

**<A>Internationally educated female teachers' transformative lifelong learning experiences:  
Rethinking the immigrant experience through an arts-informed group process**

**<au>***Susan Brigham*  
*Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada*

*E-mail:* [susan.brigham@msvu.ca](mailto:susan.brigham@msvu.ca)

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**<B>Abstract:** This article is based on two phases of a five year arts-informed study that involved 24 women who immigrated to Maritime Canada as adults and who were all teachers in their countries of origin. In groups of approximately six, research participants gathered together in workshops held in two teacher training institutions in two Maritime Provinces over a period of several months to critically reflect on teaching and learning, as well as immigration experiences. In the workshops the women, along with two researchers/workshop leaders, one of whom was the author, engaged in writing, story telling, art-making, dialogue, and critical reflection. Drawing on the theory of transformative learning I analyse the research data presented in two vignettes. The workshop practices, methods, and materials engaged the participants in the imaginative domain and in the exploration of multiple modes of knowledge construction and dimensions of identity.

**<B>Keywords:** Arts-informed research; transformative learning; immigrant women; internationally educated teachers

**<B>Introduction**

This article discusses how a group process involving writing, story telling, art-making, dialogue, and critical reflection was used as a tool for transformative learning with adults. I draw on examples, using two vignettes in particular, from research data from phases one and two of an arts-informed research project that took place over a five year period, involving 24 women from 17 countries. All research participants immigrated to Canada as adults and were teachers in their home countries. I refer to the theory of transformative learning and arts-based adult education to analyse the rich thick research data that emerged from the project. My research addressed the following question: In what ways can arts-informed methods help us to understand the complexity of female internationally educated teachers' experiences including their transformative learning processes?

### **<B>Theoretical Framework**

Transformative learning (TL) theory is a theory of deep adult learning first developed by Jack Mezirow and enhanced by others. The theory holds that throughout our lives we develop perspectives or frames of reference which help us make sense of our experiences and make meaning in our lives. These perspectives involve broad based assumptions that influence our attitudes, tastes, expectations, beliefs, values, judgements, and the way we perceive ourselves and others as well as our relationships with/in the world. These frames of reference, which are not fully developed, are often acquired uncritically, and operate at an unconscious level, resulting in a distortion of our thoughts and perceptions. However, when we confront events or disorienting dilemmas that cause deep self-questioning and a troubling of our taken-for-granted ways of knowing and being, our meaning schemes and previously unexamined assumptions are brought into focus and scrutinised and a cognitive shift occurs. This entails critical reflection and a dialogical process with others in a supportive environment. Mezirow (2003) also asserts that

direct intervention by an adult educator to develop critical reflection skills and dispositions may be required. Further, Mezirow (2000) emphasises that ‘imagination is central in understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternate interpretations of our experiences by “trying on another’s point of view”.’ Transformative learning (TL) theorists are interested in this shift or transformation, wherein frames of reference become more discerning, open, reflective, and capable of change (Mezirow, 2003).

While Mezirow has been criticised for being overly concerned with the cognitive and rational processes (Taylor, 2000), several researchers have addressed affective and spiritual dimensions of transformative learning. For example, Boyd and Myers (1988) assert that transformation begins with the process of discernment, which involves drawing on the extrarational, such as symbols and images, to help to bring our meaning schemes into consciousness. Others, such as Dirkx (2001), Hillman (1975) and Scott (2006), propose that transformation requires an imaginal dialogical relationship with one’s unconscious psychic energy through such processes as meditation, poetry, journaling, art, or by being attentive to one’s dreams. For example, Scott suggests that transformation comes about when one experiences a structural shift in the relationship between the ego and the unconscious. I, like other scholars I discuss below, build on this by emphasising a more holistic understanding in which both the rational/cognitive and the extrarational/affective dimensions are dual processes in transformative learning. These dual processes can be best supported through the arts.

### *<C>Arts-informed approaches*

Adult education scholars have explored the arts in adult education from a variety of angles and they argue their potential through a variety of lenses. To begin, arts informed approaches can inspire, motivate, provoke, challenge, engage, develop skills, and reduce stress. More than this,

however, through the arts learners can construct knowledge (Kerka, 2003), critically reflect on identity and practice (Brigham, 2011), as well as the inner self and society (Dirkx, 2000), problematise experience (Brigham and Walsh, 2011; Walsh and Brigham, 2007), improve interactions with others (McNiff, 2003), engage community members in creative civic dialogue to critique and challenge social injustices (Clover, 2000, 2006; Clover, Stalker and McGauley, 2004; Stalker, 2003), and promote human growth and development (Jones, 2001). Adult educators have embraced the creation/production and use of poetry, dance, drama, popular theatre, film, photography, murals, quilts, vocals, sculpture, and music to achieve some of these outcomes. Such artistic works and processes provide ‘a richer way of thinking about learning, one which includes feeling and imagination, intuition and experience, external tools and cultural milieu, as well as the effort to understand’ (Claxton, 1999).

### **<B>Research Method and Process**

A growing number of scholars are turning to arts-based research methods as well. Practices of both arts-based and arts-informed research have grown in popularity in both teacher education (Ewing and Hughes, 2008) and in adult education. The arts and research have been seen as particularly relevant to ‘women adult educators since the early 1980s’ due to their feminist aims of empowerment, control, and voice (Clover, 2010). Cole and Knowles (2007) describe the essential purposes of arts-informed research as means to

<dq>enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for purposes of advancing knowledge.

<tx>An arts-informed approach was used in this study to help understand the immigration, integration, lifelong learning and teaching experiences of internationally educated female teachers who immigrated to eastern, Maritime Canada. None of the participants or the two researchers, one of whom is the author, specialised in teaching art or was formally trained as an artist, yet the arts offer a rich opportunity to stimulate critical reflection, imagination, and creativity; encourage interaction and dialogue; and provide an important way to address the research problem. Further, I believed that ‘tap[ping] into embodied knowing, honour[ing] emotions and creat[ing] space for rehearsal for action’, were critical components in this work with internationally educated teachers and achievable through the arts (Butterwick and Lawrence, 2009).

After obtaining ethics approval from my university research participants were invited to take part in the study through word of mouth and information posters posted in university buildings and community organisation bulletin boards in two Maritime Provinces. The participants were international students, workers with temporary work visas, permanent residents, and those who now have Canadian citizenship. The main commonalities between the participants were that they are all women, internationally educated, and had been teachers in their home countries. Other than those characteristics, the research participants were very much a heterogeneous group.

The participants emigrated to Maritime Canada as adults from Australia, Bangladesh, China, El Salvador, Egypt, France, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Jordan, South Korea, Kuwait, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. With the exception of two (one from Poland and one from France) who self identified as ‘White’, the research participants fell within Canada’s category of ‘Visible Minority,’ a controversial term that is used in Canada’s

Employment Equity Act (1995) to describe ‘persons, other than aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour’ (Government of Canada, 2011). The participants’ ages ranged between 28 and 65, many were married, and some had children. They came to Canada for a variety of reasons, such as to pursue a university degree, to accompany a spouse who is an international student or looking for employment in Canada, to seek better employment opportunities in teaching or in a related field, and/or to provide a better quality of life for their children. Generally, the participants had a positive view of Canada before they arrived, as a place with plentiful jobs, excellent education systems, and a tolerant, if not friendly, society for immigrants. A couple of participants are now teaching or are attempting to obtain certification to teach in Canada. Each has been in Canada for varying amounts of time; the longest period is 17 years and the shortest is less than one year.

The research project was carried out in two phases over a five year period. Each of the two phases involved two groups consisting of about six research participants in each group with a grand total of 24 participants in four separate groups. The groups were organised around geographical location and participants’ availability. The small groups allowed each participant an opportunity to join a workshop approximately six times over several months, which ensured that each participant had one session or workshop in which her story was the main focus. The workshops took place in classrooms in two teacher education institutions in two provinces. By meeting regularly, about every two weeks, over a sustained period of time the participants in each group came to know one another and developed a sense of community, such that over time the participants revealed multiple understandings and perspectives as well as opposing views.

The workshops involved writing, story telling, art-making, dialogue, and reflection around the topics of immigrating, integrating, teaching, and learning. The two researcher-

workshop leaders participated in the workshop activities and also acted as empathetic ‘guides on the sides,’ encouraging participants to share and reflect on experiences and explore meanings in their art work, prompting for elaboration, summarising past workshop topics, and, on a few occasions, reminding the research participants of the importance of respecting one another’s privacy and confidentiality by not identifying other participants by name outside of the group nor sharing what was discussed in the workshops outside the group. Other than these roles, the researchers/workshop leaders did not direct the learning through formalised teaching methods or teach ways to use art materials. Throughout the study the researcher-workshop leaders worked at creating a safe space, where each participant’s contributions were shared and valued. At the beginning some of the participants expressed a concern that they were not ‘artists’ or ‘artistic’ and apologised for their visual images before discussing them. However, with encouragement, compliments from other participants, and occasional reminders from the workshop leaders that the aesthetic quality of the product was not important, just the ideas and meanings behind the art, by the second workshop several participants noted they actually looked forward to using the art materials and others seemed more confident with their creative abilities. Some women described the art-making as ‘therapeutic’, ‘relaxing’ and ‘enjoyable’ while another felt the materials allowed her to think differently which meant she was never exactly sure what shape her artwork would take until after it was begun.

Each workshop began with brief brainstorming about ideas related to teaching, learning, and/or immigration experiences, and then 10 minutes of writing in any language about a teaching or immigration experience. Research participants were asked to write freely without worrying about spelling or grammar, without talking, and even if they were not sure what to write, to keep their pens moving. Following this activity, one participant would volunteer to share what she had

written. Others in the group would ask the storyteller a few questions before choosing a medium to sculpt, paint, draw, or construct their responses to her story. When the research participants finished working with the art materials, each woman, including the storyteller and the workshop leaders, took turns showing her visual image to the group, explaining the meaning, representations, and/or processes involved and a group dialogue followed.

The study yielded rich thick data in the form of transcripts of each workshop, individual flow writing pieces, and artwork. For the purpose of this paper I focus predominantly on the transcripts and briefly describe the relevant visuals.

In the next section, I provide two vignettes from the data that illustrate how, through dialogue, writing, art, and reflection the women elucidated how they view the world, why they hold their views and how they have experienced shifts in the very form by which they make meaning.

### **<B>Vignette 1**

Sara is a teacher from India. She and her husband immigrated to Canada five years ago with hopes of establishing themselves in professional careers, earning decent salaries, and providing a good education for their children. Like some of the other participants, Sara talks about an accumulation of experiences in the migration process, a series of disorienting dilemmas culminating in epistemological shifts. For example, in the first session of one group Sara constructs two figures from Lego blocks (each with a head, a body, straight arms, and legs). One figure is tall, sturdy, and well balanced. The other is smaller, wobbly, with spindly legs. As she begins to talk, Sara nudges the smaller figure and it collapses. She says:

<dq>I am thinking myself like this. Falling apart. People are just ruling on me. They are much better, even though qualification-wise they are much below than me. Still they are



ruling on me ... Yes, that is what I was feeling back home [pointing to the first figure] and that is what I am feeling right now [pointing to the figure that has collapsed] smaller every day. Every day I am trying to finish my life ... Every day I am falling apart[and] losing my strength.

<tx>Sara explains how she encountered a new environment in Maritime Canada in which her teaching credentials and experience are not formally recognised by the provincial government's credentialing body, her standard of living lowered, and her self-esteem and aspects of her identity brought into question. She adds that she has lost a sense of safety, security, dignity, and belonging. During subsequent workshops, she describes various ways she, her husband, and her school aged child have faced discrimination and isolation in their new contexts as well as the many barriers she has faced, such as un/under employment, racism, discrimination (based on her accent, ethnicity, culture, and appearance) and lack of social support. Sara recounts privileges afforded her in her home country because of her education, middle-class advantages, mobility, and admirable teaching career:

<dq>When I think about my status [back home], it was much more respectful, much more economical advantages, [higher] living standards. There I was secure. I had the home, I had the big bank balance ... I felt safety there. I had family there. ... I was permanent teacher. We were well settled there ... I thought there are huge opportunities here [in Canada], and I will get into the [school] system, [at the] most after 2 years. ... I will be here and people will accept me, and what you get? Lots of struggle.

<tx>After immigrating to Canada and as she entered university and schools as a parent, volunteer and eventually a teacher, she describes feeling awkward, feeling that she 'stood out' from the majority, lacking the social script possessed by those who were born here. Her lack of

Canadian middle-class attitudes, dispositions, accents, networks, social skills, apparel, language, familiarity with local popular discourse and culture as well as 'acceptable' stories and body odours are amplified. Her cultural, social, and symbolic capital is no longer adequate or valued.

Sara laments:

<dq>You want to be a teacher. You think all your education; all your experiences back home have been erased. ... That makes me so depressed. ... You start thinking, I have wasted my time here ... I have to start as a fresh child.

<tx>In a later session, during silent flow writing Sara wrote:

<dq>[I dreamed] about when I came here in Canada and seeing myself successful in my profession. [But what I] found is very hard and struggling and sometimes I think it will linger on life long ... I wanted to make Canada my home [but] I don't think I will ever be accepted as Canadian here and I will always be seen as ... an outsider. ... So I wonder if the decision I took in my life was right or wrong ... mostly ... I think maybe my decision was wrong, I should not have left home.

<tx>The dialogue that followed Sara's story involved many group members sharing doubts, fears, and frustrations about integrating into Canadian society and the teaching profession. As the women shared their stories and artwork, they delved into micro and macro societal issues, such as issues of power in relationships (i.e. within families, schools, and communities), culture, school board policies, immigration policies, and the political economy. When it was Delaine's turn to share her response to Sara's story, she showed a picture made of pieces of mostly dark blue fabric on a white background. The picture was of a woman in a jubilant pose, her arms raised up above her head. In one corner there was a large dark flower

with red, white, and blue coloured streamers flowing down from it. Carefully choosing her words she explained:

<dq>This is me. This is Canada, very pretty because the flower is characteristic of Canada. After 17 years living in Canada I have many, many stories but now I am happy because my sons, my friends. Now I enjoy the life because the life is beautiful. When the human is positive never, nothing [is a big] problem because the human[s] are very strong; very strong in [facing] the problems. I listen [to] you and listen [to] you, but [look] up up ... because the God created the land for every people not only for one, okay?

<tx>After she spoke the group broke into spontaneous applause. Delaine's story of hope was next echoed by Margaret whose watercolour painting depicts a person surrounded in black with a band of yellow outside the black. She explains:

<dq>Whenever this person moves it will always be black around him. Canada is good and bright ... We moved here with our hopes and fears and black surroundings, so the thing is, we should move on and be in the brighter area. We need to think positively and it will look brighter than our current status, which is the black part though sometimes the feelings can overwhelm us. I think that we have ... lots of accomplishment and we need to celebrate that ... rather than to wait for a big bang to happen in our life because this big bang will never happen ... I learned that because I myself was doing that ... I was thinking I studied and worked here and I didn't accomplish much. I am waiting for the big bang ... on the negative side we feel we have not accomplished friendship with Canadians but there are other things that are more positive to look at.

<tx>The women then discussed the ways in which their capital (human capital, cultural and social capital) is de/valued and how many of their 'deficiencies' are in fact strengths that could

benefit schools and future generations. In a later workshop Sara also raises a point about how teachers who are members of the ‘majority’ are failing to critically reflect and thereby change their attitudes toward ‘minorities’:

<dq>What we should do in Canada [if] we really and sincerely want to conquer the inequality in Canada? ... There should be some kind of reflections on that and there should be some minimal of thinking. Students and teachers should reflect on [the questions]: ‘As [a] majority, what authority we have and how we have seen other people? ... And how we could challenge these beliefs?’ ... And we should respect people from other cultures.

<tx>Over the weeks, Sara begins a shift in her frame of reference in terms of her view of others and difference and acknowledges the need to be self-reflective: ‘As teachers we should recognise ourselves first, what we are and why we want to be a teacher ...’ and in the final workshop she talks to the group about her expanded meaning structures:

<dq>I am from India and I didn’t have an opportunity to mix with other cultures and had my negative perception about different cultures. Then I came here and interacted with other cultures and got opportunity to work with different cultures and when I worked with them I found my perception entirely wrong ... and now my attitude has changed towards them. I feel a change inside me that I am more accepting and more tolerant towards other cultures, even in the diversity of my own culture because of the caste system.

<tx>Sara explained that the workshops, the art-making, have allowed her to bring to voice her innermost thoughts, to have her experiences discussed and ‘mirrored back’ by others, and ‘be understood.’ She elaborates: ‘this group is giving emotional support. Kind of let your feelings

out, someone to listen to, talk to. This group is giving us a very good opportunity where we can talk free[ly] and be understood.’ She adds, ‘What I shared with you ... it took me one year. I couldn’t [talk about this] other than in my bedroom. I could not talk to anyone else.’ Through group communication, which included dialogue, text and art-making (both individual and collective) the women were able to compare interpretations of similar experiences and reassess their taken-for-granted frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000). Through the social collective dimensions of critical thinking the women in the group acted as ‘critical mirrors reflecting back to us aspects of our assumptions clusters we are unable to see’ (Brookfield, 2005). Additionally, the writing, the silence, introspection, and resymbolising experiences through art-making in a supportive safe space were vital for critical reflection which also provided opportunities to begin a plan to take action for social justice. For example, for Sara, silence is no longer an option: ‘We should not be quiet. Ninety nine percent of stories ... just get downplayed in your house.’ With regard to a plan for social change Sara suggests that as a group the women need to take action to ‘educate, educate, educate’ others and as teachers they have a specific role to challenge the school system. ‘The school system must put too much attention to [diversity] issue because the bottom line of all is wars ... The education system is responsible for [ignorance].’ She and the others pick up new threads of thoughts and insights and weave some of them into further dialogue inspiring action for social justice while leaving other threads in disarray, perhaps to be considered in another time and place. Over time, through the workshop processes, Sara demonstrates learning that ‘transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow, 2009). Moreover, she shifts her focus from wishing to return to India to wishing to transform the Atlantic Canadian school system.

## <B>Vignette 2

Rita is from Bangladesh. She and her husband immigrated to Canada to pursue their professional careers. In the first research session Rita tells a story with a pastel drawing of a river with a bank on each side. On each bank are flowers and grass. On the left side of the river the flowers are without petals, drooping with their heads bent and on the right side the flowers are upright with butterflies fluttering around them. A very small figure is leaving the left side of the river, walking into the water toward the other side.

<in>Rita: A tree I drew ... as a teacher. Students are flowers but there is a cactus too because you grow from a good teacher.

SB: You grew from a good teacher?

Rita: No from a teacher, not a good teacher ... My country became independent in 1971 and my education start at that time. During the revolution period, the opposite country that attacked our country killed all our educated people, the teachers.

Several voices: They killed them? Why?

Rita: Yes, if you kill the educated people of the country, you kill the country. ... I am a product of those teachers who do not know anything, so I do not know anything. ... so I drew a river. Slowly slowly it takes time. That is me (pointing at a very small figure partly in the fast flowing water with footprints left behind). I want to cross the water. ... I came to Canada; I have to develop my English ... I took that English course ... then I got admission here at the university in B.Ed, then I found a lot ... [of] flowers.

<tx>In her artwork and narrative Rita emphasises a desire to be a 'good' teacher despite a lack of role models from her own schooling experience. Rita captures this in a metaphor of transforming from a cactus (a bad teacher) to a tree (a good teacher) as she gains experience and knowledge in

a Canadian Maritime provincial school system. She situates her teacher identity in a historical context and symbolises time as a wide river through which she crosses slowly. The themes in Rita's story were taken up in the next session, which began with Sandi who shared the following story after a period of flow writing.

<dq>When I was a little girl I had a dream that I will be a teacher not a doctor or engineer ... In my country a school certificate takes ten years so in ten years of school I had to change seventeen schools. In all seventeen schools I never met any good teachers who can teach. Sometimes the teachers were screaming in the class. If the students didn't know the answer they will get beaten. Very terrible. ... I got to Canada and when I went to college I said I would be a good teacher when I finished my degree. I became a teacher and I visited many schools. I just pick up good things about teacher. I feel that there is something empty, something lacked ... I have no power ... I believe that children are more motivated by good teachers than by bad teachers.

<tx>Immediately following her story the women in the group were invited to use art materials to respond to Sandi's story.

Sara creates an image with coloured pencils in which there is a covered boat on blue wavy water. Under the rounded roof of the boat sit many people with one person standing up at the back of the boat facing forward using a pole to push the boat across a river.

<dq>She is driving herself and her students. As a teacher she wants to ... give the [shade] ... [The birds] are students and fly away eventually. ... We are taking the teaching profession very lightly. We think that if you can't be a doctor or engineer than you have no future but teachers are the most responsible persons.

<tx>Participant “Ocean” re-symbolises Sandi’s experience with a pencil crayon drawing of a building with four windows and an arched double doorway. The building is surrounded by a dark green border. Outside the building sits a figure leaning against a tree on a blue hill. Around the figure are flowers and above the figure (in the tree) are heart-shaped apples.

<dq>This is a kind of old school ... where we don’t break the rules. I put darker colour around the school, kind of a [hedge] or a fence. You are the lady under the tree ... and you are satisfied. You can get out of the old school and be in the field ... In that way you are ... open minded, not inside the building but outside in the field. We have to be open-minded first and then we can teach the kids. We can’t give the students the right answers, we can help them find the answers for themselves, and we can give them more motivation to be able to think. This is flower, your passion for teaching.

<tx>Through a re-symbolising process and dialogue centring on an experience (Sandi’s) that was storied in a group, different perspectives emerged. Sandi’s story became less a private matter as each research participant assigned meaning through symbols and metaphors. Through a method of un/re/braiding the research participants take up different threads of Sandi’s story such as the role of the teacher, the need to be self-reflective, and the required characteristics of a teacher. These reveal complex issues about teaching, identity, power and the micro, meso, and macro structures within which they live. From Rita’s and Sandi’s stories other stories are interlaced into a dynamic and intricate plait, as is evident when Rita returns to her story, reflecting on her past teacher self, storying her experiences:

<dq>The way I worked there, I felt ‘oh, I am a good teacher’. I got lots of awards for different strategies of teaching ... My managing capacity was good and I taught 60–105 children in one class. I had 8 classes from 7 to 4 pm. ... People wanted education from



good teacher and the way I taught was good. I was one of the good teachers in my country. But now I think ... I was not good teacher and the way I taught was not good. Oh! What did I teach there? Nothing. .... Repeating and repeating is not a good teaching. ... I said [to my students], ... 'what I give you now, you follow. You have to write 10 times, you have to read 10 hours, it does not matter you sleep or not. Just read and remember it.' Now I think what I did with them. I took them like machines. I feel very sad. Many times I wake up with bad dreams. ... I like this Canadian system. ... Here [teachers] know something.

<tx>The resultant stories highlight several contrasting elements such as dreams and nightmares, violence and cooperation, neglected and cared for students, power and powerlessness, qualities of 'good' and 'bad' teachers, as well as qualities of Canadian teachers and teachers from another country. The artwork also captures other contrasts such as sadness and happiness, darkness and lightness, shade and brightness, cloudiness and sunshine, monochrome and colourfulness. Yet, through the dialogical process around the visual forms the binaries become more nuanced. For example, while the research participants exalt Canadian Maritime provincial education systems and the quality of Canadian teachers they are also critical. For instance they highlight a devastating silence around discrimination, which they see as a significant problem in some Canadian teachers and administrators and a weakness in the provincial education systems.

The interlaced stories and symbols and metaphors also unveil some of the ways the women view the world, why they hold these views and, as in Rita's case, how they have experienced shifts in the very form by which they make meaning about teaching and their teacher identity. Risse and Maier (2003) state that identity is the relationship between the

individual and the social world. For Rita, her identity is what Dwyer calls a ‘contextual and relational positioning rather than a fixed essence’ (2000). As she re/de/constructs the political, social, and historical context from which her teacher identity emerged, Rita’s confident, capable, well-respected teacher self is unpacked. In anguish she is able to face up ‘to the limits, uncertainties, and the dissolution of established beliefs, while simultaneously [responding to] new decisions and ... undertaking ... new forms of responsibility’ (Perry, 1968).

### **<B>Discussion**

In this study the simultaneous processes of storying, dialogue, art-making, and reflective practice lead to multi-voiced, polycentric, complex plaits which brought about individual and collective re-imaginings not only of self but also larger power structures in which we are embedded and the hegemonic assumptions we hold. Several participants talked about the value of having their stories reflected/resymbolised and discussed by others in an open and trusting environment. Indeed, ‘stories are not simply told; they are also witnessed’ (Butterwick and Lawrence, 2009). Dera, for example, explains that the responses to her story were validating: ‘[Through] these responses I felt [the other workshop participants] understood me. That means that some of them are facing the same thing because [nearly] everyone ... understand what exactly my feeling were ... the fears, difficulties, worries.’ For the participants the workshop processes serve as an apparatus for understanding and sharing experiences and being engaged in intra- and interpersonal dialogical relationships as meaning is transferred ‘between interpretive realms’ (Collins, 2003), which help to bring habits of mind into consciousness.

In the telling of stories we may distort and constrain interpretations of our experiences yet dialogical reflective processes involving art-making and writing can help to unravel, reweave,

interweave, and critique such interpretations and help us recognise how the ‘self is an artefact of interpretive practice ... [which is] perpetually under construction during social interaction’ (Collins, 2003). In this study, the flow writing process provided a means of drawing on memory, uncovering and developing narratives of experience and recording thoughts and reflections which were returned to and shared with others. Through storytelling the women often translated their ideas from one language to another (English) and images into words as they verbally articulated their narratives of experiences and reflections. The art-making processes allowed the women to move beyond the limitations of language, for

although language reveals, it may also conceal, in which case unconsciousness may be considered primarily non-verbal. Non-verbal data, particularly embodied experience, therefore need to be incorporated in the research process in order to make sense of the undisclosed, un verbalized meaning. In such a situation unconsciousness is to a high degree considered to remain distinct from verbal language, although ultimately it may be structured through language as narratives of experience are uncovered and developed. (Leitch, 2006)

Additionally, as English was not the first language of the participants, the art materials permitted the women to foster communication through visual means. Moreover, the art-making required the participants to tap into unconsciousness and bring to light un verbalised meaning and embodied experience. In resymbolising and ‘mirroring back’ the narratives of experiences of group members through art, the women had to draw on the extrarational, which helped to bring meaning schemes into consciousness and problematise experiences. Together, the workshop practices, methods, and materials engaged the participants in the imaginative domain, and in the exploration of multiple modes of knowledge construction and dimensions of identity.

There is no essentialising story of ‘immigrant women’ or ‘internationally educated teachers,’ rather each individual’s politically, historically, and structurally situated narrative contributes to the larger social analysis of, in this case, teaching and what it is to be a teacher and an immigrant woman. Such analysis is the ‘inevitable precursor to social action’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 201). And indeed, after meeting a number of times several research participants suggested the critiques of relations of power that came out through the stories, reflections and artwork prompted them to take social action. For example, many of the research participants have collaborated in the development of readers’ theatre scripts and conference presentations using the research data from this study, including the artwork, which was photographed and projected onto a screen during the readers’ theatre performance. Some participants have also been involved in the performance of these presentations in various venues across Canada, including orientation sessions and workshops for pre-service teachers (see Walsh Brigham, 2007). In these ways the participants have begun a form of collective social action that was instigated by the workshop processes, integrates the art pieces (e.g. the artwork), and has the potential to springboard further arts-informed investigations by teachers.

For Sara and Rita, transformative learning through the arts entailed a structural shift in consciousness, in their way of being in the world and in their relationships in the world. It involves an analysis of power structures and developing a vision and inspiring courage for individual and societal change. I would argue, therefore, that arts-informed research processes do assist adult educators in helping their participants shift perspectives to become ‘more critically reflective of their assumptions and aware of their context’ (Mezirow, 2000). They also foster hope in action, for ‘spaces of possibility must open first in our imaginations’ (Welton, 2005). And through the two vignettes, we see how the arts helped operationalise the imagination

towards critical reflection and opened spaces for contemplation, creativity, dialogue, and transformation.

This arts-informed research process also acted as a shuttle between the unconscious and the conscious and between the rational/cognitive and the extrarational/affective dimensions. Through this research process the women pushed against the edges of not only what they know but also how they know what they know. Individually and collectively, in varying degrees, they worked at uncovering an awareness of their new contexts and brought into focus the meaning of their lived experience in more holistic ways (Leitch, 2006). Through these glimpses the participants were confronted with new possibilities for individual and social transformation and some have begun to enact social change. Moreover, the rich data that result from a study such as this are critical for informing policy makers and transforming policies, such as those related to immigration and education.

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