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To cite this article: Jeanne Rey , Matthieu Bolay & Yonatan N. Gez (2020) Precarious privilege: personal debt, lifestyle aspirations and mobility among international school teachers, Globalisation, Societies and Education, 18:4, 361-373, DOI: [10.1080/14767724.2020.1732193](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1732193)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1732193>



Published online: 26 Feb 2020.



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Precarious privilege: personal debt, lifestyle aspirations and mobility among international school teachers

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen an exponential growth in the field of international schools, and a concurrent rise in the number of young Anglo-Saxon teachers overseas. Such mobile teaching careers have largely been presented in terms of emphasising exploration, travel and lifestyle-related migration. While acknowledging such factors, we also draw attention to financial constraints, and in particular, to the challenge of personal debts, which weighs heavily over many Anglo-Saxon teachers. We therefore discuss international teachers' mobile trajectory in terms of a balancing act of negotiation between lifestyle and financial factors and point to a strategic trade-off between the two. Moreover, by emphasising the neglected aspect of indebtedness, we argue that, while a key point of appeal for such teachers' participation in the international school sector lies in the ostensible participation in the carefree, privileged environment of lifestyle migration that would have been out of reach for them otherwise, in reality, such horizons of opulence are limited, as teachers are locked into a precarious system that offers little protection and is highly unpredictable. In this context, the accumulation of professional experience provides only a limited pathway for assuming control over one's future destiny/destination – be it professional, geographic, or financial – and at times may even backfire.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 April 2019
Accepted 16 February 2020

KEYWORDS

International schools; debt; student loans; lifestyle migration; teachers; mobility trajectories

1. Introduction

In this article, we explore the driving forces and structural conditions behind the professional mobile trajectories of international teachers primarily from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. In the literature, the field of international teaching tends to be highlighted for its 'cosmopolitan stance' (Rey, Bolay, and Schubiger 2019; Weenink 2008) encapsulated and promoted by international curricula.¹ This stance makes international education² ideologically attractive to some teachers, who see it as a progressive and timely educational field that is imbued with open-mindedness and a spirit of pluralism adapted to a globalised world. At the same time, professional autonomy and the opportunity to travel and to deepen intercultural understanding reinforce the choice of international teaching as an attractive pathway for people eager to embark on fresh challenges both in their professional and personal lives (Savva 2013; Hrycak 2015). In this respect, international teaching may not only have an intrinsic value for the ideals that are associated with the profession,³ but can also give the impression of a type of 'lifestyle migration', a privileged form of mobility driven by globalisation, individualisation, increased ease of movement, work-related flexibility, and increases in relative global wealth. For the lifestyle migrant, mobility is associated with a search for the 'good life', as well as with authenticity

and meaning-making – a project often taking the form of romantic, idyllic, and some say escapist ‘return’ to a simpler mode of living (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Codó 2018).

Within the international schooling sector, this view is prominent. It can be found in the exotic images and language of freedom and exploration provided by school heads and recruiting agencies to prospective teachers, as well as in the motivational discourse offered by international teachers themselves.⁴ But while employment market actors tend to emphasise this view, we propose that such emphasis on the lifestyle aspect of teachers’ mobility may underplay structural factors, and in particular financial considerations, primary among which is the burden of accumulated student loans. Indeed, we argue that this marginalisation of debt is not coincidental, and in fact, the appeal of the international teaching market draws in part precisely on the idea whereby individuals encumbered by debts can nonetheless partake in the privilege and seemingly carefree attitude reserved for lifestyle migrants. This emphasis is set within a number of timely phenomena, including the privatisation, financialisation, and internationalisation of education, the rising level of indebtedness through student loans in the Anglo-Saxon world, and the precarisation and flexibilisation of a globally mobile workforce.

In presenting our argument, we draw on a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2015 to 2018 in the international education sector.⁵ Our ethnography included classroom observations,⁶ participation in school events, and attendance at teaching job fairs, school fairs, and specialised online job portals and forums. Throughout our fieldwork, we followed individual teachers across the main market junctures that regulate their employment, while also capturing their experiences as communicated informally in multiple online platforms. We conducted a total of 86 interviews⁷ with international school teachers from a variety of backgrounds⁸ and with other experts of the field (school principals, school owners, consultants, teacher recruiters, etc.).⁹ In line with the sector’s global scope and reach, multi-sited fieldwork was conducted in Switzerland (multiple cities), Nairobi, London, Chicago and Toronto. Despite obvious differences between our fieldwork sites, Kenya and Switzerland share common features such as the fact that both serve as regional or global trading hubs that are also home to a large number of international organisations.¹⁰ By contrast, London, Chicago and Toronto are seen more as recruitment and training hubs for the international education industry.¹¹ In addition, some interviews were conducted online (e.g. with teachers who had already left the country where we conducted the study, or with teachers met during job fairs).¹²

We begin by briefly setting the stage for the global industry of international education. Introducing a quick typology of international teachers, we then explain our focus on the category of the ‘adventurer teacher’. This is followed by a section addressing the financial concerns common among international teachers, which we then present in relation to lifestyle migration and a touristic drive. Before concluding, we set the personal negotiation of these two key factors against structural precarity and accumulated professional experience, and consider how actors try to gain control – professional, geographic, and financial – over their destination and destiny, with varying degrees of success.

2. Cosmopolitan education for sale

The notion of ‘international schools’ remains vague and somewhat contested, lacking consensual definition. From a labour market perspective, such schools share a number of characteristics, including a common pool of native English-speaking recruits trained in Anglo-Saxon countries, the use of English as a main teaching language, and a reliance on internationally recognised curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB).¹³ The literature on the development of international education usually traces its inception back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the birth of the League of Nations in Geneva in 1919. The ‘foundational myth’ (Dugonjić 2014) for international education dates to the establishment of the International School of Geneva (Ecolint) in 1924 as a response to the needs of a growing number of expatriate families working in international organisations. The birth of international education further profited from an alignment of additional factors such as

American industrial corporate interests, ideals of peace as articulated by political internationalism, active currents in pedagogical innovations in the Geneva area, and corporatists' interest in the consolidation of an international worker status (Dugonjić 2014). Indeed, the birth and continuous expansion of international education correlated with the growth of corporate imperialism, notably in the extractive sector – some of the first international schools started off as private schools for the expatriate employees of oil companies – in which companies traditionally cater to the education of their employees' children both in the countries of extraction and/or production and in the countries where their headquarters are located. This model has later been replicated, following the 'spatio-temporal fixes' of capital (Harvey 2003), in the Middle East, in South and East Asia, in China and increasingly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Indeed, in recent years, the rationale and tone of marketisation and commodification of education have increasingly dominated the sector. In a world transformed by neoliberal projects and policies, the value of education is monetised as a path for desired futures, emphasising return on investment through a variety of gained capitals over the inherent significance of the formation of a moral character and an inquisitive mind. According to Bunnell (2016, 546), the international schools industry has undergone a shift, from an

'ideal' context of activity, identified by a balance of pragmatism, idealism and innovation within a monopolistic market structure, towards a post-cold war and 'post-ideal', or 'non-ideal', context identified by an imbalance of commercialism, profit and competition within a monopolistic competition market structure where brand and reputation matter most.

This manifests in the rise of for-profit primary and secondary education markets akin to what Robertson and Komljenovic (2016) have observed regarding higher education, including the engagement of recruiters for international students and financial agents that provide families with new forms of tuition-related credit. Thus, for example, multinational companies nowadays offer 'edu-packages', including anything from schools' technology and architectural infrastructure to the curriculum to teacher training and professional development (Ball 2010). These trends reflect in numbers: throughout the last two decades, international education has grown exponentially all across the world, and the estimated numbers of international schools, who now employ about half a million members of staff¹⁴, skyrocketed from 1000 in 1995 (Hayden 2011) to more than 9300 in 2017 (Keeling 2018).

This expansion is linked to two main factors, namely the growth in expatriation and the rising demand from local – upper/middle class – populations. The appeal of these two target groups is demonstrated in our own research in Switzerland, where we found that the significant growth of the international school sector in the first decade of the twenty-first century was mainly fuelled by the rising demands by expatriates funded by newly established multinational companies; however, as the 2007–2008 financial crisis resulted in cuts in corporate funding, international schools increasingly sought to target a local clientele. Across so-called emerging economies, international education is increasingly geared towards a growing local middle class aspiring for global pathways, and it is them who now constitute the main market for international schools (Brummitt and Keeling 2013, 29; Keeling 2018, 21). While these schools' students are mainly local, they can claim internationality due to their curriculum and a high ratio of internationally trained teachers, who are hired within the same Anglo-Saxon transnational labour market as expat-dominated schools (Hayden and Thompson 2016). At the same time, not all schools that claim internationality deliver on their word. Indeed, in our fieldwork in Kenya, we have seen how, while international schools often cater for a large expatriate population, local private schools increasingly adopt the idiom of internationality to varying degrees of conviction – at times, as a blatantly false pretense – with the intention of tapping into the aspirations – and pockets – of a growing middle class.

These last points are of special relevance in the context of the present paper. While claiming international appeal and cultivation of a truly cosmopolitan stance, critics note that the international school sector is, on the whole, Anglo-Saxon and white. They point to the postcolonial continuities

in which the field of international education is grounded (Hughes 2009; Burke 2017), which is especially salient in view of ‘the geographic spread within the North/South divide; the Western-centric curricula; and the extent of the non-local and Northern-oriented teaching force’ (Bunnell 2017, 8). In many contexts, it is precisely the symbolic capital embodied by (mostly white) native English-speaking teachers that constitutes one of the main points of appeal for international schools.¹⁵ In Japan, for instance, Imoto (2011, 283) notes that parents are concerned primarily ‘with the value of white native teachers’ that contribute to make a school ‘authentically’ international in their view. As we will see, it is precisely for such Anglo-Saxon teachers that the challenge of mounting student debts is a central concern that may affect professional trajectories.

3. The mobile adventurer teacher

The field of international education is fundamentally associated with mobility: of families and students, curriculum and pedagogies, and, as is of concern here, of teachers. Teaching in international schools is set within processes that are at once geographic – ease of transnational crossing – and related to identity – the rise of ‘portable personhoods’ and the ‘transformed nature of occupations, personal identity and life strategies’ (Elliott and Urry 2010, 3). Teachers’ mobility can be placed within wider work pattern shifts, including a general move towards self-made ‘boundaryless’ and ‘portfolio’ careers, whose capital is accumulated across wide geographies, collecting a range of global experiences (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). And yet, as not all teachers in international schools would automatically fit such a description, we wish to present an original typology of international school teachers that we developed in the course of our research – the ‘expat’, the ‘local’, and the ‘adventurer’ – before focusing on the category of adventurers as standing at the centre of our present argument.¹⁶

Firstly, ‘expat teachers’ are foreign teachers whose mobility is tied to personal circumstances, most commonly by travelling with one’s partner and family as a ‘trailing spouse’. In such cases, the duration of employment often depends on the partner’s contract (e.g. within an international organisation or multinational company). Such teachers may not have chosen teaching as their first career, but rather consider it as a contextual activity, often spurred by limited employment opportunities in the host country. Secondly, the category of ‘local teachers’ refers to teachers from a local background. Local teachers are usually trained within their country and have simply transitioned to an international school from the public or private sector. Being more sedentary, local teachers often outlast mobile international teachers in the same school, thus increasing stability within an otherwise high-turnover teaching environment.

Lastly, ‘adventurer teachers’¹⁷ are *a priori* connected neither to the site/country of the school nor to the expat community. They are typically white, trained teachers from Anglo-Saxon countries, and are mostly young and unaccompanied by spouse or children. Their basic contracts – whose breach is subject to severe financial and social penalisation – are usually limited to two years, whereupon it might be extended or replaced by a new contract in another school/country.¹⁸ In line with the stereotypical image of the international teacher, teachers of this category often regard their work as an instrument of mobility that will quench their thirst for adventure and travel. As one British math teacher, who as a young man taught for years in Kenya before settling down in the UK, explained,

one of the great things I thought that there is about teaching [is] that you can just go anywhere in the world. (...) [As a math teacher,] it’s surprisingly easy to get a job wherever you are, wherever you like in the world. (...) The adventure of teaching really appealed to me.

In this article, we focus on this third category of teachers because they make up the core of recruitment efforts within the growing industry of international education, and because their category is the most exposed to the forces that we seek to describe with regard to international teaching: the self-planning of one’s trajectory, the quest for financial solvency, the idea of teaching as travelling, exposure to professional precarity, and the significance and limitations of accumulated experience.

4. Debts at home and international trajectories

Earlier in the article, we began noting the increasing financialisation of international education. By financialisation, we refer to the growing appeal of an economic prism for perceiving the world, especially through the application of values that derive from the economic market to other social domains (Bear et al. 2015). Such financialisation, we argue, is also at the core of the experience of teachers themselves, and we have noted how many of them referred to indebtedness when explaining their trajectory and the choice of destination. It might appear uncomfortable to consider teaching, which is still seen as a vocational profession (Estola, Erkkilä, and Syrjä lä 2003), and teachers' motivations and calculations in explicitly financial terms. As we indeed show, financial motivations ought to be recognised alongside others. Still, in recognition of how this factor tends to be overlooked, we dedicate the present section to its articulation.

Beyond the widely admitted narrative of taste for travel and cultural exchange, personal debt offers a fruitful entry point for taking into consideration structural factors within English-speaking teachers' growing appeal to go international. Linking past, present and future (Guyer 2004; Hart 2001), debts allow for a simultaneous glimpse into one's former socio-economic situation, present geographical and professional position, and aspirational ideas about the good life and horizons of success. As Peebles (2010, 230) argues, 'credit/debt weld people to particular temporal regimes as people labour to build the increment demanded by the future in exchange for actions in the past, (...) then, the projection toward the future is critical'. Nowhere is this 'exchange' and 'projection towards the future' made clearer than in the link between debt and migration, which has been widely documented at least since colonial slavery (e.g. Graeber 2011; O'Connell Davidson 2013).

In understanding debt in the context of international teachers' mobility, attention should be drawn to the specific moral subjectivity of debt and indebtedness (Pérez-Roa 2019; Graeber 2011), which can be considered as one possible catalyst of teachers' mobility and disarticulation from one's home context. As school education has long been a cement for the construction of the nation-state, teachers' careers have been mostly contained within national territories. The unprecedented growth of the sector of international education has ushered in a large-scale labour mobility from Anglo-Saxon countries towards numerous parts of the world, especially within emerging economies. This process is a manifestation of postcolonial power relations and language hegemonies, which encourages teachers (with the 'right' language abilities, teaching habitus, and sometimes racial profile) to move overseas. As debts tend to ignore frontiers and nationalities by only acknowledging the dynamic between creditors and debtors (Lazzarato 2011), we suggest that debt might constitute a key element in the process of extracting teachers from a nation-state framework, within which they have traditionally been anchored, to become a globally mobile workforce. Ironically, while teachers' mobility may convey a certain sense of freedom and autonomy, it is the planned repayment of loans¹⁹ that often orients international teachers' mobile pathways within a global educational market.

Our findings clearly point at the quest for debt alleviation – mostly related to student loans – as important to the motivation of many international school teachers. Driven by neoliberal policies concerning 'human capital', many states have increasingly been transferring responsibility and financial risks related to higher education towards individuals and families. The expansion of student loans became dramatic at the turn of the twentieth century and has grown so much that it is estimated that, in the USA alone, student loans greatly exceed a trillion dollars (Gusterson 2017). Indeed, the USA in particular, but to a lesser extent the UK, Australia, and Canada have all adopted market-based higher educational systems in which exorbitant tuition fees fuel a thriving credit industry. In the USA, the average rate of a student loan has grown from 4000 USD in 1993 to nearly 40,000 USD in 2016, thus becoming the third source of indebtedness after mortgages and auto-loans.²⁰ Student debts repayment rates are relatively high, a fact that has been attributed to the moral virtue associated with education in contrast to other consumption credits and sources of indebtedness where repayments rates are lower (Zaloom 2018; Pérez-Roa 2019). In a context where

lending has become increasingly aggressive and at times predatory (Williams 2004), student loans have also become targets of speculative finance through derivative markets in which they gain popularity for their relatively low rate of a payment default.

It is on the backdrop of these mounting debts that we can understand the link between international teaching and personal financial indebtedness. Most of the teachers that we interviewed referred to economic strategies or financial concerns when accounting for their own mobile teaching trajectories.²¹ The most commonly mentioned economic strategies included extra tutoring hours or the cumulation of part-time jobs aimed at saving, while the most frequent financial concern referred to the alleviation of student loans and other forms of debt. Student loans were frequently mentioned by teachers who had studied in Anglo-Saxon countries, where higher education implies considerable fees.²² In our study, about half of the adventurer teachers trained in Anglo-Saxon countries (47%) associated their mobile trajectories with the explicit objective of reducing their student debts.²³ This is illustrated by Hailey, an adventurer teacher trained in Chicago who taught in Germany, China and Vietnam before moving back to her home in the Midwest: 'When I moved to Asia, a goal of mine was to reduce quite a few of my students loans ... and I was able to do that quite easily in fact.' Indeed, international school teachers can enjoy packages that include multiple advantages such as accommodations on site, insurances, and flights, and profit from living in regions that are substantially less expensive than their home surrounding. These conditions allow for teachers to set aside money intended for repayment of past financial obligations as well as planning for their future. Job recruiters, on their part, have internalised this source of appeal, and have learned to draw on it for their marketing needs. Forums and job portal for international teachers are replete with adverts that promise both to alleviate accumulated debts and to attain a better quality of life elsewhere.²⁴ As one advert aimed at a UK audience suggested, 'If you are in debt and sick and tired of a country that rains non-stop, apply to Seek teachers for this excellent opportunity! If you are selected and successful, this is your chance to earn a massive tax free salary with benefits.'

This emphasis on debt relief is starkly different from the image portrayed by the notion of lifestyle migration. While the taste for travel makes up a more appealing public image, one that also aligns with international education ideals of intercultural encounters and cosmopolitanism, our face-to-face interviews as well as our research within online forums showed the centrality of economic motivations. Indeed, many of the teachers we interviewed admitted that their teaching choice partially takes the form of an economic strategy, intended either to repay their student loan or to save money (for example, in order to buy a house for their retirement).²⁵

5. Going international: balancing enjoyment and debt alleviation

Teach Away, an online recruiter for international and language teachers based in Toronto, Canada, claims to provide services for more than a million educators worldwide.²⁶ Based in a revitalised industrial area in downtown Toronto, the organisation presents itself as a start-up excelling in addressing the travel and adventure aspirations of teachers from Anglo-Saxon countries, and mainly from the USA. One of the organisation's recruiters explained to us that the dominant profile of licensed teachers applying for international teaching is of women between the ages of 25 and 40. The company's marketing pitch emphasises travel and discovery, featuring destinations perceived to be attractive for potential adventurers. 'It's a way for you to be paid to travel', we were told by another staff member, as she narrated her own teaching experience in France. At the same time, she warned that it is difficult to find a position in Europe and emphasised the drawback of teaching in most European countries: modest salaries relative to high living costs, administrative obstacles with regard to residence permits and, last but not least, fierce competition with European teachers, including many from the UK. Drawing a comparison between countries such as France and China with regard to costs of living, salary and benefits, our interlocutor portrayed Asian destinations as financially more appealing than European ones. While the recruitment agency gives the impression that one could travel-and-teach just about anywhere in the world, their biggest market is currently

focused on the Middle East and South-East Asia, with a special interest in China. The current boom of English-speaking education in the United Arab Emirates, for example, created a tremendous need for native English-speaking teachers, and is one case for which the idiom of travel and adventure could be seen as a marketing ploy for attracting teachers to less popular destinations: at Teach Away, the marketing pitch starts with adventure and ends with delving into the fine print of the financial packages.

In our study, we found these two themes of lifestyle and financial solvency to be persistently evoked alongside one another.²⁷ The tension between the two is noted in dedicated online forums, which serve as popular channels for commenting on particular schools and teaching countries and for sharing advice and warnings. Oftentimes, discussions focus on financial considerations and feature topics such as ‘schools with the highest saving potentials’ or the ‘best school packages’, while still keeping enjoyment and lifestyle in the background. For instance, one teacher’s online entry asserts that,

Kuwait is great for savings. The salaries are tax free and pretty good. Housing is provided by the school. Electricity and water are paid for too. (...) Travel to Europe and Asia is cheap but will become expensive because you will want to leave Kuwait every time a holiday comes up. Alcohol is illegal here so you’d have to go outside of the country to enjoy a booze in relaxing setting where you won’t have to worry about being imprisoned for drinking. I’d estimate that if you are clearing \$3000 a month here that you could easily save \$20-24 K a year unless all the money that you want to save is being used to pay for things back home (student loans, credit cards, loans, etc).

Experienced international school teachers accumulate remarkable familiarity with the global landscape of international schooling, laying out their opportunities and carefully weighing the pros and cons of each destination by negotiating lifestyle and financial considerations. Claudia, an American teacher whom we met in Nairobi, and who has previously been teaching in the USA, Myanmar and Colombia, illustrated this observation:

People who go to Europe are usually a little bit older and they don’t need the money as much. But if you want to have amazing students and you want to have good packages — you’re going to go to Asia. That’s the place to go. Not necessarily China; (...) you [rather] go to like the best school in Singapore, you want to go to the top school in Japan or Korea. (...) There, the students are amazing! (...) Asia is definitely top notch. (...) You don’t make as much money in the African schools. And the Latin American schools pay very poorly unless you would go to Santiago in Chile or Argentina or my school in Colombia. (...) The problem with Brazil is the taxes. They pay very high with taxes and it’s also very expensive to live there so Brazil has a good package but the savings potential is lower.

We encountered similar considerations in the job fairs that we attended. While experienced teachers may easily organise their moves by relying solely on the online labour market, job fairs are still an important gateway to international education for new entrants to the field. Organised throughout the year in strategic locations to connect with English-speaking teachers ready to go international (e.g. in London, Toronto, Boston, San Francisco, Melbourne) as well as with experienced teachers on the job (e.g. in Dubai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, Panama City), these events bring together school recruiters and candidate teachers for two or three days during which schools introduce themselves and interview applicants to fill their vacancies. Schools’ pitches systematically emphasise the quality of life enabled by the school’s location and facilities and the type of contractual packages and saving opportunities. In discussions we held with candidates at two job fairs in London, we noted their oscillation between factors associated with what they considered as ‘fun’ and those related to financial benefits. For example, one candidate, who was given a job offer in Uganda and in Azerbaijan, eventually opted for the former, emphasising the temptation of tourism over an appealing employment package: ‘[I chose Uganda] because it is a unique opportunity to visit Africa and make safaris in the weekends in a country that is safe.’ In our visits to such fairs, we noted that schools in China and in the Middle East, and to a lesser extent in Africa and central Asia, are the most widely represented and as such draw most attention from candidates.

Noting enjoyment and repayment of loans as key recurring themes, we observed continuous tradeoff between lifestyle aspirations and financial interests. As one international teacher currently based in Germany wrote in an online forum, ‘although the quality of life [in Germany] is amazing so is the cost and I barely save anything. I was thinking of going to Dubai next to save money and live the expat lifestyle *but it seems the two are mutually exclusive*’ (our emphasis). This tradeoff is clear to employers, who may offer appropriate financial incentives: while positions in sought-after destinations can be filled by offering a mere subsistence salary, destinations thought of as being of lesser interest must offer appealing packages in order to remain competitive and attract top teachers. Indeed, we learned from teachers how some schools have tempted them with excellent employment conditions, but required them to sacrifice their quality of life, for example by compromising socialisation opportunities outside of gated school communities, lacking outdoor opportunities, and restricting freedom for female teachers due to conservative gender norms. In some cases, teachers’ calculations took into consideration compromising factors such as interactions with condescending parents and spoiled children, as well as unethical practices such as bribery in exchange for grades.

6. Planning ahead: precarity and the limits of capitalising on experience

Teachers with whom we spoke have been aware that the forward-planning prospect of employment trajectories is always limited: being located, for better or worse, in the heart of a highly dynamic field, they enjoy little employment protection beyond their short-term contracts, they acknowledge labour market insecurity and high-turnover rates, and they are subject to sudden employment termination, if due to the management’s disapproval of them or due to unexpected budget cuts and structural changes. In the absence of large-scale regulation, international teachers’ career decisions increasingly involve mobility, reduced employment security, and increased casualisation (Arber, Blackmore, and Vongalis-Macrow 2014; Bunnell 2016). In this section, we point at this precarity and show how it may in part be offset by the accumulation of professional experience, which helps teachers assume greater control over their trajectory. At the same time, we point to the limits of capitalising on professional experience, which at some point may become a burden rather than strength. To illustrate these points, we draw on several of our interviewees’ professional biographies.

We begin with an extended presentation of the case of Marleen, from California, whom we met in Switzerland where she was teaching and whose story we believe fleshes out and brings together several of the threads presented thus far. Despite having already completed her studies in another discipline, Marleen decided to return to school and – with the help of supplementary loans – finish additional studies at a teaching college. Having obtained and enjoyed a teaching internship in Ireland, she became keen on teaching in Europe, an interest that overlapped with necessity due to massive education cutbacks in California at the time. At a job fair in London, which she used her savings to attend, she was offered jobs in three schools – in Qatar, Kuwait and Japan. While she recalls the job fair experience as a positive one, none of the jobs that she was offered were in Europe as she had wished. She eventually settled for the offer in Kuwait, ‘because the agent was very persuasive’ and presented her with appealing financial opportunities. Her first year in Kuwait she recalls as ‘a bad period’, during which she felt very lonely and was disappointed with the school and with the living environment. She thus concentrated on saving as much as possible, minimising expenses and accumulating extra tutoring hours: ‘In the first year I was tutoring so much that I was living only on my tutoring money and so the rest was just going in the bank.’ After one year, she returned to the USA for holidays and hesitated whether or not to complete her contract, but quitting in the middle of a two-year contract would have resulted in losing a much-anticipated bonus. She thus went back to Kuwait, but with a new mindset:

Going back also was a big decision because the second year was better. I knew what to expect, there was light at the end of the tunnel. I didn’t tutor as much, I traveled more, I didn’t save as much money.

During this year, she filled in online applications for several international schools in Europe and was selected by a multinational educational group that was about to open a new school in Switzerland. She trustingly embarked on this new chapter, but was soon disappointed once again: ‘The leadership was really tough. People were just hiding in their classrooms because no one knew what was going to happen next.’ After she learned that the management had decided to increase teaching hours without adjusting salaries, she quit the job after only one year and returned to the US. From these three years, she concluded that at least she ‘made enough extra money to pay off [my] student loans and was able to travel a lot, which was awesome’. In successive exchange, we have learned that Marleen had taken a six-month break living off her savings, after which she went back to teaching in a local state school.

Marleen’s story resonates with the experience of many of the teachers with whom we spoke. As such, it covers the themes that we have already encountered with regard to the typical image of the ‘adventurer’ international teacher – a young, primarily Anglo-Saxon person who, by turning to teach abroad, seeks to juggle economic solvency and a search of the good life. Moreover, Marleen’s story presents the international teaching experience as a way of coping with and expanding beyond a challenging employment market in one’s home country, while also attesting to the international market’s own precarity, as exemplified by the employment conditions in Kuwait and eventually also in Switzerland. But while Marleen’s employment in Switzerland did not work out, her case exemplifies a common trope within the field, of unsatisfactory first jobs aimed at building up one’s portfolio in a gradual move towards a dream job (in Marleen’s case, in Europe). Employment flexibility is tolerated especially early on in one’s career, partly for the taste for adventure that it conveys and the financial advantages that it offers in terms of debt repayment and savings. Indeed, for early-career teachers, the assurances of accumulated experience often fit into a strategic plan justifying the temporary acceptance of less attractive positions.

However, the conversion of experience into higher and more stable employability becomes complicated as teachers actually attain seniority, at which point their years of experience can even backfire. In our interviews, we encountered many examples of the limits of such capitalisation on teaching experience among senior teachers, for whom the employment market remains as precarious as it is extensive. Alina, for instance, spent more than ten years teaching in Singapore before being confronted with job cuts in her school. When her seniority rendered her too expensive to keep, she left her belongings behind and moved to nearby China while still looking for another job in Singapore. Another international teacher from the US, Karen, faced a similar situation after having worked for fifteen years in Spain, France and Switzerland. After several years in Switzerland, the school where she worked did not renew her contract – opting instead for younger and less costly teachers. As this would imply the loss of her work permit in the European Union, and as her son’s father lived in Spain, when we interviewed her she was desperately seeking another position in Europe, while beginning to contemplate alternatives as none of her applications bore fruits. The cases of Alina and Karen emphasise the particularity of such employment precarity, as teachers may lose not only their job but also, in one swift motion, their legal status in a country where they have established themselves over several years.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the mobility of international teachers within the booming industry of international education, prompted by near-absence of global regulation and a particular, Anglo-Saxon conception of ‘internationalism’. This educational sector allows Anglo-Saxon teachers, whom we have dubbed ‘adventurers’, to travel, work, and negotiate enjoyment and financial considerations, and in particular the repayment of their mounting student loans. We argued that, for such teachers, a key point of appeal lies in the ostensible participation in the carefree attitude of lifestyle migration, which would have been out of reach for them otherwise.

However, and while such an idyllic image has its appeal to teachers and recruiters alike, such emphases underplay multiple constraints. While adventurer teachers can make choices *as if* they possess total freedom, we have seen how this taste of privilege often does not live up to reality and is limited at best or illusory at worst. Even as adventurer international teachers' employment opportunities are indeed multiple, the market's high turnover is such that they are often locked into a precarious system that offers little employee protection and formal retirement plans and is sometimes characterised by summary dismissals and continuous relocations. Flirting with lifestyle migration and with the expatriate life of multinational corporations and international organisations, whose employees' children they often teach, international teachers' actual situation is substantially less certain than that of these other expat groups, and may better fit within what Standing (2011) terms a global 'precarariat' (Bunnell 2016). In this context, we have seen how the accumulation of professional experience provides only a limited pathway for assuming control over one's destiny/destination – be it professional, geographic, or financial – and may even backfire.

Our analysis thus leads us to propose the concept of 'precarious privilege' as capturing this flexible global workforce, in which international teachers combine the privileges of emancipated globetrotters and the precarity of contractual employment in the neoliberal age. As suggested by Martínez Guillem (2017), the concept of precarious privilege illuminates conflicted social positions shaped by neoliberal discourses and policies. But while Martínez Guillem refers to this concept to point at the dialectics of social reproduction and transformation in political activism, we apply it to highlight the ambivalence of teachers' positions and subjectivities within a deregulated global labour market. This tension, we argue, takes us back to the experience of indebtedness and its disciplinary effect that reshapes people's self-conceptions and future trajectories. As Lazzarato (2011, 28) proposes, the power of debt is enforced neither by repression nor by ideology; while seemingly free, the debtor's actions are set and narrowed by the contractual frame of the loan. Our study shows how such control manifests and is transferred into an axial logic driving the global education labour market.

Notes

1. First among which is the International Baccalaureate (IB), which is the most widely employed curriculum in international schools.
2. By 'international education', we refer to the educational sector of international schools, which provides international or English-speaking curricula throughout the world. The history and ambiguities of the concept are explored in Section 2.
3. While this is rarely the principal motivation for entering the field of international education, experienced international teachers often refer to their attachment to the ideals, values and pedagogies in international education, in particular when teaching an international curriculum.
4. For example, one industry survey claims that 47% of international teachers chose to teach abroad in order to travel (Deady 2017).
5. This research has been supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (ref. number 161231).
6. We visited 28 schools in total, six of which were selected for longer periods of immersion. We also conducted narrative interviews centered on international teachers' personal, professional and geographical trajectories.
7. The interviews were centered on international teachers' personal, professional and mobility trajectories.
8. 57% of the teachers we interviewed had been trained in an Anglo-Saxon country (Great Britain 29%; USA 20%; Canada 6%; Ireland 3%). The other teachers had been trained in France (14%), Switzerland (14%), Germany, Spain, Kenya, Turkey and Israel (less than 3% each).
9. We thank Noémie Kumar and Camille Poursac for their assistance in interview transcription and coding.
10. 59% of the teachers we interviewed were teaching in Switzerland at some point in their career. As a secondary research site, Nairobi allowed us to contrast our findings: the ratio of teachers who had been teaching in Nairobi within our general interview sample is 21%. While we do acknowledge the fact that teacher's profile and trajectories in both sites may differ, the purpose of this article is not to compare the situation of international teachers in the two countries, but rather to the contrast between trajectories of teachers who are often trained and recruited within the same circuit.
11. 21% of the teachers we interviewed were met in recruitment fairs or schools in these three cities.

12. At the time, we conducted the interviews, our interlocutors were teaching either presently or formerly in, among other places, Singapore, China, Thailand, the USA, Canada, Kenya, Uganda, Kuwait, Switzerland, Qatar, Tanzania, Malta, Spain, UAE, and the UK.
13. Other curricula, such as the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), the UK International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), or the American curriculum, are also being used.
14. Data from the International School Consultancy Research (<https://www.iscresearch.com>). Accessed 16 January 2019.
15. According to an industry report (Deady 2017), teachers in international schools originate primarily from the USA and the UK, as well as Ireland, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. This trend does not appear to be shifting, and the continuous expansion of the industry implies an increasing need for such teachers. In 2017, Deady estimated the growth of the industry to be such that it will require some 150,000 more workers within the next five years.
16. This typology draws on teachers' first engagement in the field of international education, yet acknowledges that teachers may shift categories along their professional trajectory.
17. We borrow the category of adventurer from the literature on young African migrants (see Bredeloup 2008), for whom mobility is perceived as a pathway towards a more open lifestyle within the context of self-accomplishment.
18. Two-year contracts offer a convenient time frame that offers schools sufficient return on their investment while allowing flexibility in hiring and renewing contracts in accordance with shifting needs. As one experienced teacher explained

'in every international School I've ever seen it's always two [years ... and if] you ask the directors, the answer to that is that the amount they have to invest in a teacher coming to them, for the visas and this, and that they don't want the teachers coming and going, so it's better.'

19. As Zaloom (2018, 240) argues in the American context, 'regimes of foresight gain traction by endorsing future calculation as a moral project. From the postwar period onward, US financial policies have shaped an ethics anchored in projecting futures and ordering household economies around these forecasts'.
 20. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2017-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2016-education-debt-loans.htm>.
 21. This applies to 74% of the teachers we interviewed. Yet, it is noteworthy that for some teachers, financial considerations are not central to explaining their mobile professional trajectory. This is notably the case among expatriate teachers, whose primary concern include the possibility of contributing to their children's educational environment, or who engage in teaching as a way to distract them from boredom and loneliness in a context of expatriation. Thus, Charlene, an expat French teacher in Nairobi, states that
- well, the financial aspect is interesting, but it is hardly our main motivation. (...) If you look at my trajectory, for me, financial gains are not always there. What I earned in the USA was insignificant; it only helped paying for the nanny, that's it. In Tunisia, it was somehow satisfactory. But then, next year I am going to earn even less.
22. While the question of student debt did not come up among teachers trained in continental Europe (France, Switzerland, Germany or Spain), other financial issues discussed in this article, such as the absence of pension plans, were repeatedly mentioned.
 23. By contrast, expatriate teachers never mentioned this financial constraint when explaining how they became to teach in international schools. We assume that the absence of such reference is due to the privileged condition of expatriate teachers, whose spouses work in multinational corporations.
 24. For example, we noted the presence of financial institutions in a teaching job fair. One company offered 'financial health check' that considered teachers' indebtedness and proposed 'financial planning' including investment plans to provide additional incomes and establish a horizon for retirement.
 25. Importantly, international teaching positions do not normally consider a retirement plan, leaving teachers to use their own discretion and creativity to ensure a viable future for themselves. This porosity has opened a niche for financial coaching for international teachers, as demonstrated by Andrew Hallam's (2011) book 'Millionaire Teacher: The Nine Rules of Wealth You Should Have Learned in School.' Claudia, an experienced American teacher who attended Hallam's fly-in workshop at her high-end international school in Nairobi, explained the challenge for international teachers, who must assume full responsibility over their financial planning—past, present, and future:

'if you teach in the States you have a pension; once you're overseas we have to do all on our own. We don't have a pension anymore, so you need to be saving so that you can still retire, basically.'

26. www.teachaway.com/recruitment. Accessed 7 January 2019.

27. This choice remains multifaceted, balancing considerations ranging from school reputation to local labour market or migration policies. Yet, the fundamental engagement with how to balance between lifestyle and financial considerations cut across our interviewees, and especially those from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation [grant number 161231].

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