Degrading, devaluing and discounting: The qualifications of overseas trained teachers (OTT) in England

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Abstract

Highly trained teachers from across the world come to England expecting to practise their chosen profession. These expectations are dashed, however, if their foreign credentials and work experience are not recognised as legitimate by potential employers and accreditation bodies. This type of social situation is the focus of the relative deprivation theory (Olson, Herman & Zanna, 1986; Runciman, 1966; Walker & Smith, 2002). According to this theory, relative deprivation is defined as having a perception that an expectation has been dishonoured (the cognitive component) resulting in possessing feelings of injustice, dissatisfaction, and discontent on account of this dishonouring (affective component).

Relative deprivation may take one of two forms. Egoistic relative deprivation results when a person feels that he or she has been unjustly deprived relative to other individuals. The result of this is stress and a lower level of life satisfaction. On the other hand collective relative deprivation, which forms the basis of this paper, results when a person feels that his or her group is unjustly deprived relative to other social groups. The result of this is the basis for collective or group actions. Put simply, relative deprivation theory specifies, and empirical evidence has substantiated that affective relative deprivation is the proximal cause of engagement in protest action, which fully mediates the more distal effects of cognitive relative deprivation (Dion, 1986; Dube-Simard & Guimond, 1986; Grant & Brown, 1995; Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Pettigrew, 2002).

Introduction

England is a migrant country. Haque *et al.* (2002, 3) have defined migrants as "All those who were born outside the UK". At present it is estimated that migrants make up 8% of the total United Kingdom (UK) population, or 10% of the working age population (some 4.8 million people in all including 3.6 million people of working age). The composition of the current UK migrant population has, of course, been conditioned by the UK's policies towards migrants over the past five decades. The overseas born population is diverse, including (amongst the

working age group) people from elsewhere in the EU (23%) who are not subject to immigration controls, those from the Indian sub-continent (20%), from Africa (19%), and from the Americas (11%) including Canada and the USA.

Several migrants have lived in the UK for many years, and some have acquired British citizenship. This article however focuses on recent and new arrivals, particularly overseas trained teachers. Almost a third of the total migrant population currently living in the UK arrived during the last decade (Haque *et al*., 2002) of whom approximately 43 000 are overseas-trained teachers (Miller, 2006) who teach in primary and secondary schools. The 1990s saw a particular increase in the number of teachers migrating and being recruited. The White Paper (2001), "Secure Borders, Safe Havens" recognised that as well as placing additional demands on local services, migrants in general brought diversity, entrepreneurship, labour and other resources to the UK.

A similar conclusion, with regard to migrants in Canada, was reached by Basran and Zong (1999, 4) that noted "when migrants come here, they bring their language, culture, values, education, and work experiences to their new society". London's Mayor, Ken Livingston's 'Spatial Development Strategy for London' published in 2004 explicitly recognised the important role international migration continues to play in London's future. The report also noted that, at present, 40% of all migrants to the UK live in London and they account for 26% of London's total population.

Historically England has generally been regaled as both an open and tolerant society and its commitment to diversity has been admired by many nations in the world. However, in recent years, this openness and tolerance has been increasingly threatened by a series of government initiatives targeted at restricting the privileges and freedoms of migrants, whether they are legal, illegal, unskilled, low skilled or highly skilled. For example the qualifying period for individuals in Employment-related Categories, (OTTs included) can become eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain, and was increased from four to five years with no recourse provided for those persons already in the UK (Home Office, 2006). Second, all migrants including OTTs are required to complete an English language and Life in the UK test as part of a set of new requirements for obtaining ILR (Home Office, 2006). Third, the terms of employment for OTTs were varied to allow for their deportation if after four years of teaching employment they failed to achieve UK Qualified Teacher Status (DfES, 2007), irrespective of the reasons.

Invariably such requirements have led migrants and their supporters to criticise the responsible authorities for failing to move beyond tolerance and accept differences as valid and valuable expressions of the human experience. With respect to the latter criticism, one of the most outstanding issues concerns the non-recognition of the qualifications and work experiences of migrants, in particular those individuals trained outside the European Economic Area. At present it is still unclear how much work has been done to explore how many highly educated migrant professionals experience deskilling or decredentialising as a result of moving to England.

This article examines the politics of difference as manifested in the non-recognition of overseas credentials and prior work experience of some migrant professionals, namely teachers. The article is divided into four parts. It begins with a review of contextual information on teacher migration and recruitment to England. The second section examines studies pertinent to non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience in other parts of the developed world. The third section analyses the debate on differences and knowledge and the perceptions and judgments held by English policy-makers and educationalists involved in teacher training and recognising overseas credentials. The final part concludes that assessment and recognition of prior learning and certain country's qualifications constitute a political act. While credentials from within the European Economic Area receive automatic recognition and are legitimised as valid, certain forms of credentials, knowledge and work experiences gained outside this area are generally treated as suspicious or inferior, or both.

International migration to the UK: Past and present

International migration has always played a central part in England's nation building. The economic and demographic interests of England are usually the push factors behind voluntary migration, skilled or otherwise. Additionally, migration on the whole has also served as a means of social and ideological control. In deciding who are most desirable for admission, the state sets the parameters for the social, cultural and symbolic boundaries of the nation as manifested in the racist nature of English immigration policies. Pointedly, during the 1950s, migrant selection to England was racially motivated, with the certain groups of individuals deemed more desirable than others (Grannum, 2002).

Another important factor, also used to decide who was allowed into England, was whether or not migrants could add to the country's knowledge profile. During that time migrants from the Caribbean, India and Africa were accepted on account of their manual and domestic skills but they were not considered part of the intelligentsia (Bradford & Kent, 1993). Subsequently the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act severely curtailed their employment. However at the turn of the century and at the onset of the industrial revolution, this situation was reversed. England required much more labour in the form of technical skills. Individuals from former colonised territories, including the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean, were actively encouraged to take up positions which locals were vacating, and in some cases officials were unable to fill (Bradford & Kent, 1993). This was considered a historic watershed (Whitaker, 1991, 19).

For the first time in England's history the selection and admission of migrants was based more on their educational skills and resources rather than purely on their racial backgrounds (*Ibid.* 19). This new system represented, at the level of formal principle, that England's policy towards migrants was both colour and religion blind. Some commentators called this new thrust of migration from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, to England, inclusive since it also represented a balancing of the pattern of migration from America, Canada, Australia, and Europe. By the mid-1970s, and for several other reasons, there were more migrants arriving from the Third World than from the developed world (Dustmann *et al*., 2003). The largest number came from Asia, followed by the Caribbean, and Africa. Between 1968 and 1992, 35.7% of 3.7 million migrants admitted came from Asia; and 58% of 1.8 million immigrants who arrived in England between 1991 and 2001 were also from the same region (Haque *et al*., 2002).

Since the mid-1990s, the selection of migrants on the basis of education and skills, favouring the highly skilled over family-class immigrants and refugees, has intensified. More than half the number of migrants admitted throughout the late 1990s were economic-class migrants (Dustmann *et al*., 2003); among them, a considerable number are highly skilled professionals, particularly nurses and medical doctors, engineers and teachers. In the year 2000, out of a total 227 209 migrants and refugees admitted, 23% (52 000 individuals) were admitted as skilled workers (Kirk, 2004). Despite the UK's preference for highly skilled migrants, and despite the fact that these professionals bring significant human capital resources to the UK's labour force, Miller (2007c) pointed out several experience barriers to integration such as the non-recognition of their overseas credentials and work experience. This was also found to be the case in Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998; 2000; Krahn *et al*., 2000; Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2001).

International skilled migration

Overseas-trained teachers have been welcomed into English society for two very different reasons. On the one hand, due to labour shortages and low birth rates it has become essential to recruit highly trained teachers to fill the gap so that teaching and learning could carry on seamlessly and government fulfil its obligation to providing quality education to its pupils. This objective was achieved through voluntary teacher migration (Ochs, 2003; Appleton *et al*., 2006a); the recruitment of teachers by education providers and local authorities (McNamara *et*

al., 2004); and, on a smaller scale, the forced migration of teachers as a result of a form of unrest or upheaval in their country of origin (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2005b). Understandably, the OTTs who received teaching contracts in English schools have been found to possess appropriate skills, experiences and qualifications.

Some migrants, among them OTTs, have been polarised in terms of their qualification levels. For example, a number of individuals trained in countries outside the EEA will be denied access to suitable jobs and promotions on the grounds that their qualifications do not compare favourably with UK qualifications. This point was made clearer by Haque *et al*. (2002) which found that "Compared to the UK-born population, a higher proportion of migrants have a degree, even though a higher proportion, at least a third have been deemed to possess 'unrecognised' qualifications". However, as these qualifications have been deemed below those of the English standard, the result has been a failure for several individuals to be absorbed into the labour market. Indeed, Haque *et al*. (2002) surmised that, "UK qualifications are more highly valued in the labour market than qualifications obtained abroad" (Ibid., 6).

The 2004 Labour Force Survey found that the overseas-born population tended to perform worse than the UK-born one's with lower employment and labour market participation rates and a higher unemployment rate. This position was accentuated by Haque *et al*. (2002, 5) who concluded that "migrants from white ethnic backgrounds tend to perform as well as, or better than the existing population- in terms of their employment and wage levels. However, migrants from ethnic minority backgrounds on the other hand, do worse than the UK-born". Additionally, ethnic minority teachers are believed to be less likely to enter teaching whether UK-born or otherwise, hence the government's much publicised initiatives during the period 1999-2003 to employ more. The approximate impact of such initiatives is still being felt.

Overseas trained teachers in England are drawn from EEA member countries, OECD countries including the USA and Canada, and from other places such as Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Accordingly, their cultural backgrounds differ considerably from mainstream culture (Basavarajappa & Jones, 1999). In 2006 using Home Office and Work Permits UK data, Miller (2006b) estimated that there were approximately 43 000 OTTs in the UK. This represented approximately 10% of the total teaching labour force. Using total work permits and work permit extensions, the top suppliers of teachers to the UK were: South Africa (10 474), Australia (8 816), USA (5 367), New Zealand (4 212), Canada (3 513) and Jamaica (2 289). It should be pointed out that due to lack of proper data collection on OTTs in England (McNamara *et al.*, 2004; Morgan *et al*., 2005; Miller, 2006b), even at best, these figures represent mere estimates.

Among the unexpected outcomes of teacher migration and recruitment to the UK has been the inability of UK Naric, the agency responsible for providing the comparability of overseas qualifications, universities, and potential employers to arrive at consensus on the approximate worth of certain overseas qualifications and work experience with different education systems outside the EEA. While some UK universities accept the qualifications of OTTs from various countries as comparable, teacher employers and some initial training providers have rejected these same qualifications as inferior on the basis of UK Naric's assessment. Invariably, if an OTT's degree is deemed inferior to UK standards by UK Naric, this OTT will not be able to access a QTS training course until they have completed a 'top-up' degree. In the meantime however, this OTT is confronted by problems of pay, progression, promotion and survival. The social justice implications are clear.

Measuring the effects of this problem

Making sense of how humans are affected by the actions or inactions of a system is both difficult to quantify and to measure. In Canada for example, a human capital approach aimed at investigating this issue revealed that overseas qualifications and work experience were

consistently undervalued, the result of which was wage gaps for overseas trained workers, particularly those of colour (Basavarajappa & Jones, 1999; Grant & Oertel, 1998; Pendakur & Pendakur, 2000; Rajagopal, 1990).

Basran and Zong (1998) found in their study of 404 professionals (teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers) from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong that they had experienced considerable downward mobility after emigrating to Canada and were living on a relatively low income (70% under $30 000). Furthermore only 18.8% had taught in Canada though 88% had taught in their country of origin, and most had experienced difficulty in having their credentials and work experience abroad recognised. A considerable number had also reported discrimination from potential employers because of their skin colour (65%), national or ethnic origin (69%), or because they spoke English as a second language (79%).

Some of these issues have been raised by Miller (2008a) in respect of OTTs from the Caribbean teaching in England. From a relatively small sample of nine OTTs, 55% reported teaching in a different education phase; 22% were teaching different subjects; and nearly all had been paid as unqualified teachers; a position directed by the DfES (Teachernet, 2003). Furthermore, 100% reported fewer prospects for promotion compared with white OTTs and with locally trained teachers, despite their qualifications and/ or previous experiences.

Levels and measures of deprivation

As already established, the focus of this study has been on collective relative deprivation. Within this framework, Tajfel's formulation of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is constructive. For example, Tajfel (1978) explicitly acknowledged the importance of conflicts of interest between groups in engendering prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, and of related interest, Tajfel felt that only an integration of social identity theory with relative deprivation theory would provide a complete explanation for the reason why professionally deprived and held-back individuals would feel resentment towards the system and its officials.

As a result, in describing the conditions under which social protest is most likely to occur Tajfel (1978, 67) maintained: "It might be said that much of it (*the theoretical development of SIT*) can be seen as an attempt to articulate some of the social psychological processes which are responsible for the genesis and functioning of relative deprivation". In the last 25 years, there have been several attempts to merge situated identity theory with relative deprivation theory (Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Smith, Spears & Oyen, 1994). There is now evidence that both theories are even more intertwined than Tajfel had imagined.

In this article I have put forward two ways in which social identity theory and relative deprivation theory might be integrated to explain the resentment and professional denigration felt by OTTs in response to any actual or perceived inequity to their group. First, it is clear that the people most likely to care when individuals are treated unfairly because they are a member of a minority group, are the minority group members themselves. Conceptually, strength of group identity influences a minority group member's motivation to identify with and draw strength from one another both directly and indirectly.

Second, a straightforward extrapolation from social identity theory results in the hypothesis that group identification motivates outrage at social injustice: the stronger a person identifies with a minority group, the stronger his or her feelings of outrage will be towards that group's illegitimately low status and unfair treatment. This is because a strong group identification motivates minority group members to assign particular importance to the results of inter-group social comparisons between their group and the majority group and therefore, to react emotionally to perceived or actual unfair treatment of their group (Smith *et al*., 1994).

This merger of social identity theory with relative deprivation theory therefore suggests that group identification, in addition to the belief that an expectancy has been unjustly violated

(the cognitive component of relative deprivation), influences the strength of the affective component of relative deprivation because "People become more sensitive to invidious social comparisons" (Tougas & Beaton, 2002, 129). Strength of group identification may also influence a person's desire to engage in resentment and disquiet (Wright & Tropp, 2002).

This proposition can be supported by social identity theory as, in this theory, a person's group identity is conceptualised as an important part of a person's self-concept. Accordingly, individuals will be more keen to publicly endorse what they feel is a group's common cause. In doing so, this shows group identification and group loyalty (Abrams, 1990; Smith, Spears & Oyen, 1994; Wright & Tropp, 2002). However, it should be noted that strong group identification itself can also act as an internal barrier to some members integrating with a majority group (Brown, 2000; Ellemers *et al*., 1999; Miller, 2007b), even when a minority group's status is perceived to be illegitimately low and unstable (Brief literture review on OTTs in the UK).

Overseas-trained teachers in the UK, whether recruited or migrated, are an interesting group to study because not only do they have a strong identification with the culture in which they have been raised, but they also have an emerging national identification with their new country. As a result, they are members of two partially overlapping cultural groups (Basran & Zong, 1999). A clear proposition is that stronger national identification will resist and frown upon perceived or actual unfair actions by members or systems of the host society.

Devaluing and degrading: Overseas-trained teachers, their qualifications and experiences

In a 2002 Home Office study, Haque *et al.* found that Minority Ethnic individuals, especially from the Indian sub-continent, with high educational and occupational qualifications experienced downward occupational mobility after arriving in the UK. A significant factor was found to be non-recognition or devaluation of their overseas qualifications. This situation has been described by Basran and Zong (1998, 15) as "double jeopardy".

A similar situation was reported by Miller (2007b) who found that the non-recognition of the qualifications of overseas-trained teachers had prevented them from accessing senior positions or positions of responsibility in schools. Indeed, Miller also reported that where an OTT had achieved QTS, they stood a much better chance of gaining promotion. It must be reinforced that an OTT without QTS is more likely to be paid according to the unqualified rate and less likely to be allowed to take up responsibility for curriculum or a pastoral area. Furthermore, before OTTs can access a programme for QTS, their degree qualifications must have been judged as comparable by UK Naric (See Table 1).

To avoid a misconstruction of the problem detailed above, I have summarised the approximate processes involved in having an OTT qualification assessed and later accessing a programme of study leading to the award of QTS.

OTTs arriving in England, from outside the EEA, regardless of teaching experience or previous position or qualification, must pursue a course of study leading to the award of UK Qualified Teacher Status. Before OTTs can embark upon such a course however, they must first seek comparability for their qualifications from UK Naric. Obtaining Naric's assessment is crucial as universities involved in initial teacher training rely heavily upon Naric's assessment as the basis upon which to admit or deny an OTT entry to a QTS programme.

Naric's assessment of an OTT's qualification can result in one of two outcomes. First, the degree or diploma may be deemed equivalent to a UK first degree. Second, the degree or diploma may be deemed non-equivalent to a UK first degree. It should also be established that the basis for teaching in the UK is a recognised first degree and teacher training such as the post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE). Either of the likely results outlined above will trigger certain actions. For example, if an OTT's degree qualification has been deemed equivalent

Table 1: UK NARIC's assessment of OTT degree/ diploma qualifications compared with UK qualifications, by country

Degree/Diploma	Country qualification	University	UK Comparison	Country of origin
BEd	Kenya	Nairobi	Equivalent	Kenya
BA	Australia	Melbourne	Equivalent	Australia
Candidata magisterii (BSc/ BA)	Norway	Bergen	Equivalent	Cameroon
BSc	Russia	Bashkir State Pedagogical	Higher National Diploma	Russia
BA/ BSc	Guyana	Guyana	Higher National Diploma	Guyana
BEd	Jamaica	UWI Equivalent	Jamaica	
BEd	Canada	Alberta	Equivalent	Canada
Dip Ed	Jamaica	Mico	BTEC/NSVQ3/ AVCE	Jamaica
BA	Russia	Baskir State	Higher National Diploma	Russia
BA	Jamaica	Northern Caribbean	Higher National Diploma	Jamaica

Source: Miller (2007a). *OTTs and the Qualifications Conundrum.*

then he/she can, conditional upon the support of the headteacher, apply for a place on a programme leading to QTS. It is expected that this programme to QTS will fulfil the dual role of providing the OTT with a qualification and bringing the OTT in line with UK teaching standards. However where the OTT's qualification has been deemed non- equivalent they are faced with an additional problem. That is, they must complete a 'top-up' undergraduate degree to bring their original undergraduate degree qualification in line with UK undergraduate degree standards. Upon completion they may, conditional upon the support of their headteacher, enrol for a programme towards QTS.

The OTT who secures employment, in both scenarios, might be expected to be paid as an unqualified teacher and is officially restricted from taking up certain positions in schools TTA, 2001). However, it has been known that where the demand for teachers is sufficiently high, or where OTTs have been deemed particularly resourceful, headteachers have paid them on the main teaching scale and have also promoted them (Craig, 2002). However, as Miller (2006a) reported, there have been a small number of cases in which white OTTs without QTS were promoted and paid more than black and minority ethnic OTTs, also without QTS.

The policy of difference and recognition: Epistemological and ontological misconstructions

The above discussion demonstrates that many organisations in the UK, including government agencies, local employers, and educational institutions, play a role in the devaluation of overseas qualifications and prior work experience. As a consequence, migrant individuals and families, along with British society as a whole, have suffered severe impacts. While some of the studies have rightly identified that denigration of overseas qualifications exists, few have identified factors at the root of this issue.

Consequently some critical questions remain. Why do such inequities prevail in a democratic society such as the UK? Is the UK not an inclusive society founded and developed on democratic principles? How do such unequal tendencies persist in a society in which migrants are said to be welcome? What has prevented action? What has prevented us from moving

forward? Using perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism, the following observations can be proffered, aimed at eliciting a greater degree of clarity on this matter. The first two considerations concerns our epistemological misconstructions of difference and knowledge. The remaining two relate to the ontological foundations in the assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications under the patronage of positivism and liberal universalism.

Epistemological misconstructions of knowledge and difference

First, non-recognition of overseas credentials and prior work experience can be attributed to the deficit model of difference. In a multicultural society like the UK, one of its key expressions rests on its commitment to cultural pluralism. However, some commentators (Dei, 1996; Fleras & Elliott, 2002; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004) have suggested that the UK has only endorsed pluralism in superficial ways. Instead, it has been suggested that "We tend to prefer 'pretend pluralism', which means that we tolerate rather than embrace differences" (Fleras & Elliott, 2002, 2). In practice, differences have either been over emphasised or have been trivialised, or both. Though minor differences may be gently affirmed in depoliticised and decontextualised forms such as food, dance, and festivities, substantive differences that tend to challenge hegemony and resist being co-opted are usually perceived by many as deficient, deviant, pathological, or otherwise divisive.

It seems reasonable to concede that one clear hurdle that prevents the UK from fully recognising migrants' educational qualifications and professional experiences is the prevailing attitude towards difference. Our negative attitude and behaviours towards migrants co-exist with our commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness. Henry *et al.* (2000, 10) calls the co-existence of these two conflicting ideologies "democratic racism." Accordingly, democratic racism prevents the government from making any changes to the existing social, economic, and political order, and from supporting policies and practices that might ameliorate the low status of people of colour because these policies are perceived to be in conflict with and a threat to liberal democracy.

Second, knowledge is used as power to keep out the undesirable. Critical theorists and postmodern scholars (Cunningham, 2000; Foucault, 1980; McLaren, 2003) have held that knowledge is power; knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated; and knowledge is never neutral or objective. The nature of knowledge as social relations prompts us to ask the following questions: What counts as legitimate knowledge? How and why does knowledge get constructed the way it does? Whose knowledge is considered valuable? Whose knowledge is silenced? In respect of the present discussion on OTTs and their qualifications, is knowledge Europeanised? These are important questions.

Consistent with the DfES's (2007) definition of an OTT, these questions are made all the more important. First, if the OTT is one who has been recognised by the competent authority in his / her country, why does the UK not recognise the OTTs qualifications? Secondly, to reject the qualifications of these individuals is to reject the competence of the alleged competent authority. Third, to deploy OTTs in UK classrooms making full use of their skills and experiences, though rejecting their qualifications, is tantamount to professional blackmail. Studies have clearly shown that, while migrants from Third World countries encountered difficulties with their overseas qualifications and work experience, those from advanced countries (such as the US, Australia or New Zealand) have relatively successful experiences.

It can be speculated that knowledge has been Europeanised in the UK. As Li (2003) rightly points out, the term "migrant" becomes a codified word for people of colour who come from a different racial and cultural background, some of whom do not speak fluent English. The knowledge possessed by migrants is deemed inferior because their real and alleged differences are claimed to be incompatible with the cultural and social foundation of the "traditional" UK.

It seems clear that the power relations are embedded in social relations of difference (Dei, 1996, 63). In fact, this hierarchy of knowledge and power is rooted in the UK's ethnocentric past, where migrants from Europe, New Zealand, Australia and the US were viewed the most desirable, and those from Third World countries as undesirable. The UK's commitment to points-based migration does not permit recruitment of migrants on the basis of racial and national origins. Accordingly it may be construed that the devaluation and devaluation of migrants' knowledge and experience has become the new head tax aimed at keeping out undesirables. It has also been used as a new strategy to maintain the subordination of certain groups of migrants and to reinforce the existing power relations in the UK.

Ontological foundations: positivism and liberal universalism

Third, overseas qualifications assessment and recognition in the UK suffer from positivistic measuring. Positivists believe that an objective world exists out there, external to the individual (Boshier, 1994). Positivists also believe that if something exists, it can be measured (Young & Arrigo, 1999). Studies mentioned here have revealed that this objectivist ontology has been the key determinant behind the current practice in overseas qualifications assessment and recognition. The existing scheme searches for an absolute truth regarding knowledge and experience. It adopts a set of value-free criteria, which discounts the social, political, historical, and cultural context within which such knowledge has been constructed.

The claimed neutral assessment and measuring usually disguises itself under the cloak of professional standard, quality, and excellence without questioning whose standard is put into place, and whose interests it represents. Although migrants are allowed into the country, professional standards deny them access to employment in their professions. As Krahn *et al.* (2000, 15) rightly pointed out: "The real purpose of implementing such standard is to restrict competition and to sustain the interests of the dominant groups."

Fourth, in overseas qualifications, positivism can be placed beside liberal universalism. This in turn exacerbates the complexity of overseas qualification recognition. As Young (1995) noted, liberal universalism posits that universality goes beyond particularity and difference. She also maintained that universality promotes assimilation while a politics of difference makes space for multiple voices and perspectives. In using the single-size-fits-all criterion to measure migrants' qualifications and experience, liberal universalism has failed to acknowledge: Who establishes criteria? Whose interests are represented and served by these standards? What constitutes valid prior learning? What should we do with knowledge that is valid but different? What forms of knowledge become UK equivalent?

Sometimes the rejection of migrants' qualification may be simply seen by practitioners as an effort to reduce risk arising from ignorance of the qualification in question (Reitz, 2001). It seems clear that by refusing to recognise the qualifications and experience of certain groups of migrants as legitimate knowledge, liberal universalism privileges a regime of truth that perpetuates the oppression and disadvantage of migrants.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the recognition or non-recognition of the qualifications and prior work experiences of migrants is a political act. Research on the 'brain gain' to England from the presence and contributions of overseas trained teachers has revealed that many OTTs have experienced devaluation of their prior learning and work experiences after arriving in the UK. As a result, they have experienced considerable demoralising and disempowering downward social mobility. In assessing prior learning for migrant professionals, there seems to be an apparent lack of recognition which might be attributable to a number of factors including our epistemological misconstructions of difference and knowledge.

The deficit model of difference is partly responsible for the belief that differences are deficiency and that the knowledge of some migrant professionals is unsuited and inferior and therefore invalid. It seems reasonable to conclude that knowledge has become Europeanised. Furthermore, our ontological devotion to positivism and liberal universalism has exacerbated the complexity of this issue. By applying a single-size-fits-all approach to measuring OTTs' qualifications and experience, liberal universalism restricts or even denies them the opportunity of being successful in a new society. Furthermore, it has also been revealed that professional standards and excellence have been used as a misnomer aimed at restricting competition and legitimising existing power relations.

The merger of the misconstructions of difference and knowledge with positivism and liberal universalism has formed a new head tax to exclude the undesirable, and to perpetuate oppression in the UK. The current approach to recognition of prior learning and experience for OTTs represents a grave barrier rather than a facilitator. Consequently, government organisations, professional associations, educational institutions and the responsible qualification assessment body are all urged to dismantle barriers to the professional integration of OTTs by adopting an inclusive framework which fully embraces all human knowledge and experiences, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

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