feel they have been lured into Canada by an immigration policy that gives high points for education and skills but does not disclose that credentials may not be recognized”.¹³

“How am I supposed to be getting ESL, getting them to recognize my degree and feed my children? It is like we are set up to fail.” (Participant)

It has been argued that “regulatory bodies tend to disadvantage immigrant applicants by requiring the understanding of subtle social and cultural norms that newly arrived immigrants are unlikely to have.”¹⁴ Making the various credentialing processes more equitable, efficient and transparent is essential; however, it is the deleterious effects of these processes on the collective and individual immigrant psyche that is perhaps the most pressing concern. As the demand for newcomers increases and immigrant experiences continue to be characterized by downward social and economic mobility, Canada’s immigration policies will become increasingly inadequate.

“The Glass Door”

The *glass door* is the second barrier discussed by Guo and refers to challenges that are faced by immigrants in relation to securing placements in organizations that provide the greatest opportunities for the newcomer applicants.¹⁵ The three key themes related to the penetrability of this *door* were experience, language and ethnicity.

Canadian Work Experience

Participants described their experiences with the seemingly unrelenting cycle that characterizes their efforts to secure Canadian work experience.

“Experience is necessary to get a job but having a job is necessary to get the experience.” (Participant)

¹³ Campolieti, Michele, Morley Gunderson, Olga Timofeeva & Evguenia Tsiroulnitchenko. 2013. “Immigrant Assimilation, Has the tide turned?” *Journal of Labor Research* 34:456.

¹⁴ Girard, Erik & Harald Bauder. 2007. “Assimilation and exclusion of foreign trained engineers in Canada: Inside a professional regulatory organization.” *Antipode* 39(1): 35-53.

¹⁵ Guo, Shibao. 2013. “Economic integration of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada’s second-tier cities: The Triple Glass Effect and immigrants’ downward social mobility”. *CES* 45(3):95-115.

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“In my country everything is under the table but it’s like the same thing here but you call it having connections.” (Participant)

A number of the participants spoke about alternatives to paid experience as different paths to securing Canadian experience. Increasing opportunities for professional mentorship and high-level volunteer positions were seen as essential ingredients to a more meaningful response to this barrier.

Language

Immigrants with stronger English skills have a demonstrable edge in securing employment and in enhancing their integration experiences.

“I felt welcomed but I know that my English is good and that people treat me better because of that.” (Participant)

“My English made it easier for me to find out about services and even ESL.” (Participant)

Many participants had an expectation that their English was at an appropriate level but upon their arrival in Canada found it was not as functionally useful as they had anticipated. Participants talked about their language deficits in a variety of ways including the need for higher levels of English, more opportunities for writing instruction, and more varied opportunities to practice their English.

In addition to language acquisition, participants described situations in which potential employers noted difficulties they had with the individual’s accent. While understandability was generally used as the foundation for the concern, the participants felt that it had much more to do with an underlying discriminatory bias and a general resistance to the roles that newcomers might be playing in their communities.

“They tell me it’s my accent but in my country I worked in a profession that made me have lots of interaction with English-speaking people and I didn’t have a problem ... I wonder if it’s my accent or just because I’m here?” (Participant)

“My children’s teachers understand me. You understand me. I think they understand me but don’t want me to work there.” (Participant)

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In relation to the differential benefits of language instruction, “while English and French language training is beneficial for low income recent immigrants in general, host country education benefits only highly educated recent arrivals”.¹⁶

Additionally, participants talked about needing more labour-related language with one participant describing a situation in which a customer asked for a “lid” and the participant had no idea what he was requesting because she was not familiar with that word, in that context. Another participant noted:

“I don’t think people understand what it’s like ... what it’s like to have all of these new things that don’t make sense ... it’s not just the language the way people think it is.”
(Participant)

Visible Minorities

In an examination of a specific immigrant population, the issue of skin hue was highlighted in the assertion that “the racialized experience of Chinese immigrants speaks to the notion of immigrant as social construct, which uses skin colour as the basis for social marking”.¹⁷

“I am very dark ... and I have people yell things.” (Participant)

“I notice things at work ... who’s doing what jobs.” (Participant)

“We see who gets the holidays off. Or even working more --- who gets the overtime.”
(Participant)

There are various discussions of the economic and social pressures experienced by immigrants that highlight a differential impact with respect to the challenges faced by those holding foreign credentials. Those newcomers that are considered to be majority member immigrants actually experience an advantage in terms of earnings while those immigrants who are visible minorities continue to experience economic disadvantage.¹⁸

¹⁶ Kaida, Lisa. 2013. “Do host country education and language training help recent immigrants exit poverty.” *Social Science Research* 42: 726.

¹⁷ Guo, Shibao. 2013. “Economic integration of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada’s second-tier cities: The Triple Glass Effect and immigrants’ downward social mobility”. *CES* 45(3):111.

¹⁸ Li, Peter. 2008. “The role of foreign credentials and ethnic ties in immigrants’ economic performance.” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 33(2): 291-310.

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“The Glass Ceiling”

Guo’s discussion of *the glass ceiling* is instructive as participants described their experiences in various work places. Guo’s reference to this concept centres on the newcomer’s entry level experiences, their ability to navigate employer expectations, and their ability to access opportunities for mobility.

“I got a job but then never got to get a better position.” (Participant)

“I’m working in labour because there is nothing else available.” (Participant)

“I felt like I couldn’t ask for time off. Like I should feel lucky to even have this job ... this job cleaning toilets.” (Participant)

“Other people got raises ... I didn’t. I still haven’t gotten a raise.” (Participant)

Not unlike many other segments of the labour force “increasing labour market polarization implies that immigrants who cannot get high-end jobs may end up in low-paying jobs”.¹⁹ Approximately 75% of immigrants who are trained and/or credentialed in regulated fields were not working within those occupations for which they were qualified.²⁰

The long term and significant implications for these un-matched individuals and their subsequent involvement in lower paying, lower skilled jobs is profound in terms of lost ground against their non-immigrant and matched immigrant peers. In turn, these economic obstacles contribute to the levels of social well-being experienced by immigrants.

LOOKING FORWARD

Based on this discussion and the work already being undertaken to support Chilliwack’s Local Immigration Partnership, there are a number of opportunities for change that are suggested through the experiences of the participants in this project. In framing this input, in some cases

¹⁹ Campolieti, Michele, Morley Gunderson, Olga Timofeeva & Evguenia Tsiroulnitchenko. 2013. “Immigrant Assimilation, Has the tide turned?” *Journal of Labor Research* 34:457.

²⁰ Zeitsma, Danielle. 2010. “Immigrants working in regulated occupations.” *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 11(2): 13-28.

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as next steps, it is recognized that the locus of control for some of the shifts and changes suggested lay beyond the purview of Local Immigration Partnerships; however, any meaningful and localized efforts need to be understood within a more nuanced, and macro-level context.

The final section of this report discusses 1) the four areas that were identified by the LIP as their emphasis for 2014-2015, in relation to the participants' comments; and, 2) suggested steps forward for the LIP to consider based on the participants' experiences.

Chilliwack's Local Settlement Strategy: A Status Update

As evidenced by the brief status summary below, the four areas of emphasis in Chilliwack's Local Settlement Strategy continue to be critical to improving the integration experiences of newcomers.

1) Maximize the functioning of the Local Immigrant Partnership through an increased awareness of immigrant services in all sectors of the community.

The primary approach has been to develop a stronger online presence through the CCS website, Facebook and Twitter. Yet one of the key challenges associated with enhancing a social media presence is that it needs to be self-sustaining in terms of the audience both seeking and providing the content and to date this activity has remained relatively minimal. Interestingly, very few participants in this project referenced the internet as their avenue to learning about and/or making community connections. Instead, the primary mechanism for learning about services and opportunities is word of mouth.

2) Establish sustainable linkages with broader community initiatives to raise the profile of immigrant issues and reflect the intersectionality of these issues.

Raising the profile of immigrant issues is challenging in Chilliwack, perhaps in part due to the relatively low numbers of immigrants in the community. Efforts to engage with these specific needs and opportunities by bridging with more mainstream issues (e.g. aging, crime, mental health) have been marginally successful; however, there continue to be challenges in communicating and elevating the importance of the lens of immigration in relation to these broader community conversations.

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- 3) Develop a media and social media strategy focused on educating the general public, informing clients, and engaging service providers in information-sharing.**

There have been some beginning forays into a strategic media plan recognizing that a more robust three-prong approach targeting the general public, clients (current and future), and service providers is necessary. A campaign that profiles particular immigrants through the telling of their stories (i.e. *The Faces of Newcomer Connections*) has the potential to be an effective information and community education strategy. Too many events and media campaigns target those who do not need the information so there needs to be a strategic approach to planning and communicating about community events.

- 4) Establish a service networking plan to include annual or semi-annual workshops for the purpose of information-sharing. Explore the capacity of this group through partnerships, to develop professional development opportunities in relation to those events.**

These events are often poorly attended and require greater coordination and higher profile in terms of agency and local government commitment. This area of emphasis has the potential to create opportunities and broaden the audience for these exchanges to focus on current and future employment, volunteer and mentorship opportunities.

Next Steps

General Readiness

The majority of the participants expressed, with some reluctance, that if they had known, at the time of migration, all of the barriers that they would face then their choices in some cases might have been different. Others indicated that their decision to come would not have changed but their expectations would have been more measured and consequently their sense of frustration mitigated.

“There needs to be greater information available before we come --- and not just what you want us to think but really how it is.” (Participant)

“I don’t know if I would make the same choice.” (Participant)

“Canada is a very big country and we need to know about where we should settle. We need more information about that actual community that we will live in.” (Participant)

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These comments regarding preparedness need to be addressed by all levels of government as information is provided pre and post arrival.

Professional Affirmation and Employment Preparedness

There are a number of key issues that need to be considered in developing responses to the problems identified with respect to affirming and complementing foreign credentials. The cumbersome nature, real or perceived, of the credentialing process implicitly and explicitly reminds immigrants of their lesser status. There need to be more robust efforts to educate newcomers regarding the processes prior to coming to Canada and more effective programs to facilitate their movement through the system once they have arrived.

An example of a supportive approach raised by a number of participants was cultural and language-based matching in various forms of peer support and collegial relationships.

“Could there be like a buddy system ... my son had one at school and I think it’s a good idea.” (Participant)

“I wish I could talk to someone, but regularly, about how they did it.” (Participant)

“It’s like I need someone who’s done it but also someone who has the power to really help ... not just understand but help too.” (Participant)

These more localized approaches must be complemented by broader systemic responses supported by all levels of government. At the policy level, there are some who argue that “labour market outcomes for new immigrants in regulated fields may be improved through pre-migration initiatives, such as extra points given for credential recognition by regulatory bodies”.²¹ However, these types of systemic proposals need to be understood within a context of privilege that some immigrants possess, through language, country of origin and skin hue. These more privileged newcomers would only benefit further from these types of initiatives that tend to be universal responses to particular and nuanced challenges in the various social institutions that shape the culture of immigration. Therefore, there needs to be greater critical analysis of the systemically supported and too often invisible privileges. While this conversation has focused on regulated professions, it is clear that “immigrants outside of the

²¹ Banerjee, Rupa & Mai Phan. 2014. “Licensing requirements and occupational mobility among highly skilled new immigrants in Canada.” *Industrial Relations* 69(2):307.

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regulated occupations also experience considerable downward occupational mobility after migration”.²²

At a programmatic level, feedback from participants supports the findings that critical pieces of the puzzle moving forward should include “credential assessment services, regulations to ensure fair access for professional licensing, and bridge training programs to fill gaps in immigrant skills that may arise from foreign-acquired education or experience”.²³

Participants identified very clear skill enhancement needs due to little to no Canadian work experience, limited social networks, and insufficient or non-existent profession-specific language/terminology/knowledge of norms. In response, there need to be more specific and accessible service delivery options in a variety of areas including: academic and technical writing; employment-specific communication and behavioural norms; workplace culture; job-specific language; resume, job search and job interview skills; and, preparation for regulatory and licensing examinations.²⁴ As well, the participants discussed the potential for mentorship and job shadowing opportunities in supporting their entry and mobility within various job sectors.

Social Affirmation and Connectedness

It was very clear that the social, mental and physical health of new immigrants is inextricably bound to this economic marginalization. Participants talked about social networking and sense of community in a variety of ways:

“There need to be more organized activities that aren’t just about English ... like going to the leisure centre but then you have to pay for child care.” (Participant)

“I know Chilliwack is smaller than Vancouver but we need some welcoming place ... like the [Ethnic] Centre in Vancouver.” (Participant)

“I haven’t ever felt so alone but also so dependent.” (Participant)

²² Banerjee, Rupa & Mai Phan. 2014. “Licensing requirements and occupational mobility among highly skilled new immigrants in Canada.” *Industrial Relations* 69(2):308.

²³ Reitz, Jeffrey, Josh Curtis & Jennifer Elrick. 2014. “Immigrant skill utilization: Trends and policy issues.” *International Migration & Integration* 15:2.

²⁴ Banerjee, Rupa & Mai Phan. 2014. “Licensing requirements and occupational mobility among highly skilled new immigrants in Canada.” *Industrial Relations* 69(2):290-315.

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These comments illustrate an important thread of the conversations in relation to needing gathering spaces and events that are not always service-driven. Just as universities talk about writing across the curriculum instead of singular writing courses, it was striking how attentive participants were to that same principle of seamless integration whereby, leisure centres, cultural events, ESL classes, conversations in grocery store line-ups, job skills workshops, were all articulated as building blocks in their sense of welcoming and likelihood of successful integration.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, there need to be more meaningful opportunities for immigrants to share their stories as a mechanism of affirmation, as community education, and as an instrument to lobby for change. These purposeful exchanges would ideally be structured in a manner that illustrate and build on the interdependence of these three goals. As discussed in this report, strategies may include:

- Expanding services to assist in education and training-based bridging to complete necessary learning in foreign academic and professional credentials and experience;
- Increasing availability of programs assisting immigrants with:
 - academic and technical writing skills,
 - understanding employment-specific communication, behavioural norms, and workplace culture,
 - job-specific language,
 - resume, job search and job interview skills, and
 - preparation for regulatory and licensing examinations.²⁵
- Enhancing volunteer, job shadowing, and mentorship opportunities supported through community-based inter-agency coordination and information-sharing opportunities. A critical aspect of this initiative would be developing a strategic and sustainable outreach model targeting employers through a best practices process;

²⁵ Banerjee, Rupa & Mai Phan. 2014. "Licensing requirements and occupational mobility among highly skilled new immigrants in Canada." *Industrial Relations* 69(2):290-315.

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- Hosting community dialogues emphasizing the intersectionality of both individual identities and local agency and organizational mandates;
- Increasing opportunities for social engagement in settings that are not prescribed by narrow service delivery objectives (e.g. leisure activities, cultural field trips, parent-child events); and,
- Developing a strategic media campaign targeting clear goals such as unintentional discrimination and harmful stereotyping addressed in part through a “Faces of our Community” series highlighting diversity in Chilliwack and profiling newcomers.

In summary, as organizations and government agencies develop more progressive approaches to these issues, there is a need for a more “inclusive framework that allows us to work toward *recognitive justice* that balances freedom of migration with recognition and full membership in Canada” (Guo, 2013, p. 112).

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