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University of Bath

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Developing the notion of teaching in ‘International Schools’ as precarious: Towards a more nuanced approach based upon ‘transition capital’

Abstract

This paper is a response to a recently published article in this journal entitled ‘Precarious privilege: personal debt, lifestyle aspirations and mobility among international school teachers’ by Rey, Bolay and Gez (2020). In this follow-up paper, we take the notion of ‘precarious privilege’ as the starting point for theorising an emerging concept derived from our recent research into teachers’ experiences of turnover in the field of International Schooling. We call this concept ‘transition capital’, which imagines the social reality of being a teacher in International Schools as being a mixture of both the negative and positive. We believe that the concept of ‘transition capital’ complements the notion of ‘precarious privilege’ by recognising the paradoxical nature of the teacher experience. It also attempts to go beyond it by showing how the positive and the negative are dialectical in nature. We also seek to flesh out the burgeoning concept of ‘transition capital’ by explaining its origins in the notion of ‘resilience capital’ and sketching a future research agenda. This agenda includes exploring the ‘coping strategies’ of teachers and focusing more on teacher attrition rates and longevity in the field, rather than merely turnover, which we argue should be viewed as ‘transition.’

Keywords: International schools; international school teachers; transition capital; precarity; global middle class

Introduction

The growth of ‘International Schooling’

This paper is our response to a recently published article in this journal entitled ‘Precarious privilege: personal debt, lifestyle aspirations and mobility among international school teachers’ by Rey, Bolay and Gez (2020). That paper focuses on a sub-set of teachers in the rapidly growing body of ‘International Schools’, namely ‘young Anglo-Saxon’ educators.¹ The complex arena of ‘International Education’ that involves pre-university English-speaking ‘International Schooling’ (rather than non-English speaking ‘National Overseas Schooling’ such as the role of Japanese schooling in Singapore: Toh, 2020) has begun to attract scholarly attention in recent years, amidst substantial changes in both scale and nature, and the challenge of being a teacher in an ‘International School’ has been previously discussed in this journal (Sava 2017). Although the ‘International School’ continues to defy exact and consensus definition (Hayden 2011), and has long-been seen as an ‘enigma, eluding accurate description’ (Salter 1999), it is acknowledged that they are in the main, schools delivering a curriculum in English outside an English-speaking country (Brummitt and Keeling 2013). This definition seems to confirm the view that ‘English is the primary language of the global economy’ (Spring 1998, 27). In particular, this arena of elite schooling has attracted a greater sociological lens of inquiry, as called for by Resnik (2012) and Tarc and Mishra Tarc (2015) among others, and our paper adds to this ongoing development.

It is asserted that the arena of International Schooling, within a very broad definition underpinned by English as a Medium-of-Instruction, currently has over 11,000 schools (Speck 2019) and half a million teachers. Currently, China has the most schools, and the United Arab

¹ Although the authors do not specifically mention the ages of these teachers, it is assumed that they are in their mid-twenties to early thirties.

Emirates (Dubai in particular) has the most students (Gaskell 2016), revealing the extent to which globalisation and neo-liberal education reforms in Asia and the Middle East are generating demand for an established form of elite, English-speaking schooling (Machin 2017). One view from Singapore is that ‘International schools are a necessary part of the infrastructure’ in order to attract inward investment, and produce a globally-oriented workforce (Siong 2012). Since Post-Cold War, the field has moved deeply into commercially-led territory, catering for locally-based parents as well as the globally-mobile expatriate ‘international community.’

However, beneath the surface of enormous change, one significant aspect of activity remains strangely constant. An under-reported fact is that this arena has always been largely populated by teachers from ‘Anglo-Saxon’ nations, and continues to do so in spite of the huge movement towards schooling ‘local’ children. The first Director General of the International Baccalaureate, Alec Peterson, (1987, 200), reflecting on his experiences, had commented on the ‘high preponderance of teachers from the UK in International Schools.’ It was reported (Barker, 2010) that 30,000 teachers had ‘fled’ Britain between 2005 and 2010 to work in International Schools. In 2012, it was being stated (Shaklee and Merz 2012, 13) that: ‘The most predominant groups choosing to teach in International Schools are from Western nations, primarily Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand and the US’ In 2014-15, there were 300,000 full-time teaching staff, with one-third coming from Britain (Robertson 2018). It was reported (Navdar 2016) in October 2016 that the number of teachers in the Middle East had reached 112,000, of which 86% were Western-trained, predominantly from the US and UK. Moreover, it was being said that in the UAE’s almost 600 ‘International Schools’ in late-2016, British-trained teachers accounted for almost exactly half (49%) of total staff, and a further 15% coming from North America, plus five percent from the Australia and New Zealand.

These proportions are similar to those uncovered over 15 years ago in a seminal paper by Canterford (2003), which had discovered that British and American teachers represented

just over half (52%) of all the total body - i.e. it is widely known that the arena is comprised of 'disproportionately large' (Canterford 2003, 47) numbers of British and American staff. This emergent fact had led Canterford (2003, 53) to conclude that 'International Schools are favouring teachers from these nations and are therefore operating within segmented labour markets.' However, the body of teachers in the field have generally been overlooked, in spite of an acceptance that they face huge challenges, an issue to be discussed next.

The neglected dimension of teacher reality

In addition to wanting to see the world, Rey et al. (2020) argue that the 'young Anglo-Saxon' grouping of teachers is drawn to the International Schooling arena largely due to economic concerns; namely, personal debts. This in itself is a significant move forward in the academic discussion since few attempts have been to explain why teachers *enter* the arena. Rey et al. (2020, 1) explain that this group's interest in the International School field can be explained in terms of their participation in the seemingly carefree, privileged environment of lifestyle migration that under normal circumstances would be unavailable to them back in their home countries. Based on our experiences of international schools, we have observed that these privileges include relatively light teaching loads, competitive salaries, and a range of benefits, including free health care, travel and accommodation allowances, tuition fees for teachers' children and relocation allowances. A significant feature of young, Anglo-Saxon teachers is the challenge of personal debts, such as the accumulation of student loans. Working in International Schooling thus provides this group of teachers with a way out of indebtedness, yet at the same time, their indebtedness effectively 'locks' (Rey et al. 2020, 10) them into 'a precarious system that offers little protection and is highly unpredictable' (Rey et al. 2020, 10). This paradox is captured in the seemingly oxymoronic phrase, 'precarious privilege', in which

the teachers ‘combine the privileges of emancipated globetrotters and the precarity of contractual employment in the neoliberal age’ (Rey et al. 2020, 10).

The work by Rey et al. (2020) is much welcomed, offering a basis for further critically analysing and theorising the growing scene. Firstly, it has been noted that there is a lack of research and comment on teachers in the field of International Schooling in spite of the enormous growth over the past two decades (Bunnell 2016). Although there has been much progress made in recent years (e.g. Bailey 2015; Blyth 2017; Poole, 2020b), the domain of teachers in International Schools remains largely under-researched and under-theorised with little critical sociological attention. Much effort has gone into developing a typology of teachers, which changes over time anyway, yet surprisingly little empirical research has emerged. Overall, the experience and reality of being a teacher in the wider International School setting has been very neglected, and we hope that the work by Rey et al. (2020) will spur some action.

Therefore, in summary, the work by Rey et al. (2020) significantly adds to the emerging discourse on teachers’ experiences and reality in International Schools. Secondly, Rey et al. (2020) focus on a sub-group of teachers (Anglo-Saxon, young, and in debt) who have yet to receive much, if any, specific attention even though, as we have already noted, the field has always been served disproportionately by ‘Anglo-Saxon’ born-and-trained educators. Thus, they arguably warrant greater attention. Finally, Rey et al. (2020) neatly capture the ambivalence and complexity of the International School context by considering the affordances and constraints of mobility within the field.

The emergent debate

Building on the work of Rey et al. (2020), we interrogate two assumptions on which their arguments are predicated in order to theorise a new concept for understanding how teachers in the field of International Schooling negotiate precarity, as evidenced in the form of high-

turnover and hyper-mobility. Our analysis is based on interactions with teachers who are considerably more experienced than the ones in Rey et al.'s study. These teachers are in their mid-thirties to their mid-fifties, hail predominantly from the UK and the US (although some teachers also came from South Africa and Australia) and have little desire to return to their homecountries, where the chances of finding similar employment is slim, a situation exacerbated by the impact of Covid-19.

The first assumption we address is that the arena of International Schooling is a 'precarious system' (Rey et al. 2020, 10). It is true that International Schools are 'tense' and 'messy' places, and indeed always were, with few outlets for releasing the 'pressure valve' (Bunnell, 2019). Previous research has identified precarity as revolving, in practice, around unstable contractual and working environments (Bunnell, 2016), substantial micro-politics and tensions (Caffyn 2015), and high turnover among educators (Odland and Ruzicka 2009). Odland and Ruzicka (2009, 6) had revealed an average annual turnover of 14.4%.

We identify 'precarity' as a 'condition of chronic uncertainty and insecurity', where 'labour is insecure and unstable' (Standing, 2015 p.6). In this context, the short-term contract is clearly a precursor to creating the condition. However, we also take Guy Standing's (2015 p.6) broader view that this is not just a social condition, but it involves a person, a 'precariat', that 'can act' and 'has agency'. In other words, it is a social condition that can be remedied and dealt with by the persons involved. In this context, turn-over or contract-breaking are acts of agency, and self-care, representing escape and resistance. The condition of 'precarity' is not necessarily a situation that need be endured but can in fact be solved. This gives the discussion an affirmative dimension, and points to possible strategies being employed. Whilst we readily acknowledge that International Schools are hotbeds of precarity, we nonetheless argue that there is scope for a more nuanced lens of inquiry, one that not only takes into consideration the

(negative) structural impediments of precarity, but also how individuals perceive and transform these structures.

The other assumption that we address is the notion of being ‘locked’ into a ‘precarious system’ and the equating of contractual employment with precarity. Rey et al (2020, 10) observe that in the context of international schooling:

‘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.’

Whilst teachers’ mobility may be circumscribed in terms of trans-country mobility from global South back to global North (i.e., in returning home, mainly to Britain or North America), it does not necessary follow that movement within a particular country or within the arena of International Schooling will be similarly curtailed. Taking the word ‘system’ as our focus, we argue that it is the interconnectedness of International Schools that offers teachers opportunities for continuity, stability and hope. Failure to return home, therefore, should not be interpreted as immobility. Rather, movement within a country, between countries, and between schools, becomes an alternative way (strategy) to foster agency. The short-term contractual nature of employment also has some unexpected benefits. As we show later, teachers exploit the short-term nature of their contracts, using turnover as a strategy to move beyond the present precarity, and to achieve a better condition.

In this follow-up paper, we take the notion of ‘precarious privilege’ as the starting point for theorising an emerging concept derived from our recent research into teachers’ experiences of turnover in the field of International Schooling. We call this concept ‘transition capital’, which encompasses the social reality of being a teacher in an International School setting as being a mixture of both the negative and positive. The concept of ‘transition capital’

complements the notion of ‘precarious privilege’ by recognising the paradoxical nature of the teacher experience. It also attempts to go beyond it by showing how the positive and the negative are dialectical in nature.

This finding has emerged from a research project that has focused on ISTs’ experiences in international schools in Shanghai, China. This research has highlighted teachers’ struggles with precarity. We offer excerpts from this project later in this paper to build the case for ‘transition’ capital. These excerpts come from interviews and personal communications, such as email. The teachers names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity. Interview transcripts and analysis were also shared with the participants, who were given a chance to remove anything with which they were not happy or to share new insights in follow-up communications.

Towards a new lens of inquiry

In order to arrive at ‘transition capital’, it is necessary to approach the arena of International Schooling from a more nuanced perspective. Such a move is in line with Craven’s (2018, 586) view that the ‘messy, fluid, and unpredictable’ nature of the field offers ‘the perfect testing ground conducive to deconstructing conventional conceptions and reconstructing them.’ Pearce (2013, viii) had added his view for the need for a more nuanced analysis when saying that ‘we need to look harder at International Schools and to have more comprehensive ways of looking.’ Hitherto, analysis of working in ‘messy, fluid’ International Schools has been dominated by an overly ‘negative sociology’ (Bunnell 2019). Such an approach can be seen in the study of sociology generally, as evidenced by the focus on ‘divorce’ or ‘suicide’, which might be seen as extremes, whereas the normal condition is more blurred, and positive. We see the same issue in the field of International Schooling where the focus is always on turnover and instability, rather than understanding low-attrition and continuous growth. Frawley (2018)

identifies a ‘happiness problem’ inherent in news media reporting, and a pre-occupation with the more negative issues in life, and such a view would be correct when applied to discussions about International Schooling. As mentioned earlier, this negative sociology approach assumes that International Schools are dysfunctional and deeply unpleasant workplaces in nature. However, characterising these schools as such exposes a major paradox; again, we ask a fundamentally important question: ‘if International Schools are indeed so dysfunctional and unpleasant why do teachers continue to stay in the field and suffer it?’

Turn-over might be high, yet attrition rates would seem to be surprisingly low. We do not see an exodus of teachers fleeing the arena in spite of precarity. However, they do move from school-to-school. This was always seemingly the case. For example, Hayden and Thompson’s (1995) study showed that 40% of teachers had taught in five or more schools. Hardman’s (2001) study showed that 89% of teachers had worked at two or more schools. Indeed, the numbers indicate that the teaching workforce is continuing to expand, and it is fully expected that the workforce will double by 2030, to reach almost one million teachers (Speck, 2019), although the (over-)reliance on British and North American educators might have to start to be reduced. Indeed, Singapore has already started a scheme in conjunction with a British university whereby local citizens can train mid-career as teachers to enter the arena (Davie, 2018).

Moving beyond the normal negative sociology has enabled us to reorient our approach from identifying the problems that teachers face to exploring teachers’ lived experiences of precarity. This shift of focus has helped us to understand why teacher attrition is relatively low and why, despite a seemingly ‘tense’ and ‘messy’ space, teachers choose to stay in the field. We situate our analysis within the burgeoning field of positive sociology. Positive sociology is the study of ‘what people do to organize their lives such that those lives become, in combination, rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling’ (Stebbins 2009, xi). Such an approach to sociology is

concerned with looking ‘into how, why, and when people pursue those things in life that they desire, the things they do to make their existence attractive and worth living’ (Stebbins 2009, xi).

We situate ‘positive sociology’ within the broader area of ‘Humanistic Sociology’. This latter area is seen as dealing with ‘the study of how to make a better world’ (Du Bois and Wright, 2002 p.5). Moreover, ‘the key commitment is that people matter’, and it involves a ‘conversation about values’ (Du Bois and Wright, 2002 p.5). First, the discussion about continuous high amounts of ‘contract breaking’, and high rates of ‘turn-over’, tend to be viewed solely from the organisational or administration/school leadership perspective, where it is deemed a negative (even selfish) behaviour that costs time and money, wasting resources on hiring and training new teachers. The act is rarely understood from the perspective of the teacher, where it can be viewed as a stressful yet perhaps necessary act to seek out a better condition. Second, the act tends to be viewed as if the teachers do not value the job or profession, or value the relationships with colleagues that they have built up. It is almost always viewed as irresponsible behaviour, as if the teachers do not possess professional values. Yet, in most cases, transitioning yourself (and your family) is probably a last-resort, and does not necessarily reflect personal or professional values. The fact that International Schooling traditionally has high levels of moral code and ethics probably exacerbates the issue. For these reasons, the discussion and narrative needs to be re-positioned so the topic is not always negated, and the individuals made to look un-professional. The reality is most likely somewhere between the two.

This approach allows us to acknowledge the struggles that ISTs face, but also to identify the strategies that they employ in order to overcome their struggles and to use their negative experiences in order to create a more stable and generative life. This approach has also helped us to reconceptualise the notion of turnover, which has been understood as a form of precarity.

Rather, we have come to view turnover as a form of rupture and repair. It is a potential space for the renewal and renegotiation of identities. It becomes a kind of ‘safety-valve’ that enables/empowers teachers to escape from precarity and to start anew. Such a *sociological imagination* (Mills 1959) comes to view turnover as a strategy rather than an imposition. We conceptualise the potential that these moments of turnover offer as ‘transition capital.’ Before exploring this concept in more detail, we first turn to the notion of ‘resilience capital’ (Poole, 2020b), from which ‘transition capital’ has emerged.

The concept of ‘Resilience capital’

Resilience capital has been proposed as a way to bring together two seemingly disparate approaches to understanding the ‘International School Teacher’ (IST) experience. The first approach has sought to understand teachers in terms of an emerging ‘Global Middle Class’ (Ball 2010; Ball and Nikita 2014). The GMC is regarded as a ‘new’ class, identified by their being servants of Capital, rather than being owners of Capital as exemplified by the more established Transnational Capitalist Class (TNCC) (Sklair 2001). A platform for viewing ISTs within the GMC lens, with similar experiences and aspirations, comes from Tarc, Mishra Tarc and Wu (2019).

The GMC can be differentiated from their more place-bound counterparts, due to their accumulation of ‘cosmopolitan capital’ (Weenink 2008, 1092) and the development of ‘cosmopolitan social norms’ (Waters 2007, 483). Cosmopolitan capital encompasses experiences abroad, international networks, language skills and transnational degrees (Bühlmann, David and Mach 2013). Cosmopolitan capital is accrued from a position of advantage in order to reproduce social advantage, such as facilitating global mobility or providing teachers and their families with instrumental (social capital, access to better schools) advantage (Tarc, Mishra Tarc and Wu 2019). Generally speaking, understanding teachers in

International Schools as part of a GMC stresses the more positive aspects of being a globally-mobile teacher. Moreover, the accumulation of ‘cosmopolitan capital’ may outweigh the negative aspects of precarity. After all, how else might we explain the paradox of teachers in the field of International Schooling continuously growing in numbers, yet experiencing precarity? There must be something ‘locking’ them into the arena, beyond the usual explanations of high-salary or freedom from inspection that frequently appear in national press reports.

The second approach has sought to explore the difficulties and struggles that teachers face by utilising Guy Standing’s (2007) notion of the ‘precariat’, a so-called ‘Dangerous Class’. As touched upon earlier, Standing’s ‘precariat’ is a construct that denotes an emerging low-status class of individuals whose working lives are characterised by a general lack of security (job title, income, pension, length of contract), and an associated lack of subsequent support from agencies such as trade unions or employment laws (Minimum Wages, Social Welfare etc.). This scenario of dual-insecurity factors, lack of both security and support, is a very unpleasant condition. These groups include refugee and asylum seekers, illegal migrants, temporary and seasonal migrants, and long-term migrants (Standing 2011). The concept has been applied (Bunnell 2016; Poole, 2019) to teachers in International Schools, as a form of white-collar precariat, whose experiences of short-term contracts, micro politics, and uncertainty, coupled with a lack of support from either national or international agencies, suggest that they could be part of a ‘Global Educational Precariat’ (GEP).

However, parsing the teacher experience of International Schooling into either positive (GMC) or negative (GEP) constructs is incongruent with how individuals experience the world. Life is rarely black-or-white. At the level of lived experience, dichotomous notions such as negative and positive not only become blurred, but also become hybrid in nature (Poole and Huang 2018). Hence, in order to move beyond an either/or dichotomy, ‘resilience capital’

becomes a way to bridge the GMC and the GEP constructs. Aspects of the GMC were retained in the form of the accumulation of capital. However, that concept also acknowledged that negative experiences can be utilised in order to bring about positive outcomes, both physically in the movement from one school, or one country, to another and affectively in terms of how teachers come to view their difficult experiences in a more positive light in terms of lessons learnt, and experiences undergone.

Resilience capital can thus be understood as the accumulation of (largely) negative experiences that individuals utilise in order to negotiate the present and the future. The idea is that teachers take a more positive attitude towards negative or precarious experiences, utilising them in the short-run in order to develop skills, dispositions and endurance which also can be converted into more traditional economic and cultural forms of capital. By way of illustration, we offer the following quotations taken from our research into International School Teachers in China:

It is easier to put up with difficult situations since they are temporary. I can work anywhere for two years. Personally, though I would prefer to stay at least four years at any school [...] I think these situations always have made me stronger and better at navigating new schools (Nora, personal email communication).

Another teacher, Tyron, also explained that being surrounded by adversity forced him to become stronger:

I think another positive thing about it is that you have to develop yourself a lot more, especially if you want to go to a big school and you know that the needs for that school are kind of like different from what you currently are

doing. It's like internally you have to fight and I mean to stay alive. But in order to fight you have to develop. You have to develop yourself. And I mean, I do get stronger. I mean I'm mentally much stronger than I was five years ago (Interview)

'Resilience capital' can be seen to be a holding concept until a more nuanced term could be proposed. 'Transition capital' represents a complement to, and perhaps even a development of, resilience capital, to which we turn next.

The concept of 'Transition capital'

Transition capital imagines the social reality of being a teacher as being a mixture of both the negative and positive. In terms of the negative, teachers in our project reported feelings of being duped or cheated by International Schools, as illustrated in the following quotations:

It is difficult to communicate all aspects of a job in a contract or the posted information, but I find that many of the 'extra' duties piled onto international teachers can be very frustrating and sap energy. For example, a position I had in China added on boarding school duties that were not mentioned in the hiring process at all (Nora, personal email communication)

And then when I got this job I was lied to. I was told that I was going to be the IT manager here. And then they told me I was going to be a dorm parent (Jack, Interview)

So, we got taken for a ride. I was the head of K-8 and I wrote the maths programme, K-8. And I found out later that the head of curriculum got that programme translated and she submitted it to the Ministry and it had been adopted by the country as K-8 maths programme (Norman, Interview)

Another issue teachers face is the short-term nature of International Schooling. Renewal of contracts is contingent on 'good' examination results and student evaluations. However, this can create feelings of anxiety:

So, the stress you have to perform. If you don't perform, you are kind of let go. Also, there is some chance that you might get work at another school, but you don't want to disrupt this groove that you have every day. So, I would say the emotional missing family, missing friends, missing my family and obviously I have to perform all the time. It's pretty stressful (Tyron, Interview).

Finally, the difficulties of working in International Schools take on a more existential nature, with some teachers talking about their experiences in terms of being in a situation of perpetual liminality. This is illustrated by Nora:

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 don't ever - 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. So, there is a little bit of definite stress that goes along with that because you don't have a base to depend on. You've got yourself (Interview).

Despite the prevalence of precarity, our research has also identified the many strategies that teachers employ in order to overcome their difficulties. For example, Jack talked about how another teacher chose to shut himself off emotionally as a strategy for coping: ‘I know him enough to know that he’s decided to just put a box around himself. I think that’s a perfect example. It can happen to certain people’ (Interview). Another strategy adopted by Nora involved asserting agency: ‘I have enough international experience that I know to be tenacious’ (email correspondence) whilst Jack took a more stoic approach to dealing with difficulties: ‘You have to just be a survivor’ (Interview) In both cases, prolonged exposure enabled them to develop resilience, which helped them to navigate unexpected situations.

A final strategy, and the one most germane to this paper, involves teachers utilising the short-term nature of International Schooling as a way to ‘escape’ from a difficult situation. This is illustrated by the following examples where Nora and Jack both share a positive view of the short-term nature of International Schooling:

Part of it is, when you go into international teaching you know you have a bit of control over it. Like you can move somewhere new every two years. So, some of it is in your control and part of the job. I mean, some international teachers fall in love with a country or a place and end up staying. But I think the majority of them might not be there for two years, you know, move on to greener pastures (Nora, Interview)

Having a two-year contract is very beneficial because you’re not locked down [...] So, having two years is copacetic for the employer and the employee. From my perspective, it doesn’t offer protection and job security

but it does give you the flexibility to search around if you don't like the school (Jack, Interview).

As we can see from the quotations above, turnover is a transition to something new, not an end in itself. Disaffected teachers do not leave the arena, but simply move school, or country (hence a high rate of turnover exists alongside a low rate of attrition). At the same time, the teachers remain flexible; they either do whatever job they are offered, whether they wanted it or not, or they use the precarious condition and high turnover of others as a means to secure swift promotion. This is illustrated by Jack who explained that 'We'll take anything we can get, basically. That's pretty much what it comes down to. It just so happens that the market right now is pretty good' (Interview).

We prefer the term 'transition' over 'mobility' as the latter suggests movement in terms of physicality. Transition, instead, offers a more nuanced and positive connotation. Transition can refer to the physical movement from school to school. It can also refer to the movement across and through symbolic spaces, such as the school or the negotiation of teacher identities.

International Schools are acknowledged as places of constant flux and have been understood as 'transnational spaces' (Hayden 2011) that are 'criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors' (Beck 2000, 11). Once again, this interpretation foregrounds individual agency. Schools can also be thought of as contested spaces or contact zones (Pratt 1991, 34), that is, they are:

'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today' (Pratt 1991, 34).

This comment is particularly germane to the so-called 'Non-Traditional International Schools' (Hayden and Thompson 2013), those catering to locally-based families within a profit-driven

mission (and making up the bulk of the aforementioned 11,000 schools). Some of these newer forms of ‘International Schools’ do offer some form of international curricula to national middle-class elites. Brummitt and Keeling (2013, 30) had noted how 200 million Chinese children will soon need schools, and: ‘The proportion of these children wanting an internationally-oriented education will be very hard to satisfy with the current provision in China.’ Subsequently, new models of ‘Non-Traditional’ schools have emerged. For example, the growing body of ‘Chinese Internationalised Schools’ (Poole 2020a), have been shown to be comprised of a number of national and international orientations, such as curricula and teaching demographic, that are often in tension, leading to the marginalisation of expatriate teachers’ professional identities (Poole 2020a). The tension between national and international orientations has also been found in the-more ‘Traditional International Schools’ (Hayden and Thompson, 2013) in China, where the privileging of ‘Western’ ideas about teaching and learning dominate (Lai et al. 2016).

The new notion of ‘transition capital’ helps us to understand how teachers negotiate these difficult symbolic spaces and the strategies they employ in order to do so. Here, we retain the general negative view of International Schools as inherently complex, ‘messy’ and ‘tense’, yet by focusing on transitions, we are able to frame individuals’ actions within the generative contexts of agency, resilience and identity. In fact, the high turnover of teachers in itself can present opportunities for both moving *to* another school and moving *within* another school - i.e. promotion prospects can be increased in schools with a high turn-over. Here we have an example of the subtlety of transition in practice.

The notion of accumulating ‘transition capital’ therefore emerges, as a complement to ‘resilience capital’. Resilience is a general term for teachers’ overall positive mind-set for dealing with precarity; transition capital is an instantiation of resilience capital. We believe that ‘transition capital’ complements Rey et al.’s (2020) related concept of ‘precarious privilege’

by capturing the ambivalent and complex nature of the lives of teachers in International Schools. However, it also develops it by suggesting a specific strategy that teachers employ in order to overcome their precarity. Rather than succumbing to their fate, we focus on what teachers do to survive and, in many cases, even thrive. Teachers use their precarity in order to sustain privilege.

Conclusions

We have focused attention on the fact that the field of International Schooling continues to grow and attract new entrants, yet at the same continuous growth implies that the players largely remain in the field. There is much discussion of an exodus of teachers into the field, yet the exodus always seems to be one-way. This seems odd given the inherent nature of the field, which is and always has been viewed as ‘messy’, and ‘tense’, with substantial instability and precarity. The dominant negative sociology approach is not sufficient to make sense of this. What is needed are concepts that capture the brackish ambivalence between these two extremes, which we offer in the form of resilience and transition capital.

Teachers in International Schools seemingly possess enormous resilience, based upon their condition, and the accumulation of ‘resilience capital’ offers advantages in the field. Rather than merely focusing on the negative aspects, there is a need to understand more about the strategies used by actors to survive and thrive. The growing diversity of the field, especially within the majority-sized ‘Non-Traditional’ arena offers much scope for study since this area of International Schooling involves new players, and new spaces of activity. The ‘Chinese Internationalised Schools’ are one such avenue, but there are many others emerging. Hong Kong stock-market listed *Maple Leaf Educational Systems* operates in 2020 a network of 78 schools across 19 cities in China, many offering a Canadian curriculum. An emergent and

under-reported phenomenon has become the state-backed ‘International School’ (Yemini and Fulop, 2015). At the same time, the ‘Traditional’ arena of activity is also undergoing much change, with increased precarity, and there is scope for study there too.

Stebbins (2009) argues strongly that the mainstream sociological discussion is usually ‘problem-centred’ and there is a need to move away from viewing sociology about merely dealing with negative issues in life. The same is true if we are to fully move towards a more nuanced, perhaps even critical, approach that draws upon multiple and nuanced vantage points. The ‘coping strategies’ of teachers clearly warrants greater research. Attention needs to focus on other aspects of precarity. This paper has primarily focused on contractual pressures upon teachers; however, multiple problematics may be at play. Further, the attention of research needs to focus more on teacher attrition rates and longevity in the field, rather than merely turnover. Finally, the attention needs to focus on viewing turnover as a ‘transition’, which is more empowering. There is a need to view ‘turnover’ as functional, rather than merely adopting a conflict perspective. This helps to make sense of the continuous growth in spite of the adversity.

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