"Sink or Swim" – The 'Culture Shock Experiences' of Immigrant Educators in UK Schools: Critical Perspectives

Brogan Leigh Dannhauser

St Paul's Catholic School
Phoenix Drive, Leadenhall, Milton Keynes
Buckinghamshire, MK6 5EN, United Kingdom
E-mail address: brogandannhauser1995@gmail.com
ORCID: https://prcid.org/0009-0008-2780-1832

Sadi Seyama-Mokhaneli

Department of Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education
University of Johannesburg
B-Ring 418A, Auckland Park Campus, Cnr. Kingsway & University Roads
Auckland Park, Johannesburg, 2006, South Africa
E-mail address: sseyama@uj.a.cza
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5234-0555

ABSTRACT

Aim. The study aims to interrogate the experiences of culture shock among immigrant educators in the United Kingdom's school system. It also illuminates that while immigrant educators are a vital workforce, bringing diverse skills and knowledge, they experience cultural shock in adapting to a new and diverse cultural environment. Thus, they often encounter obstacles related to cultural systems and teaching methods that negatively affect their school adjustment and performance.

Methods. The study used a qualitative explorative case study underpinned by the critical social constructivism paradigm. After obtaining ethical clearance and approval from the council, participants were purposively sampled from a population of Milton Keynes Council, drawing eight immigrant educators for focus groups and five school leaders for individual semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed through thematic analysis, identifying and describing patterns in qualitative data that were valuable across various inquiries.

Results. The findings show that immigrant educators experience distant leadership, confusion, anxiety, isolation, and a struggle for identity and belonging as part of their culture shock. Discrepancies between expectations and reality, lack of institutional support, and communication barriers exacerbate these challenges. School leaders often reinforce existing norms and values that immigrant educators find difficult to navigate, contributing to their sense of exclusion and cultural dissonance.

Conclusions. Immigrant educators are vital in transforming the UK's educational landscape, bringing valuable skills and multicultural perspectives. However, to fully realise their potential, schools must implement formal support programmes such as mentoring and culturally inclusive leadership. The study calls for systemic reforms in educational institutions to support immigrant educators' integration better, thereby enhancing their well-being and job satisfaction.

Keywords: culture shock, cultural diversity, immigrant educators, acculturation, separation, integration

Introduction

Immigrant educators are a significant and growing segment of the UK education's diverse workforce, bringing valuable skills, knowledge, and perspectives to their schools and students. The prevalence of immigrant educators in schools has increased significantly in today's multicultural society. The pursuit of prospects serves as a key driver as the UK's education system provides ample opportunities for career growth that may be lacking in their home countries (Budrow & Tarc, 2018). The UK is a multicultural and multilingual society, with a diverse and dynamic education system. According to Sue Sentance et al. (2022), the combined student population in schools across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland surpasses 8.9 million, with over 20% of these students using a language different from English within their households. Moreover, there are over 500,000 educators in schools in the UK, with about 10% of them foreign-born or having a foreign nationality (Department of Education, 2020). These figures indicate that the UK education workforce is composed of a significant and growing number of immigrant educators.

The education system in the UK has experienced a positive impact from migration, particularly in terms of diversification and cultural exchange (George et al., 2011). The influx of immigrant educators has significantly contributed to this phenomenon. Various countries have been represented within the teaching staff immigrating to the UK, as indicated by statistical data (De Villiers, 2007). Notably, African teachers constitute a significant proportion of foreign educators in the country, with South Africa being the primary contributor (George & Rhodes, 2015). Research also reveals that a noteworthy number of South Afri-

can trained educators choose to work abroad, with many opting for positions in the UK. Moreover, studies suggest that there is an evident inclination among practicing educators from South Africa to migrate overseas. According to Khulekani Magubane (2016), 17 752 educators have migrated to various countries which include the UK, Canada, Australia, and Portugal. Immigrant educators are attracted to the UK's diverse and dynamic educational system, seeking career progression, access to high-quality education, and chances for professional growth (Budrow & Tarc, 2018).

These educators bring a wealth of diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that greatly enhance the educational milieu. However, they experience cultural shock in adapting to a new and different cultural environment, which can affect their well-being, performance, and job satisfaction (Furnham, 2019). *Culture shock* is the term used to denote the psychological and emotional strain that individuals may undergo when transitioning to a fresh and unfamiliar setting (Ward et al., 2020). It can manifest in various symptoms, such as confusion, anxiety, irritability, depression, isolation, or resentment, which affect the teachers in doing their job (Stroud Stasel, 2021). Colleen Ward et al. (2020) asserts that culture shock can also impact one's professional identity, confidence, competence, and relationships with colleagues, students, parents, and communities. Therefore, school leaders must understand and address the needs and issues of immigrant educators and provide them with adequate support, guidance, and empowerment to overcome their culture shock and integrate into their schools.

There are limited studies of immigrants' culture shock in specific settings (Stroud Stasel, 2021). This research gap restricts an understanding of how school leadership practices contribute to immigrant educators' culture shock experiences. Therefore, school leaders and district officers need to understand the needs and issues of immigrant educators in their schools. Deeper insights into the dimensions and nuances of immigrant educators' culture shock could reveal leadership's shortcomings in the attempt to acculturate them. Delight Sibanda and Sadi Seyama-Mokhaneli's (2024) study demonstrated the need to examine immigrant educators' acculturation in a host country, revealing authoritarian leadership as an impediment to tenable inclusion and integration. Thus, through John W. Berry's acculturation theory, the study explores immigrant educators' culture shock in their acculturation within the UK education system's culture.

Following the introduction, the paper proceeds as follows: First, it provides the engagement of literature on educators' immigration in the UK context and culture shock. Second, Berry's Acculturation Theory is explained as the underpinning theoretical framework. Third, the research methodology adopted for the study is explicated. Fourth, the findings through the identified themes are presented and discussed for more profound meaning-making. Fifth, the paper offers concluding remarks, limitations and future research avenues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture Shock and Acculturation of Immigrant Educators

Culture shock occurs when individuals are exposed to new and unfamiliar cultural environments, often resulting in feelings of confusion, anxiety, and disorientation (Oberg, 1960). Immigrant educators face the added complexity of transitioning into foreign educational systems, which involves adapting to different teaching methodologies, classroom expectations, and professional standards (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020). The U-curve model of culture shock, developed by Kalervo Oberg, outlines the phases of adjustment that individuals go through, including initial excitement, followed by frustration, adaptation, and eventual acceptance. Culture shock is a pervasive phenomenon that individuals experience when they transition into new and unfamiliar cultural environments, and it is particularly relevant to immigrant educators entering the UK school system. This experience involves a state of psychological disorientation caused by the clash of the host country's norms with the individual's native cultural practices (Furnham, 2019). For immigrant educators, culture shock is not merely an emotional response but a significant professional barrier that can affect their performance, job satisfaction, and long-term retention within the education system.

Several studies have emphasised the role of culture shock in shaping the experiences of immigrant educators. As Donna Roskell (2013) explains, one of the primary challenges immigrant educators face is navigating a new educational landscape that often includes different pedagogical frameworks, student-teacher relationships, and communication styles. These differences can lead to feelings of incompetence and anxiety, particularly when immigrant educators feel unprepared to adopt student-centred learning techniques that may contrast with their previous experience with teacher-centred systems (Stroud Stasel, 2021). Moreover, communication barriers are frequently cited as a major challenge. Immigrant teachers often encounter difficulties in establishing effective communication with students and colleagues due to language differences and unfamiliar colloquialisms (Fee, 2011). These barriers are further compounded by different expectations in terms of behaviour management and student engagement, which can lead to misunderstandings and a sense of professional isolation.

Professional Challenges and Institutional Expectations

In addition to communication barriers, immigrant educators also struggle with the often-unspoken expectations placed on them by school administrators and peers. According to James Budrow and Paul Tarc (2018), many immigrant educators en-

ter the UK school system with a wealth of experience and knowledge, but they find that their professional skills are undervalued or overlooked. The pressure to conform quickly to the dominant educational practices of their host country can result in a loss of professional identity, leading to disengagement and decreased job satisfaction (Alamri, 2018). This loss of identity is particularly pronounced when immigrant educators are not given the opportunity to incorporate their own cultural backgrounds into their teaching practices, effectively erasing a valuable aspect of their professional persona. The lack of formal support systems exacerbates these issues. Donna Roskell (2013) highlights that many schools in the UK are ill-equipped to provide targeted support for immigrant educators as they adjust to their new environments. Mentoring programmes, while effective in some cases, are often underutilised or unavailable, leaving immigrant educators to navigate the complexities of their new roles without adequate guidance (Paul-Smith, 2008). This lack of support result in educators being left to their own devices to adapt or risk professional failure.

Mental and Emotional Well-being

The emotional toll of culture shock on immigrant educators cannot be overstated. In their review of immigrant teacher experiences, Budrow and Tarc (2018) note that culture shock often manifests in psychological symptoms such as nervousness, fear, dejection, and low self-esteem, all of which can have a profound impact on an educator's ability to perform their duties effectively. The mental strain of constantly adapting to new cultural expectations, coupled with the pressure to perform at a high level, can result in burnout and, in severe cases, a decision to leave the profession entirely (Furnham, 2019). A lack of social support within schools further exacerbates these mental health challenges. Immigrant educators often feel marginalised from their peers, either because of cultural differences or because they are seen as outsiders who must conform to established norms (Hur & Suh, 2018). This sense of isolation can lead to feelings of professional inadequacy and alienation, which in turn affect classroom performance and interactions with students.

Strategies for Mitigating Culture Shock

Mitigating the effects of culture shock among immigrant educators requires a multifaceted approach that combines both formal and informal support systems. According to Jerono Rotich (2011), professional development programmes designed specifically for immigrant educators can play a critical role in helping them navigate the complexities of their new environments. These programmes should focus not only on the pedagogical skills required in the UK school system but also on the subtle cultural

differences that may affect their interactions with students, colleagues, and administrators. In addition to professional development, schools must cultivate a more inclusive culture (Azorín, & Ainscow, 2020). This values the unique perspectives immigrant educators bring to the classroom. Schools should implement policies that promote cultural awareness and inclusivity at all levels, from the classroom to administrative leadership (Rotich, 2011). By fostering a supportive and welcoming environment, schools can help immigrant educators feel valued and integrated into the broader educational community.

Mentoring programmes have proven to be effective in supporting immigrant educators as they adapt to their new roles. Mentoring offers immigrant educators the opportunity to build relationships with more experienced colleagues who can provide guidance and support (Maready et al., 2021). This not only helps teachers navigate the formal structures of their new schools but also gives them a sense of belonging and community.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws from Berry's Acculturation Theory to provide critical insights into culture adaptation strategies for immigrant educators. Berry's acculturation theory, by psychologist John W. Berry, describes how people adapt to a new culture through four strategies: assimilation (adopting the new culture), separation (retaining the original culture), integration (blending both cultures) and marginalisation (engaging with neither culture) (Berry & Sam, 2013.

Assimilation

Assimilation is a process where individuals adopt the cultural norms and values of the host culture, often at the expense of their original cultural identity (Berry & Hou, 2017). It has been observed in the context of educational settings that immigrant educators opting for this strategy might attain a sense of belonging but often grapple with cultural homogeneity and well-being issues. This stance is supported by Jacky Lumby and Marianne Coleman (2007), who suggest that such an approach can lead to a reduction in diversity within educational institutions. South African migrant educators in the UK experience isolation and cultural disorientation, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of assimilation (Manik et al., 2006; Mercado & Trumbull, 2018). Moreover, Mercado and Trumbull, (2018) stress the difficulty for fully assimilated immigrant educators to maintain their cultural heritage, which could adversely affect their well-being and job satisfaction. Nolan Zane and Winnie Mak (2003) point out that assimilation outcomes are highly individual and context dependent.

Separation

Separation involves maintaining one's cultural identity while resisting the influence of the host culture (Berry, 2005). This stance tends to preserve a strong sense of cultural identity but may limit societal integration (Rudmin, 2003). Research indicates that immigrant educators employing separation cultivate resilience and pride in their heritage (Berry & Hou, 2017). However, this approach can also constrain their integration into the school environment, potentially impeding the establishment of an inclusive educational atmosphere (Azorin & Ainscow, 2020).

Marginalisation

Marginalisation occurs when individuals reject the norms and values of both their original and host cultures, leading to diminished cultural identity and difficulties in community integration (Berry & Hou, 2017). Immigrant educators facing marginalisation typically feel isolated and struggle with belonging, impacting their well-being and job satisfaction (Berry et al., 2006). Studies by Sun Yee Yip (2023) highlight the transitional challenges faced by immigrant teachers, such as language barriers and cultural differences, promoting support through mentoring programmes and specialised courses to alleviate the adverse effects of marginalisation on their professional development.

Integration

Integration represents a balanced approach, combining the preservation of original cultural norms with the adoption of new cultural aspects (Berry & Sam, 2013). This practice is often linked to a stronger cultural identity and better incorporation into society. The role of school leaders is pivotal in shaping the experiences of immigrant educators and their successful integration relies on leaders' ability to support those experiencing culture shock (Faas et al., 2018). Berry and David L. Sam (2013) suggest that integration and marginalisation provide contrasting frameworks for understanding the adaptation challenges faced by immigrant educators.

To foster a culturally enriched and harmonious educational atmosphere, it is essential for school administrators to understand and support the various acculturation strategies of immigrant educators (Faas et al., 2018). Inclusive environments that value diverse cultural perspectives can be developed through culturally sensitive professional development programmes, which include training and resources to enhance cultural awareness among educators (Berry & Hou, 2017).

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative exploratory case study approach, enabling in-depth, contextual analysis from participant's perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Grounded in the critical social constructivism paradigm, the study deeply explored how power dynamics manifest in environments where immigrant educators, often perceived as outsiders, operate (Yin, 2015). After securing ethical clearance and council approval, participants were purposively selected from the Milton Keynes Council population, which has 113 diverse schools that are either state funded or privately owned (Schools and lifelong learning, n.d). The UK has over 500,00 teachers across the country, however only 10% of them are immigrant educators (Department of Education, 2020). The sample included eight knowledgeable and consenting immigrant educators of focus groups and five school leaders for individual semi-structured interviews. These sessions were conducted in multiple school settings within the UK, providing a rich tapestry of first-hand experiences.

The two focus groups' discussions, encompassing four immigrant educators in each lasted two hours and were conducted online using Teams and Google Meet. In-depth data was derived from a diverse group of individuals engaging in conversations about specific topics, leveraging group dynamics to extract insights into their views, thoughts and beliefs (Yin, 2015). The school leaders' interviews followed a set protocol, lasting 40–60 minutes each. Participants received an interview schedule beforehand, outlining the topics, session duration and interview process to ensure clarity and structure (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data. Drawing on acculturation theoretical lens data was unpacked following manual first and second-order coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Then, it was followed by identifying and describing patterns relevant across various lines of inquiry and, lastly, iteratively constructing the emerging themes (Terry et al., 2017). Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, maintaining participants' confidentiality, and anonymising their information with labels (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Participants were also informed of their right to voluntary participation.

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies: first, credibility was achieved through triangulation, member and supervisor checks, and authentic representation of participants' voices. Second, transferability was facilitated by providing detailed descriptions of the research process and context (Terry et al., 2017). Third, dependability was ensured by adopting rigorous, transparent research methods and thoroughly documenting the research process, enabling replication (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Fourth, confirmability was maintained by prioritising participants' perspectives and meaning-making processes throughout the study.

Table 1

Biographical Information of Participants

Pseudonyms	Gender	Number of years teaching	Nationality	Subject/lead-ership role	Number of years in the UK	Academic rank
P1. Alice	Female	27	British	English	53	HOD
P2. Emma	Female	17	British	Science	41	Assistant head
P3. Michael	Male	25	German	EAL	20	HOD
P4. Tam	Female	22	South African	English	4	HOY
P5. Olivia	Female	6	South African	English	2	HOY
P6. Simona	Female	38	South African	All subjects	21	Educator
P7. Tayla	Female	4	South African	Economics	2	Educator
P8. Maya	Female	7	South African	All subjects	8 months	Educator
P9. Sarah	Female	32	Portuguese	All subjects	*20*	Educator
P10. Charne	Female	5	South African	All subjects	4	Educator
P11. Faye	Female	31	Irish/South African	Science and Biology	4	Educator
P12. Sam	Female	13	South African	All subjects	3	Educator
P13. Jane	Female	32	South African	Biology and Geography	2.5	Educator

Source. Own research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The immigrant educators in this study faced a complex set of challenges rooted in cultural diversity's differences. These challenges formed the core of their culture shock experiences. Drawing from a rich thematic analysis of immigrant educators' culture shock experiences, the study established these themes: a) Expectations versus reality, b) Lack of support and the 'sink or swim' mentality, c) Communication barriers and misperceptions, d) Distant leadership and prioritisation of conformity, and e) Precarious identity and belonging. A common narrative of the immigrant educators is the discordance between the expected professional environment and the reality they encounter upon arrival in a new country. This misalignment often results in a cultural shock. Oberg's (1960) cultural transition phases underscore this journey, outlining

an initial "honeymoon phase" of excitement, followed by a crisis where differences and challenges become overwhelming, and ultimately, adjustment and adaptation if adequate support is provided.

Expectations Versus Reality

Participant immigrant educators in this study had different encounters or challenges in the UK education system. They frequently experienced misalignment between their expectations of the UK school system and the realities they encountered. This gap concerned areas like curriculum flexibility, leadership support and induction procedures. Moreover, failure to adequately address this disconnect significantly contributed to culture shock. Participant 10 [educator] believed there was insufficient guidance compared to what was anticipated and this underscored a common experience amongst new immigrant educators. Participant 10 observed:

> If I'm really struggling with trying to learn the curriculum, I'm just told, oh, you'll get there. It's fine. Yeah. That's it. [For] my induction process I was handed a file of policies and a bunch of paperwork that I had to fill in, and I was given a time limit of three hours and that was it.

Participant 11 [educator] remarked that the induction process appeared to be more of a formality aimed at meeting obligations without the appropriate comprehensive guidance:

> So, it's just an exercise in ticking the box to make sure that later if something goes wrong, they can say, oh, but you read that there in that particular thing, and when in actual fact you didn't read it because you had I think, I had about 10 induction quizzes—modules whatever I had to go through. (Participant 11 [educator])

Some participant leaders believed induction had the potential to assist immigrant educators entering the educational system in the UK in adjusting to cultural differences, although it might overwhelm them with too much information. Participant 1 [leader] posited that the induction process did not accommodate immigrant educators joining at different times in the academic:

> That's tricky. And the reason I think that's tricky is because induction programmes for new staff are set up at the beginning of a year. So, if you join sort of October time or you join in April time, there isn't the capacity within the timetable for that one person to be supported as well as they could. (Participant 1 [leader])

Participant 2 [leader] reflected on immigrant educators' induction challenges:

> I'd say like any new member of staff is to really try and pull out those key threads of the induction programme... And it can be really overwhelming. I know, because I'm there on the day and I know how much information we're bombarding you with but really trying to pull out what's common to all of them. (Participant 2 [leader])

The induction process was at odds with the expectation of a managed and informative onboarding process and indicated a need for restructuring to prioritise clarity and relevance of information. There seemed to be a lack of consistent support regardless of when teachers joined which contrasted with the reality of a rigid system that failed to accommodate immigrant educators' needs effectively. These findings align with literature that acknowledges the acculturation challenges of immigrant educators and the crucial role of a supportive induction process (Mercado & Trumbull, 2018). Nkate Philemon Mahlase (2021) concur that effective and purposeful induction programmes are vital in orientating immigrant educators about the schools' values, expectations, processes and support systems. These are valuable in making immigrant educators feel welcomed and appreciated so they can fully contribute to their new communities, enhancing retention rates in the education sector (Maready et al., 2021).

Lack of Support and the 'Sink or Swim' Mentality

The study established the absence of organised support structures within the educational setting. These immigrant educators, bringing with them a wealth of expertise and varied backgrounds, hoped for a smooth transition that would aid them in adjusting to the unique cultural and operational intricacies of a different educational framework. However, what they encountered was a strikingly different reality, where they were expected to understand and adapt to a complex and unfamiliar landscape on their own, without the necessary direction or help essential for a successful assimilation. Participant 11(educator) noted:

> They throw you into the classroom and do the job. And for me, it was a case of sink or swim. And I'm at a stage of my life, having taught for so long that I can look at this and go, you know what? I don't need this. And that's when I left. (Participant 11 [educator]

Participant 10 [educator] mentioned feeling invisible and being overlooked which shed light on the lack of acknowledgement and integration of new teachers in the educational landscape. The participant lamented:

> Even in my short time teaching here in the UK, I do feel the same that there's just no support. You are there to tick off a list on a CV and when management comes in and says, 'Oh, who's that?' They just say, 'Oh, that's just the new teacher.' They don't, uh, integrate you into anything. (Participant 10 [educator])

The perspective implies that new educators were viewed as transient or insignificant, hence the lack of support. Participant 9's statement speaks volumes about schools' lack of empathy for immigrant educators. It sheds light on a systemic issue where temporary solutions (like supply educators) are favoured over investing in the professional development of immigrant educators. Participant 9 continued:

Like to add to that, they do not support the immigrant teacher because they don't have to. There's something called supply. Do you guys get on a daily list of teachers that are absent? Hey, why must I, as a manager, exhaust myself when I'm under so much pressure and assist you or you or you in adapting or fitting in or whatever on a daily basis? We've got hundreds of supply teachers coming in. (Participant 9 [educator])

This suggests a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to acknowledge the diversity of backgrounds and the varying degrees of acclimatisation needed by different individuals. The idea that educators were just items on a curriculum vitae indicates a transactional understanding of their work, rather than a relational or community perspective. This underscores a cost-benefit analysis that favours convenience over quality support. Moreover, this attitude can create a vicious cycle of disengagement in which newly hired teachers refrain from making intellectual or emotional investments in a system that does not value them.

Literature posits that the lack of support might result in adverse psychological outcomes and decreased job satisfaction (Roskell, 2013). This condition puts unnecessary pressure on immigrant educators to quickly adapt or fail (Manik et al., 2006). Over time, this could have a severe impact on educator morale and retention (Budrow & Tarc, 2018). Leadership practices should prioritise inclusivity and empathy, fostering a community-oriented approach to the professional and personal well-being of immigrant educators (Bush, 2018). Transforming the existing "sink or swim" culture into one that nurtures and supports will not only aid immigrant educators but also enhance the educational journey for all involved.

Communication Barriers and Misperceptions

The theme of "communication barriers and misperception" addresses a major feature of immigrant educators' experiences: the fight for belonging and comprehension in a foreign professional environment. As a theme, it examines the interplay of language, culture and identity, as well as how these elements affect educators' ability to succeed in the educational system. Participant 9's [educator] story provides a glimpse into the complicated world of linguistic pragmatics, where language extends beyond words and into the sphere of cultural expression. The educator's use of the statement "I'm happy to see you" and its subsequent response as "inappropriate" demonstrates the cultural contradiction between expression and perception. The participant related:

And that's when I decided. I don't think this is life for me in the UK system. And the last bit of culture, culture shock was the language barrier. I don't mean English as the language barrier, but the language. As in if I say, 'I'm happy to see you.' That's a bit loud. Really inappropriate. And I'm like, 'Uh, no, I'm excited to see you.' So yeah, it's a cultural language type of interpretation. (Participant 9 [educator]

This imbalance not only impedes communication, but it also has the potential to cause professional conflict. It can lead to the misperception of passion as unprofessionalism, affecting the educator's connection with colleagues and students. The problem indicates an adherence to established communication standards and an unspoken demand for immigrant educators to conform to a set way of communicating, sometimes leading them to compromise their cultural heritage.

Participant 5 [leader] admitted to adopting a British accent to be taken seriously, emphasising the social dynamics of linguistic conformity. The purposeful manipulation of one's accent to conform to expectations indicates a desire to navigate the social capital associated with various dialects to avoid rejection and disregard. The need to "put on" an accent to communicate effectively and be perceived as credible reveals underlying biases within the school community. Participant 5 (leader) explained:

> In the beginning, I actually and I still do this when I speak to parents on the phone, especially when I speak to parents on the phone, I find myself unconsciously. But I guess I'm more conscious of it now, putting on a British accent just so they'll take me seriously. So, unconsciously I'll do it. And then I, you know, then I feel more comfortable in the conversation, and I just feel like I'm taken more seriously. So, I'm not saying that's the best thing to do. (Participant 5 [leader])

The educator's method reveals a greater cultural expectation that immigrant educators undertake language acrobatics to complete their responsibilities efficiently. Participant 4's [leader] narrative of a Greek instructor who left the UK owing to language issues exemplifies the harsh reality of immigrant educator turnover. Language ability and cultural fluency are inextricably linked, with the former frequently serving as a barrier to personal and professional integration. The example emphasises how the struggle of overcoming linguistic obstacles, particularly when paired with the stress of adapting to a new culture, can lead to a feeling of defeat and the choice to leave. Participant 4 (leader) revealed:

> We've had teachers that have actually gone back home…because it's just two grades, like, one of our Greek teachers went back to Greece because he just said, it's just not working. And on top of that, he's got the language barrier as well. Yes. You know, we're very lucky that we're standard English. (Participant 4 [leader])

Participants' experiences point to schools' failure to mediate against the monoculture of language – disregarding diversity, yet they accept immigrant educators from different language backgrounds. In the context of the study, there is a lack of clear communication and positive relationships within these school communities which significantly influences immigrant educators' ability to succeed (Skinner et al., 2021). This expectation to conform can force immigrant educators to suppress elements of their cultural heritage in favour of established communication norms, a compromise that can lead to professional conflict and personal dissonance (Berry & Sam,

2013). This expectation might intensify feelings of alienation and the internal struggle between professional survival and personal integrity (Yip, 2023). Berry and Feng Hou (2017) highlight the impact of cultural diversity on communication and perceptions within educational settings, indicating the potential for misunderstanding and conflict.

Distant Leadership and Prioritisation of Compliance

The theme "distant leadership and prioritisation of compliance" highlights the disparity that exists between the harsh reality that these educators face on the front lines of instruction and the expectations of an involved, supporting leadership. Immigrant educators often perceived school leadership as unsupportive and disengaged. Furthermore, a focus on rigid compliance, rather than individual needs and educator development, exacerbated culture shock experiences. Participant 11 [educator] comments present a leadership image that is seen as cold and uncaring. The claim that top leadership is "non-existent" draws attention to a serious communication gap that exists between educators and administrators, especially those who are immigrants. Participant 11 [educator] exclaimed:

> The people at the top are non-existent as far as I'm concerned. I've never seen the principal of the school. I have never seen the vice principal, the guy who is the boss of my whole department, I met him at the interview. I've never seen him since, so it's basically just what would be called my curriculum lead that I see. (Participant 11 [educator])

Due to lack of explicit leadership, immigrant educators feel unsupported because of this lack of involvement, which undermines their confidence and capacity to succeed in a new setting. Participant 6 [educator] also disclosed the leadership's apparent lack of interest in integrating immigrant educators. The detached methodology that demands educators to simply *"plug a hole and do your job"* points to a system that is more focused on maintaining operational efficiency than on developing its educators or creating a feeling of community. Participant 6 (educator) elaborated:

> Overall leadership at the college, I'd say, uh, it's obviously there, but I don't know where it happens or how it happens. Then, for help with South Africans, trying to integrate, the impression I've got is they don't care. They don't care that you're South African, they don't care where you come from. They just want you to plug a hole and do your job. (Participant 6 [educator])

This utilitarian view may lead to creating a workforce that is compliant but not committed, functioning but not flourishing. As Participant 9 stated [educator], *"The British leadership believes that professionalism is cold, cool, collective."* A culture that associates professionalism with emotional distancing may stifle open discussion, rich varied perspectives and cooperative partnerships. It may hinder the growth of a community that values and benefits from the human element in education.

Participant 8 [educator] further criticised the way schools operate, drawing comparisons to businesses where trusts or academies make decisions that may lack pedagogical wisdom:

> If the school is in a trust or an academy like the leadership of the school, like really just do what the academy or the trust tell them to do. And I think that is when schools are starting to run like businesses…and that is just what it is, because the head of the academy or the trust is not necessarily, maybe a teacher or understands the needs of children or educators or whatever it might be. (Participant 8 [educator])

This criticism draws attention to a concern that leaders' action could put administrative directive compliance ahead of educators' and students' requirements in terms of education. It points to an imbalance between efficient operations and the nurturing, educational ethos schools are expected to uphold. Research by Taylor H. Cox Jr.'s (1994) research highlights the negative impact of disengaged leadership on the acculturation process. The lack of active leadership engagement can lead to a sense of alienation and lower commitment from employees, which is particularly detrimental to those from diverse backgrounds trying to navigate a new organisational culture.

Furthermore, essentialist perspectives on leadership can be especially divisive since they oversimplify by minimising the significant influence of social, cultural and historical elements (Collinson, 2014; Seyama, 2018). Mats Alvesson and André Spicer (2012) contend that leaders must actively work to create an inclusive culture. This aligns with Berry and Sam's (2013) belief that acculturation is a process in which both immigrants and members of the host community must participate transparently, collaboratively and intentional in supporting, guiding each for an effective and meaningful accomplishment of responsibilities.

Identity and Belonging

In today's changing world of education, blending professional aspects lies at the heart of how educators shape their beliefs and methods. Yet for immigrant educators coming to the UK this blend can pose a hurdle. The concept of "identity and belonging" explores the stories of these educators as they strive to harmonise their existing identities with the responsibilities they must embrace in a foreign school environment. Confronted with a new culture, some immigrant educators struggled to reconcile their personal and professional identities. Feelings of marginalisation and not fully belonging to the school community consequently emerged.

Participant 11's [educator] reflection highlights the vague sense of belonging that many immigrant educators feel when they arrive in a new educational and cultural setting: "It's this feeling like you don't belong. But it's not their fault. It's not your fault. It's just a fact and it's figuring out and takes ... it takes time." The acknowledgement

that this feeling is not the fault of anyone, but is still a palpable reality, demonstrates the complicated interplay between individual identity and communal school culture. The process of "*figuring out*" and the time it takes to do so, emphasises the obstacles of transitioning to a new professional identity in an unfamiliar context.

Participant 10's strong admission of feeling "*so alienated*" was further explained by Participant 11 [educator] who stated: "I mean, another silly thing is, is everybody's wearing, I want to say Christmas jerseys. They call them jumpers. And it's time to remember in my head which word is the right word to use. And that's alienating for me." (Participant 11 [educator])

This exemplifies the terrible isolation that can result when one's professional function is not integrated into the school's social fabric. This estrangement might be worsened by cultural differences that the educational community does not address. Alienation can undermine an educator's professional worth and lead to disengagement from the school community (Alamri, 2018). It also deprives the school and its students of the full engagement and distinctive contributions of various educators. Participant 13's [educator] story exemplifies the exclusion that can occur when an educator serves in a temporary or peripheral capacity, such as a supply educator:

> And then I also find that I don't know if it's because of Covid [19 pandemic] and because I'm just supply, not their full-time. That as an outsider, you don't seem to get pulled, incorporated, fully. You don't feel fully part of the school. Whereas in South Africa I did. So that's my 10 cents' worth. (Participant 13 [educator])

The difference between what is experienced now and the previous sense of belonging in South Africa highlights structural difficulties in the school culture that fail to adequately accept and include various educators. Participant 7's [educator] account of being in "limbo" regarding their professional standing as an early career teacher (ECT) or a trained teacher exemplifies systemic deficiencies in recognising and integrating international qualifications and experiences. The administration's bewilderment and hesitation left the participant alone, contributing to a sense of uncertainty regarding their professional identity. Participant 7 explained:

> They couldn't decide if I was an ECT or an early career teacher. Or a qualified teacher, because I couldn't get QTS [Qualified Teacher Status] … I complained that I didn't have enough economics modules to be an economics teacher. I'm like, I'm sorry, what? But anyway, managed to sort that eventually, but they then said, oh, you're an ECT. But then they said, no, wait, you're not an ECT. So, I got a mentor, but they realised it's not working, and I couldn't be part of the ECT programme. So, it was very complicated. I was in this limbo state for a long time. And so, my line manager had no idea how to deal with me. He … didn't know what to do with me. He threw me in the deep end. (Participant 7 [educator])

This confusion was compounded by the administrative uncertainty, leaving the participant in a state of professional limbo, and underscoring the need for clear processes

that acknowledged and integrated international qualifications to ensure immigrant educators were afforded the correct professional status without ambiguity. The quest for belonging can have serious psychological consequences for educators, compromising their confidence, well-being, and, ultimately, their efficacy in the classroom (Alamri, 2018). Participants' experiences suggests that schools' integration processes may be inadequate. Cecilia Azorin and Mel Ainscow (2020) illuminated the challenges of identity and belonging, emphasising their presence points to non-inclusive school cultures. Melissa Newberry and Yvonne Allsop (2017) observed that how professional identities are constructed affect practice, and policy can help foster a feeling of acceptance and belonging within the school community. However, a fully assimilated immigrant educator can lead to more challenges that intensifies culture shock and creates a loss of identity (Rudmin, 2003).

Conclusion

Immigrant educators in UK schools bring valuable skills and knowledge to the workforce, enriching it with diversity. However, they frequently face culture shock while adapting to a new and varied cultural setting. This adjustment process can challenge cultural norms and teaching practices, potentially hindering their integration and effectiveness in schools. Drawing on Berry's acculturation theory and critical social constructivism paradigm, the study explored immigrant educators' challenges of culture shock in UK schools and their well-being, performance engagement and retention in education.

The 'Culture Shock Experience' was characterised by a stark contrast in expectations versus reality, with educators anticipating a supportive and flexible school system instead of facing rigid structures and minimal support. This gap led to a profound culture shock, intensified by the "sink or swim" environment lacking organised support systems, leaving educators to fend for themselves. Challenges in communication further complicated their integration, as cultural misunderstandings and distinct communication styles created obstacles within the school community. Feelings of alienation were exacerbated by leadership that often appeared distant and preoccupied with compliance over individual educator development. This contributed to a diminished sense of identity and belonging among the educators.

Alternative leadership approaches are recommended to mediate against the immigrant educators' adverse culture shock challenges, such as inclusive leadership that advances culturally responsive, equitable, cohesive, collaborative, creative and caring engaged employees. To enhance the sense of identity and belonging for immigrant educators in the UK, educational institutions need to implement structured induction and mentorship programmes to provide support and facilitate cultural integration. In addition, schools should establish clear guidelines for the recognition and validation of international

qualifications to prevent professional ambiguity. Lastly, ongoing cultural competency training for all staff, including administrative personnel, is essential to create an inclusive environment that values and leverages the diversity of its educators.

The research was limited to a single small school district in the UK, providing only a narrow perspective on the broader acculturation experiences of immigrant educators and their encounters with culture shock across different schools. Consequently, the findings are intended to lay the foundations for the transferability of the study into other similar contexts. Further investigation is needed into how school leaders support the acculturation of immigrant educators while acknowledging their culture shock experiences. Future studies might also explore the experiences and viewpoints of immigrant school leaders regarding integrating immigrant teachers.

REFERENCES

Alamri, B. (2018). The Role of Social Media in Intercultural Adaptation: A Review of the Literature. *English Language Teaching*, *11*(12), 77-85.

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2012). Critical leadership studies: The case for critical performativity. *Human Relations*, *65*(3), 367–390. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711430555

Azorín, C., & Ainscow, M. (2020). Guiding schools on their journey towards inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *24*(1), 58-76. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1450900

Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *29*(6), 697–712. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013

Berry, J. W. (2006). Stress perspectives on acculturation. In *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 43–56). Cambridge University Press.

Berry, J. W., & Hou, F. (2017). Immigrant acculturation and wellbeing in Canada. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, *57*(4), 254–264. https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000064

Berry, J. W., & Sam, D. L. (2013). Accommodating cultural diversity and achieving equity: An introduction to psychological dimensions of multiculturalism. *European Psychologist*, *18*(3), 151–157. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000167

Berry, J. W., Phinney, J. S., Sam, D. L., & Vedder, P. (2006). Immigrant youth: Acculturation, identity, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, *55*(3), 303–332. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2006.00256.x

Budrow, J., & Tarc, P. (2018). What teacher capacities do international school recruiters look for? *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation*, *41*(3), 860–889. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26570571

Bush, T. (2018). Preparation and induction for school principals: Global perspectives. *Management in Education*, *32*(2), 66-71. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618761805

Cox Jr., T. H. (1994). *Cultural diversity in organizations: Theory, research and practice*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.

De Villiers, R. (2007). Migration from developing countries: The case of South African teachers to the United Kingdom. *Perspectives in Education*, *25*(2), 67–76. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC87428

Department of Education. (2020, March 26). *Explore education statistics*. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/explore-education-statistics

Faas, D., Smith, A., & Darmody, M. (2018). The role of principals in creating inclusive school environments: Insights from community national schools in Ireland. *School Leadership and Management*, *38*(4), 457–473. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1430688

Fee, J. F. (2011). Latino immigrant and guest bilingual teachers: Overcoming personal, professional, and academic culture shock. *Urban Education*, *46*(3), 390–407. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085910377447

Furnham, A. (2019). Culture shock: A review of the literature for practitioners. *Psychology*, *10*(13), 1832–1855. https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2019.1013119

George, A., Meadows, P., Metcalf, H., & Rolfe, H. (2011). *Impact of migration on the consumption of education and Children's Services and the consumption of health services, social care and social services*. National Institute of Economic and Social Research. https://www.niesr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/impact-of-migration.pdf

George, G., & Rhodes, B. (2015). Teacher salary differentials using Purchasing Power Parity (PPP): A South African perspective as both a 'source' and 'destination' country. *Journal of Education*, (63), 111-136.

Hur, J. W., & Suh, S. (2018). Community-university partnerships in practice: Development of welcoming learning environments for new immigrants. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, *22*(3), 45–68. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1193377.pdf

Lumby, J., & Coleman, M. (2007). *Leadership and diversity: Challenging theory and practice in education*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446213612

Magubane, K. (2016, March 23). *The exodus of teachers from SA is not slowing down*. Business Day. https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/education/2016-03-23-the-exodus-of-teachers-from-sa-is-not-slowing-down/

Mahlase, N. P. (2021). *The socialisation of Zimbabwean immigrant teachers in Limpopo public secondary schools* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Limpopo]. http://hdl.handle.net/10386/3380

Manik, S., Maharaj, B., & Sookrajh, R. (2006). Globalisation and transnational teachers: South African teacher migration to the UK. *Migracijske i Etničke Teme, 22*(1–2), 15–33. https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/8125?utm_

Maready, B., Cheng, Q., & Bunch, D. (2021). Exploring mentoring practices contributing to new teacher retention: An analysis of the beginning teacher longitudinal study. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *19*(2), 88-99. https://doi.org/10.24384/rgm9-sa56

Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (Eds.). (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. John Wiley & Sons.

Newberry, M., & Allsop, Y. (2017). Teacher attrition in the USA: The relational elements in a Utah case study. *Teachers and Teaching*, *23*(8), 863-880. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2017.1358705

Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*(4), 177-182. https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966000700405

Paul-Smith, S. (2008). To mentor is to learn. *Early Years Educator*, *10*(1), 28-30. https://doi.org/10.12968/eyed.2008.10.1.28950

Roskell, D. (2013). Cross-cultural transition: International teachers' experience of "culture shock". *Journal of Research in International Education*, *12*(2), 155–172. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240913497297

Rotich, J. (2011). Mentoring as a springboard to acculturation of immigrant students into American schools. *Journal of Case Studies in Education, 1.* https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1055522

Rudmin, F. W. (2003). Critical history of the acculturation psychology of assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. *Review of General Psychology*, *7*(1), 3–37. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.7.1.3

Sentance, S., Kirby, D., Quille, K., Cole, E., Crick, T., & Looker, N. (2022, September). Computing in school in the UK & Ireland: A comparative study. In K. Quille, J. Maguire, & B. A. Becker (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2022 Conference on United Kingdom & Ireland Computing Education Research* (pp. 1-7). https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.89656

Seyama, S. E. (2018). *Performance management in higher education: Critical leadership perspectives for academic heads of department* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Johannesburg. https://hdl.handle.net/10210/474796

Sibanda, D., & Seyama-Mokhaneli, S. (2024). "This is how we do things". Acculturation of immigrant teachers: Elusive critical leadership. *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, *15*(1), 161-179. https://doi.org/10.15503/jecs2024.1.161.179

Skinner, B., Leavey, G., & Rothi, D. (2021). Managerialism and teacher professional identity: Impact on well-being among teachers in the UK. *Educational Review*, *73*(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1556205

Stroud Stasel R. (2021). Towards an acculturation framework for K-12 educators who live and work abroad: The role of teacher training institutions. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *2*(4), 53-75. https://doi.org/10.52547/johepal.2.4.53

Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2020). *Psychology culture shock*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070696

Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Publications.

Yip, S. Y. (2023). Immigrant teachers' experience of professional vulnerability. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, *51*(3), 233–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2023.2174075

Zane, N. W., & Mak, W. W. (2003). Major approaches to the measurement of acculturation among ethnic minority populations: A content analysis and an alternative empirical strategy. In K. M. Chun, P. Balls Organista, & G. Marín (Eds.), *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research* (pp. 39–60). American Psychological Association. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2002-18425-005