'I am a Mercenary Now' International Teachers as a Global Educational Precariat?

Adam Poole, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, China

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Abstract
International teachers still remain an under-researched group in the field of international education (Bailey, 2015; Bunnell, 2016). However, recent studies (Baily, 2015; Burke, 2015; Cavendish, 2011; Poole, 2017, 2018; Savva, 2015, 2017) have started to focus on international teachers' cross-cultural teaching experiences. Rather than focusing on seemingly fixed characteristics, these studies show how teachers' experiences play a significant role in the construction of their professional identities in cross-cultural contexts. As part of this turn to the international teacher, Bunnell (2016) has proposed that international teachers should be understood as part of an international educational precariat, a term initially proposed by Guy Standing (2011). The purpose of this study is to substantiate Bunnell's thesis that international teachers are emerging as an educational precariat. It draws upon interview data from a larger study which explored the construction of international teacher identity in a Chinese bilingual school in Shanghai. In so doing, I build on Bunnell's work by offering empirical data to substantiate his claim, but also extend it by questioning the extent to which all international teachers can be said to be a part of a global educational precariat.

Keywords: International teachers; international education precariat; the precariat; China

Introduction

International teachers still remain an under-researched group in the field of international education (Bailey, 2015; Bunnell, 2016). They have typically been defined from a personal perspective (Garton, 2000) or in terms of fixed character traits (Hardman, 2001). However, recent studies (Baily, 2015; Blyth, 2017; Burke, 2015; Cavendish, 2011; Poole, 2017, 2018; Savva, 2015, 2017) have highlighted the complexity of international teachers' lives. Rather than focusing on seemingly fixed characteristics, these studies show how teachers' experiences play a significant role in the construction of their professional identities in cross-cultural contexts. As part of this turn to the international teacher, Bunnell (2016, 2017) has proposed that international teachers should be understood as part of an international educational precariat, a term initially proposed by Guy Standing (2011).

This paper builds on Bunnell's international education precariat thesis (Bunnell, 2016) by utilising interview data from my doctoral research into international teachers' experiences in China. This paper also extends Bunnell's thesis by showing that international teachers do not necessarily form a class in and of themselves, but rather can be said to be in a state of precarity. In so doing, this paper addresses the paucity of studies on international teachers by offering an insight into three teachers' lives and their reasons for becoming international teachers and their experiences of working in international schools.

Literature review

The international education sector has seen a shift from an interpretation of international education as idealistic in nature to a post-idealistic phase, in which international education is understood as an industry, with stakeholders participating in it for pragmatic reasons (Brummitt and Keeling, 2013; Bunnell, 2014). As part of this turn, Bunnell (2016) has argued that international teachers should be seen as part of an emerging global class – an international teacher education precariat.

The precariat has been defined as class of individuals who find themselves without an 'anchor of stability' (Standing, 2011). This stability is said to be met in seven forms of labour related security, which include: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security. Members of the precariat occupy the margins of citizenship as 'urban nomads' or 'denizens' (Bunnell, 2016; Standing, 2011). Whilst full citizens have access to civil (equality before the law), cultural (entitlement in participate in the cultural life of the community), social (access to pension and health care), economic (equal entitlement to undertake income-earning activity) and political (equal right to vote) rights, the *denizen* is someone who has a more limited range of rights than citizens. Although anyone could potentially 'fall' into the precariat due to unforeseen economic reasons or even through choice, certain groups are more susceptible to precarity than others due to their marginal status. These groups include refugee and asylum seekers, illegal migrants, temporary and seasonal migrants, and long-term migrants (Standing, 2011). Based on the findings of this paper, international teachers can be said to belong to the latter group, long-term migrants.

Bunnell (2016) has extended Standing's thesis beyond the temporary or seasonal worker who typically characterise the precariat, by proposing that the growing numbers of teachers who choose to teach internationally are increasingly forming a sub-grouping of the precariat. Whilst international teaching does have its positive side, it is also characterised by a darker, more precarious reality (Halicioglu, 2015). In order to illustrate this thesis, Bunnell offers anecdotal evidence from analysis of anonymous postings on message boards, such as internationalschoolsreview.com (*ISR*.com), that highlights destructive leadership, nepotism and passport retention as recent evidence of an increasingly precarious international school workplace. He also draws upon real-life incidents, such as a Tibetan-Buddhist Chemistry teacher who was dismissed from his job for purportedly insulting Islam, in order to substantiate his thesis that international teachers are a sub-group of the precariat due to 'employment instability.' Recent practitioner-focused works (Blyth, 2017; Savva, 2015) also provide evidence to strengthen Bunnell's thesis. Blyth's autoethnography, for example, explores 'the teacher's position in an international school as subordinate and how [the teacher] is wronged on three counts; epistemically for being wrongfully mistrusted, ethically for being wrongfully excluded and ontologically for being wrongfully positioned as a lesser human being' (p.xv). My own doctoral research has also highlighted the 'darker' side of international education, such as the marginalisation of international teachers' identities, unfair dismissal, and a paucity of professional development and orientation for teaching internationally, all of which impact negatively on teachers' well-being and sense of self as a professional educator.

The increasing presence of precarity in the international education sector can be attributed to the transitory and transnational nature of international schools (Hayden, 2011). To quote Bunnell (2016), the notion of a transnational space 'implies that such institutions are often outside the national system yet at the same time nor do they operate within any discernible or organised international system' (p. 544). One colleague once summarised this situation more laconically as 'the wild west of international education'. Whilst the anecdotal and real-life evidence that forms part of Bunnell's argument does not prove conclusively that international teachers are part of an educational precariat, it certainly indicates that the subject warrants further investigation. Hence the point of this paper – to give credence to Bunnell's argument.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method for eliciting data about how the participants articulated their experiences as international teachers. In contrast to quantitative forms of data collection, such as questionnaires, experiments, and surveys, interviews provide a level of depth and complexity that can allow researchers to gain access to respondents' inner worlds so they can experience the world as they do (Silverman, 2017). Interviews can also generate 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) which can make participants' inner worlds more vivid for the researcher.

The participants were interviewed separately on two occasions, with interviews lasting between sixty to ninety minutes. All interviews were recorded on *Garage Band* (recording software) and later transcribed incorporating aspects of conversational analysis, such as paralinguistic features. Interview questions did not directly use the terms 'precariat' or 'precarity' but focused instead on eliciting rich

data about the participants' experiences of being international teachers in China. Interview data were analysed using a framework that synthesised Standing's (2011) and Bunnell's (2016) definitions of the precariat. Based on the literature review above, being a part of an international teacher education precariat creates:

- Uncertainty which can lead to a decline in psychological well-being;
- Limited or no representation in labour disputes;
- Limited opportunities to find employment in passport country which leads to teachers becoming global exiles;
- Liminal citizenry in the form of the denizen.

The framework was employed in order to initially identify narrative chunks that contained experiences of precarity. Once identified, the narratives were analysed using discourse analysis in order to bring into focus how the participants constructed their experiences of precarity.

Research context and participants

Participants were selected from two *Type C non-traditional international schools* in Shanghai China, with whom the author was affiliated. In the Chinese context, these types of schools, which are also referred to as 'internationalised schools' or 'bilingual schools' are often predominantly national, in that most of the curriculum is focused on delivering the National Curriculum with an international curriculum reserved for the final 3-4 years of high school (Poole, 2018). The first, WEST, was a recently opened for-profit bilingual school that claimed to offer an 'internationalised' curriculum that combined aspects of 'Chinese' and 'Western' approaches to learning. However, in practice the curriculum was blocked-out rather than integrated. For example, students, who were primarily host country nationals, followed the Chinese compulsory national curriculum during middle school and then transitioned to an international curriculum in the form of the IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) and IBDP (International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme). Although the school had only been in operation for three years at the time of this study, it had expanded to include a second campus, and appeared to be increasing in prestige. However, the interview data indicated that the school had trouble in retaining expatriate teaching staff, due to a lack of transparency and a perceived inequality in hiring and remuneration procedures.

The second school, SOUTH, was a non-profit school that also catered primarily to host country nationals, although at the time of this study the school was pushing to recruit more 'international' students. The school was well-funded and resourced, and recently expanded to include a third campus. SOUTH adopted a more integrative approach to combining Chinese and Western education by offering the IGCSE and the IBDP alongside aspects of the Chinese national curriculum. Staff turnover was relatively low compared to WEST, with the interview data clearly indicating that teachers were generally content with their contracts and work-loads.

Findings

Tyron: 'I am a mercenary now'

Before becoming an international teacher, Tyron worked in the military police in South Africa as a physical therapist. It was during this time that he completed a Masters degree and a PhD in sport's science. After retiring from the police, he became a part-time teacher, and later pursued a post-doctorate position in Canada. Unable to find employment in his home country due to the complex sociopolitical consequences of Apartheid, such as labour laws like Affirmative Action, Tyron became *'unemployable in my own country'* which forced him into the global precariat – that is, into a state of permanent exile and uncertainty as an economic global migrant. In Tyron's own words:

> I was actually immigrating to Canada, but that did not work out. I came to China because of practical reasons. I came because I had no work. And now I've been doing this for the last three years. And somebody would tell me 'it's kind of funny Tyron that you would go almost around the world to go to find a job' because I went to Canada from South Africa and then Canada to China.

Tyron laconically and prosaically states that '*I had no work'* whilst *'I had to do it'* conveys a sense of disempowerment and helplessness. The more utopian dream of becoming an academic and making a better life for himself and his family in Canada are replaced with a grittier and more pragmatic reality of having to find a job and continue making money in order to support his wife and three sons in South Africa.

After working in Tianjin for a year, Tyron moved to WEST, initially attracted by the prospect of helping to '*start this school from scratch'*:

> I wasn't very happy with Tianjin. And then I got this phone call from the WEST people telling me that they need a PE teacher and would I be interested in coming for an interview. It just sounded like Shanghai was going to be a lot more fun and a lot more modern so that's when I did the interview and they told me a week later that I got the job. I was pretty chuffed about it.

However, Tyron's initial enthusiasm soon turned to frustration. For example, he struggled to reconcile his beliefs about international education (as embodied in the attributes of the learner profile), with the demands of WEST's principal to construct a Chinese curriculum *'with a touch of international in it'*. This was partly due to the hierarchical structure of WEST, where instructions were issued like communiques with little or no explanation or justification – as Robert explained, *'there was this very strict pecking order'*. However, another issue was the fact that Tyron and Robert were precluded from understanding the organisational culture of WEST as a Chinese *Type C non-traditional international school* due to an unwillingness or unfamiliarity with Chinese culture and language. Data from a larger study found that another expatriate teacher, Sophie, had a more positive experience of working at WEST due to her ability, and willingness, to learn Chinese and understand Chinese culture. This suggests that cultural dissonance can lead to a loss of psychological well-being, thereby leading to a state of emotional precarity.

Tyron's narrative also highlights how being a global exile profoundly changed his teacher identity:

> I sometimes feel like I'm a mercenary now, like a mercenary soldier. Whoever pays me well, I will go there. It doesn't matter where. I mean, I will go to Katmandu and Tibet or wherever. If they pay well, I will go there. I will go to Antarctica! That's how I see myself now.

The word 'now' functions as an adverb of time underscoring the extent to which Tyron's identity has changed in just over a year. In contrast to the more positive tone of the interview data collected at the beginning of his time at WEST, Tyron now presents himself as a *'mercenary'* as a way to underscore the lengths to which he will go in order to survive and provide for his family. The image of the globe-trotting international teacher is thrown into stark relief; while teaching overseas can be exciting for some, for others it can also be precarious and uncertain in nature. Recalling Standing's (2011) notion of the precariat, Tyron's existence as an international teacher is imposed rather than chosen, thereby leading to a loss of self-efficacy and agency.

Nora: 'You are just a visitor when you come home'

In contrast to Tyron, who became international teachers out of economic necessity, Nora chose to become an international teacher, having spent the best part of her teaching career in international schools outside of her passport country, the USA.

Nora's narrative repeatedly focuses on the ambivalent nature of international teaching, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of an extended sojourn abroad, which runs like a *leit mofit* through her narrative. Echoing Tyron and Robert's narratives, Nora initially felt excited to work at SOUTH, which she considered to be a relatively 'good' school due to its CIS accreditation. However, her initial enthusiasm had started to sour a year into her two-year contract:

> You know, when I first came here, they sold me on it was new. That can be exciting too. But it didn't really feel like that when I actually got here. It didn't feel like I was involved or asked to contribute my experience from my last school. So it's just kind of a disconnect between what they sometimes say but what actually happens.

The verb 'sold' implies that Nora feels duped by the school, echoing Robert's narrative. Meanwhile, 'disconnect' accentuates the gap between what Nora expected SOUTH to be like and the reality she found. Her extensive international teaching experience and perception of the school as CIS accredited engendered certain expectations that resonated with her identity as an experienced teacher, but the school failed to live up to her expectations as it did not harness or valorise her experiences, thereby leading to the negation of her professional identity as an educator. The tension between idealism and reality also mirrors the changing nature of the international education landscape, which has rapidly changed from an idealistic to post-idealistic, where education as a passport to a top university is increasingly of more significance than making the world 'a better place' by promoting greater tolerance through intercultural understanding. Nora continued by explaining that:

> As an international school teacher, you want to feel invested in where you are working. And you feel that if you have something to contribute and you're not given an opportunity to do that you want to start thinking about moving on.

Nora refers to herself as an 'international school teacher', signaling that the 'international' aspect of being a teacher is a fundamental part of her identity as an educator. The school's decision not to draw upon Nora's experiences results in her contemplating breaking her contract, perhaps in order to find a school that valorises her identity as an experienced international educator. However, the prospect of moving on to a new school and the security of being able to do that is also empowering:

> But there is that certainty of 'I know I can find a job – I have enough qualifications and if I wait long enough I'll probably find a pretty good job. But you can't, you know, go playing games of looking for a job. At some point, you just need to decide I'm going to take a job. Here's the date: whatever month and whatever and I just need to have a decision made because there is all that paperwork and everything that goes into moving.

While high mobility is empowering, it is also precarious in nature. Nora also touches upon how being an international teacher 'on the circuit' has affected her sense of identity:

> You still have your original citizenship, but you become further and further from that where you are just a visitor when you come home. And you can't fully adapt to another culture unless you just stayed there and learned everything about it and maybe married and entered into the society. But you are always going to be someone on the outskirts of what's going on.

The narrative chunk conveys a strong sense of liminality or permanent in-betweeness: Nora has yet to adapt to the local culture, but at the same time she also feels increasingly alienated from her passport country. The phrase *'you become further and further'* suggests that this distancing is only likely to increase the more time a teacher spends outside of their passport country. The metaphors *'entered'* and *'outskirts'* vividly convey cultural space in terms of geographical space, with Nora adopting the second person 'you' in order to imply that she considers herself to still be a cultural outsider in China (she mentioned that she felt more at home in her previous school in Europe). The term *'citizenship'* also brings to mind Standing's notion of the denizen. According to Nora, this permanent in-between lead to *'a little bit of stress'* as *'you don't have a base to depend on; you've got yourself.'*

Alice: 'For me, it's more of an adventure'

Whereas the previous narratives highlight the precarious or ambivalent nature of international teaching, Alice's narrative focuses on the positive aspects of being an international teacher. Alice was relatively new to the international teaching scene, having given up *'a full-time permanent long-standing position in a very prestigious school [in Australia] where I'd been for twenty-one years'* of her own volition in order to teach in China:

> It was most definitely a choice. And I guess too I have security behind me in terms of experience, qualifications, finance. Like I'm not a new teacher who is trying to save for their wedding or save for their first home. So for me, it's more of an adventure.

Words like *'definitely'* and *'choice'* convey a clear sense of agency, with Alice presenting herself as being in control of her destiny. She is empowered due to her experiences, qualifications, and financial security, all of which explain why her narrative focuses on the more positive side of international teaching. The removal of financial considerations means that she is able to appreciate her international sojourn as more of an *'adventure'* rather than an *'exile'*. She draws upon the discourse of the globe-trotting international teacher in order to differentiate herself from the majority of international teachers, who find themselves teaching internationally due to forces beyond their control. Alice also offers an alternative perspective on age and precarity. Whereas Robert equated being older with more pragmatic, economic concerns and being younger with wanting to have an 'adventure', Alice inverts this distinction by presenting younger teachers as motivated by the need to save.

Alice also goes on to cite self-efficacy as another factor that leads to a feeling of security:

> One of things that gives me comfort is that prior to this position maybe I was offered three other positions over the course of six months. So, that is security. But I guess I feel like I'm confident in my abilities.

The ability to choose from a number of jobs empowers Alice. The word *'comfort'* resonates with other words like *'security'* and *'confident'* thereby creating what I term discursive consonance. However, the word 'comfort' implies that her current situation is perhaps not quite as she expected it to be. Alice would subsequently go on to leave SOUTH and China, moving to teach in another international school in South-east Asia. Interestingly, Alice's identity as a teacher is not connected to her cross-cultural experiences, as was the case with Nora, but rather with her perceived pedagogical abilities. When asked if she considered herself to be an international teacher, Alice was adamant that she was *'a teacher that happens to be working in China.'* She went on to explain that:

> There's kind of a prestige, perhaps, amongst teachers that teach outside of their home country. When they talk about the schools that they've been in. So 'this is only your first international school? (whispers) Ah, okay, yeah.' And that seems to be a fairly defining descriptor of whether you are an international teacher or not.

Once again, Alice distances herself from being an international teacher by referring to this group using the collective 'they'. Rather, she presents herself a teacher who teaches internationally. From her perspective as a 'national' teacher who teaches in an 'international' school, there is a kind of snobbery (prestige) that goes with being an experienced international teacher, as revealed by the use of dialogue in which Alice's inexperience is met with surprise (use of the interrogative form) and disapproval (the anti-intensifier 'only' and the lowering of the voice into a whisper). For Alice, the international teaching experience may bring a certain amount of cultural or social capital (prestige), but it is economic capital and teaching experience that brings true

security. Overall, Alice's narrative is striking in its absence of precarity, suggesting that financial security and the ability to freely choose where a teacher works are significant factors in whether or not a teacher perceives their international teaching career as secure or precarious.

Conclusion

The findings add to the growing literature on international teachers and international teachers as an educational precariat by showing that precarity is a complex phenomenon. Its exploration in educational research involves antithetical ontological perspectives: on the one hand, the situation of precarity can be said to exist 'out there' in the world as structure, and therefore has empirical warrant. On the other hand, precarity is also a construction – it is constituted by an individual's experiences and the meanings they impose on those experiences. Standing (2011) and Bunnell (2016) have approached the topic of the precariat from a more positivist stance. However, the findings of this paper reveal that teachers tended to narrate the 'darker' side of international education in terms of a situation or condition of precarity. Therefore, this paper adds to the literature by making a distinction between the precariat as a class and precarity as a situation or condition, primarily focusing on the latter and showing that teachers' understanding of precarity is connected to their experiences and perception of financial security.

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Contact email: tyger106@hotmail.com