

Warner, Lionel (2010) Overseas trained teachers: part of a problem or part of a solution? Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal (TEAN), 1 (2).

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Overseas Trained Teachers: part of a problem or part of a solution?

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Citation:

Warner, L. (2010) 'Overseas Trained Teachers: part of a problem or part of a solution?'
Tean Journal 1(2) December [Online]. Available at: <http://bit.ly/tyfJ5M>
(Accessed 28 October 2011).

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Abstract

Overseas trained teachers (OTTs) have grown in numbers during the past decade, particularly in London and the South East of England. In this recruitment explosion many OTTs have experienced difficulties. In professional literature as well as press coverage OTTs often become part of a deficit discourse. A small-scale pilot investigation of OTT experience has begun to suggest why OTTs have been successful as well as the principal challenges they have faced. An important factor in their success was felt to be the quality of support in school from others on the staff. Major challenges included the complexity of the primary curriculum. The argument that globalisation leads to brain-drain may be exaggerated. Suggestions for further research are made, which might indicate the positive benefits OTTs can bring to a school.

Keywords

brain-drain; globalisation; OTTs; recruitment; representation; support

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OTTs: part of a problem or part of a solution?

Introduction

My title is taken from Barlin and Hallgarten (2001); many overseas trained teachers (OTTs) began their UK teaching careers 'on supply', that is to say as short-term cover teachers, and supply teachers may be seen as a short-term measure in managing teacher recruitment: a solution to a problem, as the authors argue. The growth of the OTT phenomenon over more than a decade now has led to a wide spectrum of representation, from extremes of lauding the contributions they make to schools in challenging circumstances to deficit discourses concerning their recruitment and capabilities. Against this background the question arises: what factors promote and inhibit the successful transition of the OTT to the English context? In London and the South East many schools, both primary and secondary, have OTTs on their staff. Those on a substantial contract with their school often come to the attention of providers of an Overseas Trained Teacher Programme (OTTP) to gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). It could be argued, then, that those OTTs whose experiences are recorded in this paper, who have successfully completed the OTTP, are a self-selected and perhaps elite sample. It is nevertheless the case that on an individual basis these teachers are often celebrated by their head teachers and colleagues; OTTs are a source of strength for the team and the school. But this positive representation is not always shared when the focus widens into the arena of popular and indeed academic debate.

Background

There has been a significant growth in the numbers of OTTs in the UK, especially English, schools in the past decade. Teacher agencies' recruitment of supply teachers from overseas increased dramatically in the late 1990s (Ross and Hutchings, 2003), and OTTs soon started taking up longer contracts (Barlin and Hallgarten, 2001). An article in *The Times Educational Supplement* (TES) expresses the fear of schools that government insistence on OTTs gaining QTS within four years would lead to staffing problems (Milne,

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2007). Data on the actual numbers involved are patchy, but it seems clear that the greatest teacher shortages are in London (McNamara et al, 2007). Miller's estimate (2008a) is 43000 OTTs in the UK at the end of 2006.

OTTs are, it seems, hard to regulate. Bottery (2002,157) argues that globalisation and market forces have led to an increase in both 'fragmentation and control' in education and its management. Hatcher (2006) sees the growth in OTT numbers as a laissez faire extension of the role of the private sector in state education in this country. Recruitment agencies in the UK stand accused of responding to the market with inadequate attention to the needs of the teachers themselves and the countries from which they come (Curtis, 2003). There is concern about 'uniformity of assessment' (McNamara et al, 2004: 49) of OTTs wishing to gain QTS. Anecdotal evidence¹ suggests that regulations are not always enforced. Miller (2008b) sees the need for an integrated policy framework.

It is not surprising that, in this laissez-faire context, OTTs experience difficulties. They often feel unsupported, and sometimes suffer xenophobia and racism (Stuart and Cole, 2003; Cunningham and Hargreaves, 2007). They have often felt professionally discriminated against, having to undergo the 'onerous and demeaning' OTTP route to QTS (McNamara et al, 2004: ii). Working in challenging schools has had a 'deeply damaging impact on confidence and self-esteem' of some OTTs (McNamara et al, 2007: 51). Anecdotal evidence in the blogosphere is not heartening². OTTs are sometimes considered vulnerable (NASUWT, 2007).

¹ '... a friend of mine is an Australian (sic) and has been here for 5 years doing supply. He hasn't got QTS'
TES Education Ltd (2008) Available at:
http://www.tes.co.uk/section/staffroom/thread.aspx?story_id=2380126&path=/Overseas+trained+teachers/&threadPage=7&messagePage=2 (Accessed 9 April 2008).

² Rosy (2007) 'In England, OTT Feel like rubbish' .Teaching in England'. 10 December. Available at: <http://teachinengland.blogspot.com/2007/12/what-is-teaching-in-uk-like.html> (Accessed 24 August 2009).

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Against this background the representation spectrum is broad. The standard registration letter for OTTs from the General Teaching Council for England says 'Teachers from overseas make a valuable contribution to our schools'. It seems that teachers are generally supportive of their OTT colleagues, seeing them as 'an opportunity for 'culture-sharing and fresh ideas and approaches' (Smith, 2006). The Times Educational Supplement avers 'Teachers trained in other countries can enrich our profession and benefit pupils' (Bubb, 2008).

But the discourse can also be one of deficit. When in April 2008 the Opposition schools spokesman asked a parliamentary question about school staffing a press report contained the following paragraph:

'The number of overseas trained teachers without QTS has...risen from 2,480 in 1997 to 10,970 in 2007. This will spark fears that children's education is being damaged' (Cassidy, 2008).

The juxtaposition of OTTs and 'damaged' education is stark. It requires pause for thought to acknowledge that all OTTs by definition begin teaching in the UK without QTS; many may well teach competently or better without needing to gain QTS, and many others do in fact go on to obtain QTS. An even starker message has appeared in an online recruitment page: 'NO OTT TEACHERS' (sic)³. Ofsted (2002, 6) report the headteacher of a primary school asking an agency not to send overseas-trained teachers as, in her experience, their command of English was too often inadequate. A local authority lists as an issue for the induction of OTTs 'Reservations some parents may hold about their presence'⁴. This is perhaps an example of what Miller (2008b) means by OTTs becoming 'proxies...for populist expressions of frustrations' (280).

³ eTeach.com (2000) Available at: <http://www.eteach.com/JobSeekers/RecruiterProfile.aspx?EmpNo=6758> (Accessed 9 April 2008).

⁴ M1 Sheets Database (2009) Available at: <http://www.esinet.norfolk.gov.uk/cadmin/misheet/display04.asp?id=1179> (Accessed 23 August 2009)

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Academic literature on the subject, though more even-handed, is not entirely free from the deficit discourse. Sayer (2006) seems to be concerned that regulation is too lax:

‘For non-EEA teachers there is the overseas teachers training programme (sic) (OTTP) but in any case employers are able to appoint to cover shortages, and only after a four-year exemption is qualification status required. This is clearly unsatisfactory in terms of ensuring an adequate level of quality teaching and fitness to teach’ (73).

Note again the implication that numbers of OTTs are deficient in quality and fitness to teach. Similarly, Chevalier and Dolton (2004, 7) refer to OTTs in the context of what they call the country’s ‘increasingly reliance of non-qualified teachers’(sic).

A more mixed discourse is evident elsewhere. A recruitment agency privileges OTTs from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as ‘dynamic, enthusiastic, talented and highly committed to teaching’⁵. To Miller (2007: 36) OTTs are ‘unsung heroes’ whose ‘significant impact’ in schools remains insufficiently recognised by headteachers and research literature alike. He is prepared to assert that OTTs ‘have given so emphatically to England’s educational sustenance’ (31) and to suggest that they have a positive impact in schools on behaviour management and act as positive multicultural role models. But even Miller locates the OTT phenomenon within a state of crisis; he was able to write, pre-recession, in 2007 ‘the problem of England’s teacher shortage seems set to worsen’ (28). Ofsted, having in 2002 portrayed OTTs as part of a problem (op cit), later (2009: 15) manage obliquely to commend the work of OTTs in outstanding schools in difficult circumstances:

⁵ Supreme Education plc (2009) Available at: <http://www.supreme-education.com/schools/supplyteachers.aspx> (Accessed 28 August 2009).

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‘High staff turnover, the scourge of many urban schools, can be one of the biggest disruptive influences on developing a positive school culture. Often, though, the problems are more immediate, such as procuring mathematics teachers or even simply putting qualified teachers in front of classes. The more successful the school, however, the less acute is the problem. The schools give high priority and put a great deal of energy into recruitment – and worldwide recruitment is not uncommon’.

In this context of diverse portrayals it is perhaps encouraging to find research which has been concerned to dispel myths. One such myth which is heard in many educational circles is that OTTs who come from certain countries where the education and teacher training systems are modelled on the UK naturally make a smoother transition to teaching here. Maylor et al (2006: 9), investigating the myth of the culture shock that OTTs from other countries are supposed to have suffered, find that common experiences, notably pupils’ ‘bad behaviour full stop’, transcend the varied cultural backgrounds of these teachers. They also note in passing the tension between research indicating that OTTs are well trained, adaptable and enthusiastic, and Ofsted reports expressing concern that they might not really be able to cope. A second myth is that OTTs are mostly young professionals seeking to spend a relatively short time working and exploring Europe, and a third that they are simply drawn in by agencies to fill acute shortages. McNamara et al (2007: 52) find a ‘pervasiveness of misinformation’ about OTTs, especially concerning their age profile, and find that they are often older and more experienced than commonly alleged. They also find that simple supply-and-demand is inadequate to explain patterns of OTT recruitment: a substantial proportion of their sample were teaching in the primary phase, and the most common secondary school subject taught by them was English, and yet neither primary nor secondary English were/are officially the greatest shortage areas.

Aims of the research

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This pilot study sought to begin to investigate the experiences of successful OTTs teaching in the UK. In particular, it sought to explore the main professional difficulties experienced by OTTs alongside factors they saw as contributing to their sense of professional success in teaching. Given the wide spectrum of views about OTTs and the myths underlying research and other discourse concerning them, it was felt appropriate to ask open-ended questions in questionnaire and semi-structured interview, about professional difficulties encountered and reasons for success.

Methodology and Methods

A grounded theoretical approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was adopted for this small scale pilot study. As the intention was to explore the experiences of OTTs, framing it in this way allowed for the narrative of OTTs to be explored inductively, without pre-supposing what those experiences were likely to be. There were two stages of data collection. First, a questionnaire was sent by email to twenty teachers selected at random from a cohort of seventy OTTs who were recommended for QTS during the academic year 2007-08 by The University of Reading; seventeen replies were received, from a range of primary teachers and secondary subjects, a response rate of 85%. Second, follow-up semi-structured interviews were carried out, in two phases: two pairs of OTTs were interviewed, and two individual interviews were undertaken, all in their school settings. The sampling and design for the conduct of interviews reflect both convenience and OTTs' willingness to participate. Questions explored (a) what professional difficulties, if any, have you encountered coming to teach in the UK? and (b) what would you say are the reasons behind your professional success in making this transition? Interviews explored questions in more depth as well as considering OTTs' teaching experience, both overseas and in the UK. Paired interviews allowed participants to be stimulated by the responses of the other; it is argued that in paired interviews points can be clarified more readily (Doucet, 1996), and opportunities to 'spark off each other' (Booth & Booth 1997:135) adds to the depth of data collected.

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For the first interviews there were two pairs of interviewees, each pair consisting of female primary school teachers, from Australia and New Zealand respectively; they are for the purposes of this paper named Alice, Bethan, Carol and Dinah. All four taught in their home countries before travelling to England, and undertook periods of supply teaching before securing longer-term contracts. All four were highly regarded by their headteachers and senior colleagues, as was evident when they completed the OTTP. Both of the schools are in inner London, School A an average sized primary school, and School B an above average sized junior school. Both schools employed, at the time of the interviews (2008), a small cluster of OTTs, and have a history of doing so.

The two follow-up individual interviewees, both Asian, were selected in order to provide a reflection of OTTs from minority backgrounds⁶. This pilot study was designed with the aim that OTTs would reflect in a balanced way on how far and for what reasons s/he had been professionally successful as well as on problems encountered. As previously suggested, the sample is a privileged one; these are OTTs who have undertaken substantial teaching contracts and completed the OTTP to gain QTS.

Interview data was explored via a simple content analysis of the data which allowed for patterns and themes in the data to emerge. Framing the analysis in this way allowed for the narrative of OTTs to be explored inductively. This process of listening and recording begins to resemble the reflexive and iterative method of interview data collection recommended by Halcomb and Davidson (2006). The survey responses were fully anonymised, so no record was kept of age group or country of origin. In a future large-scale investigation, if undertaken, it might be valuable to collect these data in the light of the myths about OTTs referred to above (McNamara et al 2007, op cit).

⁶ Half of the applicants (33 of 65) for the University of Reading's OTTP in 2009-10 were from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

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Findings

In the survey the professional difficulties most often mentioned were classroom management and the complexities of the curriculum, each mentioned seven times. The third most mentioned difficulty was lack of professional support. Reasons for success (in order) were: professional support in school, positive attitude, hard work, and completion of the OTTP. Table 1. below summarises the results of the email questionnaire.

Table 1. email questionnaire results: numbers of comments

'main professional difficulties'	'reasons for professional success'
Classroom management/discipline 7	Support in school 9
Complex curriculum 7	Positive attitude 8
Lack of support in school 6	Hard work 7
Racism 2	Training in own country 3
Government formalities 1	Available resources 2
Data analysis 1	Planning and research 2
Pressure to undertake responsibility 1	Teaching experience 1
Slow progress of pupils 1	

It is perhaps not surprising that the difficulties of classroom management were mostly recorded by OTTs in secondary schools. Similarly, the difficulties generated by a complex curriculum were all noted by primary teachers. On the positive side a kind of consensus is suggested, which is cross-phase. The positive comments out number the negative (if the raw numbers are totalled), and there is a strong claim for a combination of personal strengths and professional support leading to OTT success.

When asked about professional difficulties faced on coming to England, all four paired interviewees foregrounded the curriculum and its organisation here. Alice immediately referred to the 'rigid timetable', and contrasted this with the more flexible and integrated curriculum in New Zealand. Bethan had

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initially 'struggled with assessment' and found 'strict guidelines for planning difficult'. She too felt that greater integration of the curriculum was possible. She spoke of the greater accountability of teachers here and the need to meet objectives. She was surprised to find that professional development opportunities had to be so closely linked to management targets and even went so far as to say that she had found '*the pressure put on teachers quite shocking*'. This is a teacher with considerable experience in posts of responsibility in Australia who at the time of the interview was applying for the post of Deputy Head of her current school. Similarly, Carol immediately highlighted 'the paperwork side' of a curriculum 'very focused' on 'objectives' as a professional difficulty, and drew a contrast with exploratory, project-based curricula in Australia. For Dinah the curriculum here is 'prescriptive', 'the same set thing'. Carol went as far as to suggest that she worked harder in Australia because more was left up to her there; having found the provision of planning and resources helpful when she first arrived here she now felt it was 'less challenging' having taught for four years in the same school.

When asked about reasons why they were successful all four referred to the support and sense of teamwork in their schools, and drew a clear contrast in this respect with the experience of being a supply teacher. Alice found her colleagues 'accepting of us'; Bethan spoke of a 'nurturing' and supportive 'community'; Carol said that '*it feels like a family*' being part of her school; and Dinah found support and encouragement from '*everyone, cooks and cleaners*', a feeling that '*we're here for the kids, not the paperwork*'. When they were prompted to consider aspects of their training as factors producing their current success there were long silences; though they felt well trained they did not immediately feel that overseas training had conferred particular benefit. However, after reflection, Carol suggested that her four year course might have covered 'more topics' than those of some UK teachers; '*we did everything*' whereas 'they' concentrated on literacy, numeracy, science, planning and assessment. So, for example, she felt confident in using drama to teach literacy, which was not common practice amongst UK-trained colleagues with whom she had worked. When they were prompted to consider

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personal qualities as success factors, Alice spoke of her self-confidence as a classroom practitioner, and Bethan of her drive and enthusiasm for the job. Carol said *'you have to be quite outgoing and open-minded to teach here, quite a strong person'*. Dinah said she was *'up for new challenges'* and *'because I'm travelling it can only help my teaching', because I did art history at school I wanted to go and see all those amazing cathedrals and paintings'*. Both Carol and Dinah saw their own qualities dynamically, growing in terms of multicultural awareness and ICT skills.

The first of the single interviewees was Elspeth, a female teacher of Mathematics. Having obtained a doctorate in India she taught briefly there in schools and universities before taking up two successive teaching posts in UK secondary schools. The main difficulty she encountered in her first UK school was vertical tutoring, i.e. having to run tutorial sessions for which she felt ill-prepared and for a group of children of very different ages. This was a teaching challenge completely outside her specialist subject. She also mentioned the need to differentiate the work in her Mathematics classes, to cater for different constituencies of ability and need, for which she felt her background and training overseas had not prepared her.

Her perceived reasons for success were succinct and two fold: 'more time' and 'personal growth'. When prompted she explained that she felt that she had received support on a personal level in both her schools but that in the second she had been accorded more time for training activities such as visiting other lessons and schools, and quality time for feedback on her own lessons from experienced colleagues and Advanced Skills Teachers. She now felt her lessons were more likely to contain the 'enjoyment factor' by which she meant enjoyment for both teacher and pupils. This meant that she was more likely to be able to share the benefits of her considerable mathematical subject knowledge.

Francis taught in Pakistan for some seven years before coming to England. At first he taught at a number of schools though an agency, then gained a longer

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term contract which allowed him to complete the OTTP and gain QTS. He has continued to teach at this school, undertaking departmental responsibilities for EAL, and being regarded by his head of department as a valuable role model for pupils. Although he did talk about the problems pupil behaviour in England had posed for him, the first professional difficulty he identified was a more technical one, the organisation of the curriculum, specifically schemes of work which did not make it clear to an outsider how much time to spend on them or to what depth the topic should be taught. He felt this was fundamentally a problem of mentorship, support, where his mentor did not have sufficient time to provide the right kinds of induction. Other problems he identified were matters of communication, related to accent and dialect, and the difficulties of obtaining leave of absence for religious observances.

When asked about reasons for success Francis was clear and definite: 'three things'. Two were personal qualities: 'commitment', which he illustrated by anecdotes about working late at school, and 'flexibility', by which he meant both tenacity (*'I am not easily put off'*) and the ability to act on advice (*'I am always trying to improve'*). The third was the support of key colleagues, one a classroom teacher and one the head of department, both showing him sympathy and understanding, both attracting his respect for their 'advice' and 'leadership', and both sharing his 'traditional values'; 'things may have been different', he felt, with a different personality as his subject leader.

Discussion

No doubt a degree of professional modesty prevailed initially during the interviews but all six were clear that they had valuable personal qualities which enabled them to teach well overseas. Dinah in particular became animated when talking about her reasons for travelling to Europe and her desire to open young minds as hers had been opened. It would be wrong in the light of these experiences to represent OTTs as merely second-rate workers drafted in time of shortage. Also, the one-way drain/tap depletion metaphor should be questioned; it is sometimes suggested that the demand for trained teachers in the global context leads to the more developed

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countries benefiting at the expense of the less. But three of the four primary interviewees said they were likely to return home to teach in the foreseeable future, and would clearly take enhanced expertise with them. Despite widespread concern about the impact on some countries of the brain drain of teachers (Appleton et al, 2006, Miller 2007, Macnamara et al, 2007), the OTT case might be viewed less as drain and more as circulation (Teferra, 2004). Or, to put it another way, the so-called drain may have benefits for the countries of origin (Freschi, 2010).

All four primary interviewees mentioned pupil behaviour, in the context of their supply teaching experience, and also cultural factors in the context of inner London diversity. But neither culture shock nor behaviour were seen as key by the primary school teachers. The only shock expressed was the very experienced teacher Bethan reacting to pressures put on teachers to achieve results. It seems likely that the experiences and capacities of OTTs sampled above are not very different in terms of behaviour management from those of 'home-grown' teachers. Of the secondary teachers Elspeth did not mention behaviour per se nor did she express shock; nevertheless her cultural challenge had been pedagogical, to cater for the diversity of her pupils. Cultural challenges (but perhaps not quite culture shock) were evident or implied in all of Francis's responses.

The finding of McNamara et al (2007) that simple supply and demand is inadequate to explain the recruitment of OTTs is somewhat supported here. Bethan was pleased to be working in a school, School A, emerging from special measures; she felt that progress was being made and there was a collective will to improve. School B is an outstanding school according to Ofsted, whose Head has a policy of recruiting OTTs. In both schools an atmosphere of welcome and support was attested to in the interviews. The presence of OTTs might be seen as a sign of strength not weakness.

Conclusion

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Whilst this is a small-scale non-representative pilot study and therefore limited in its generalisability, its results suggest that an important success factor for the OTT is professional and personal support. No doubt this is true for all teachers new to a school but it must be remembered that OTTs are trained and usually experienced practitioners; it would be a waste of the resource if they were not adequately supported and this is what they value. The primary teachers interviewed valued personal support, the sense of 'family' in the staffroom. For secondary school teacher Elspeth a more important kind of support was official, an allocation of time and resources by senior members of the school to her in-service training. For Francis the support that was most valued was expressed in personal rather than organisational terms. This duality in interpretation of 'support' could be a useful underpinning of future research into OTTs' experiences. Another possible next stage of this research would be to seek the views of school leaders about the positive impact OTTs can have in schools, and ways in which schools may be able to make even greater use of OTT expertise and knowledge than at present, particularly in view of a revised national curriculum which seems to promote creativity and globalism. It would also be interesting to take the quantitative survey further, to begin to see whether those from the majority background (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa) might have had a different experience from the minority.

There is a wider issue here of the representation of teachers generally in the media. There is not space in this paper for a discussion of the possible cause and effect relationships in society of media representations. Nevertheless, it is worth suggesting that the way OTTs are portrayed can be seen in the context of a bigger picture. There may even be a cycle of stereotyping in operation. Mockler (2004) sees teachers portrayed as victims, threats and outsiders across a range of mass media. However, Hansen (2009) finds an improvement in the image of teachers in print journalism between the early 1990s and 2005. Perhaps the change of emphasis in Ofsted judgements alluded to above is an indicator of the improvement of OTT image over time.

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The genesis of this investigation was a sense of tension or mismatch between media and other representations of OTTs and the sense, their own and of colleagues, that they are fulfilling a valuable function in education in England. Responses of OTTs suggest further lines of enquiry which could have a definite impact on policy and practice: a clearer view of how best to support OTTs, how to make the most of such a valuable resource in a way which is not exploitative but professionally developmental.

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