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The Globalizing Labor Market in Education: Teachers as Cultural Ambassadors or Agents of Institutional Isomorphism?

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Institutional isomorphists and other proponents of world culture theory argue that schools around the world are converging in many ways, whereas anthropologists and others question this conclusion, often arguing that local cultural differences belie superficial similarities. These viewpoints are not merely academic explanations of the spread and apparent convergence of education policies and practices around the world but are often present in policy and practice. The authors seek both to shed new light on these often-entrenched positions and to refocus the debate by considering the presence and influence of such views in the policies and practices of international teacher exchanges. In the context of the expanding global labor market for teachers, the authors consider the implicit theories underpinning international exchange policies and the ways in which the exchange teachers themselves make sense of these policies.

In particular, we recognize that although extensive work has been done on the dynamics of policy borrowing, little attention has been paid to international exchange teachers as potential agents of isomorphism, adopting and disseminating practices at the local level. Paradoxically, the exchange policies construct a universal teacher who is interchangeable across national (and cultural) contexts, a view resonant with institutional isomorphists, while justifying the exchanges rhetorically on the basis of their value as a cultural exchange, a view more consistent with the culturalists. The teachers who participate, however—and who effectively self-select by their beliefs that such exchanges are possible—accept the interchangeability thesis and view such exchanges as a professional development opportunity.

The globalization of labor markets, well-established in nursing (Ross, Polsky, & Sochalski, 2005), many technology-intensive professions, and higher education (Musselin, 2004), has expanded rapidly in American schools. Although overseas-trained teachers (OTTs) have worked in “foreign” contexts for decades (see, e.g., Abir, 1970, on the recruitment of Indian teachers to Ethiopia), the United States now joins countries ranging from the United Kingdom (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004) to Botswana (Appleton, Sives, & Morgan, 2006) in looking abroad for teachers to address critical shortages. Over the last 15 years, a wide array of public and private agencies—including the U.S. Department of State, state departments of education, local school districts, and nonprofit...
GLOBALIZING LABOR MARKET

and for-profit teacher recruitment companies—have sought international teacher exchanges in order to address persistent and growing teacher shortages. Although K-12 schools across the United States employ OTTs, concentrations can be found in California, major urban centers (e.g., New York City, Washington, DC, Baltimore) and in the Southeast.

The emerging globalization of the labor market for teachers has profound theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the practice of exchanging teachers across national contexts can shed new light on calcifying debates between world culture theorists (or institutional isomorphists, as they are sometimes called) and their critics. Practically speaking, educators and policymakers must deal with ethical concerns (e.g., the risk of brain drain) and cultural challenges (what kinds of special preparation are required for teachers to function effectively cross-culturally?).

Research on OTTs is in its infancy. The valuable studies that do exist (examples include Barber, 2003; Dunn, 2011, 2013; Miller, Mulvaney, & Ochs, 2007) come from a variety of methodological and conceptual approaches. Basic data regarding international teacher exchange policies and practices, including the distribution of teachers, their specializations, and countries of origin, are lacking. In addition, we know little about the merits and problems of these exchanges and less about the experiences of teachers in them. In this article, we seek to address these deficits by reporting on the first two phases of a long-term research project on the policy and practice of international teacher exchanges in the U.S. state of South Carolina.

We first consider the practice of international teacher exchanges in relation to the broader debates between those who believe that schools around the world are converging in form, organization, and practice (the world culture theory or institutional isomorphist position) and critics who argue that the appearance of convergence stem from superficial similarities that disguise education’s fundamentally cultural, situated and contextual character. We then outline the broader project’s research design and methods. The first phase of the project shared here includes a descriptive study of the demographics of teacher exchanges in South Carolina and an analysis of the forces that led to its widespread adoption in the state. The second phase shifts the focus to understanding the experiences of OTTs who participated in the program. A discussion concludes the article.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“Institutional isomorphism,” the theory of global convergence in education, implies that universally applicable best practices can be identified and that teachers are interchangeable across national contexts (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). The contrasting cultural model, rooted in anthropological perspectives, asserts that similar structures and practices nevertheless have different meanings in different contexts, implying that education policy and teacher preparation require a great deal of local knowledge and cultural awareness to be effective (Anderson-Levitt, 2003).

For decades, researchers in comparative education have explored the cultural dimensions of teaching (Alexander, 2001; Anderson-Levitt, 2002; Shimahara & Sakai, 1995; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Broad agreement exists in the field that teaching is a deeply cultural practice and is tightly intertwined with broader societal philosophies and beliefs. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) argued that “systems of teaching, because they are cultural, must be understood in relation to the cultural beliefs and assumptions that surround them” (p. 88). The cultural dimension of teaching
and school practice, however, is often an implicit, taken-for-granted, and invisible aspect of the profession that many teachers and others may not recognize in their original contexts.

As Florio-Ruane (2002) noted, however, teachers are key actors in a “complex ecology” that involves “the nature of knowledge, the child’s growth and development, many ways of behaving and making sense among diverse citizenry, and the unequal distribution of wealth and power” (pp. xi–xii). In an era dominated by the nation-state, in which the borders of culture, language, country, and education policy closely align, researchers have examined the cultural knowledge needed to teach in countries like France (Anderson-Levitt, 2002), Russia (Alexander, 2001), and Japan (Shimahara & Sakai, 1995). According to anthropologists, the deep cultural roots of teaching and schooling lead to local variation of teaching and schooling and widely differing teacher practices (Anderson-Levitt, 2003).

Given the cultural aspects of teaching, global teacher migration suggests a possible cultural displacement as teachers move away from their home countries, schooling, training, certification, and professional experiences and work in foreign contexts. Although this adjustment may be complicated, some comparative education scholars argue that a world culture has emerged in which the structures, curricula, and goals of schools have converged (Baker & LeTendre, 2005; LeTendre, Baker, Akiba, Goesling, & Wiseman, 2001; Meyer et al., 1997); this convergence diminishes country-to-country differences in practice, and would therefore facilitate OTT practice in a new national context. Recent, cross-national research in teacher education on teacher preparation for secondary mathematics, for example, found a degree of homogeneity in curricular content (Blomeke, 2012). Even critics of institutional isomorphism acknowledge that “educational systems, processes and values to appear to be coinciding” (Carney, Rappleye, & Silova, 2012, p. 387). Beyond similarities in content, world culture theorists underscore the “global cultural dynamics to draw attention to the fact that national systems of education around the world are affected by a dominant global culture that has a specific content (i.e., values of rationalization, bureaucracy, individualization, democratic governance)” (LeTendre, Baker, Akiba, Goesling, & Wiseman, 2002, p. 22).

**METHODOLOGY**

The research drawn on for this article is part of a multiyear, multisite project that began in 2009 and will run through 2013. In the first phase of the project (2009–2012), we examined institutionalized moments of the OTT exchange process: recruitment, selection, induction, and the creation of “successful” OTTs. We conducted 22 semistructured and open-ended interviews with state department of education officials, representatives from OTT broker companies, and South Carolina school administrators in 2009, 2010, and 2011. A key purpose of the first phase of data collection was to understand the scope of the use of J-1 teachers at the state level. Due in part to the decentralized nature of education in the United States, a national database of international teachers is not available. Although we have a sense of the number of OTTs working in the United States as a whole, around 20,000 in 2009 (American Federation of Teachers, 2009), select state-based compilations are generally unavailable (for an exception, see Bartlett, 2009, on California). To grasp the scope of J-1 teacher placement and global migration flows, we analyzed more than 1,000 international teacher files from the SC teacher certification database. We charted and mapped the data using Geographic Information Systems with the assistance of geography colleagues. In our analysis, we incorporated information from 2006, the year the South Carolina
Department of Education (SCDE) began to identify the host J-1 program for each teacher, through 2009. We are currently in the process of collecting and mapping the next set of data (2010–2013). In this article, we share our findings from the 2006–2009 years with the recognition that there has been a decline in the number of OTT working in the state. The systematic review and use of Geographic Information Systems pointed to the scope of the use of these teachers and included their profile (e.g., years of experience, country of origin, degrees), geographic concentration in the state, academic fields, and the general trends in migration and placement.

The interview data we analyze in this article comes from the second phase of the project (2012–2013), in which we attempt to understand this policy process from the OTTs’ perspective. Involving teachers at all phases of the process—recent recruits, active hires, and returnees/homecomers—we began the teacher interviews with the returnees in order to gain a holistic understanding of their J-1 process. Given the long and particular relationship that South Carolina has had with Romanian teachers (in part due to an SC teacher-broker company that works primarily with Romanian teachers, which results in Romania being the third largest OTT sending country to South Carolina), as well as one of the researcher’s expertise in Romania, we chose Romanian returnee teachers for the first round of interviews. Focus on teachers from one country reveals a longitudinal view on educational development and change within the sending country. In the spring of 2013, the researchers will conduct similar interviews in India (the primary OTT sending country to South Carolina).

Our analysis of teacher certification files revealed that the majority of Romanian OTTs came from one city—Cluj Napoca. Based on this information and the connections established through Phase 1 interviews, Stevick traveled to Romania and conducted 14 semistructured interviews lasting approximately 2 hr each with returnee Romanian OTTs who had worked in South Carolina. For the purposes of this article, we selected two cases to illuminate broader trends found across the group. We gave these two OTT returnees pseudonyms: Victor and Christina.

THE BROAD ADOPTION OF INTERNATIONAL TEACHER EXCHANGES IN SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina’s broad involvement with international teacher exchanges began only once federal policies enabled them. The most important federal policy for enabling such exchanges has been the J-1 visa program. South Carolina has hosted more than 2,000 OTTs on 3-year J-1 exchange visas since 1998. In purpose, the J-1 program is cultural; professionals work on a temporary (up to 3 years, now extendable for 1 year) basis for the purpose of cultural exchange. According to the U.S. Department of State (n.d.), the goal of the Exchange Visitor Program is to “promote mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries through educational and cultural exchanges.” Likewise, the SCDE presents a cultural rationale for developing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with other countries to foster teacher exchange: “These MOUs have been established as a means of broadening cultural understanding, fostering the exchange of educational ideas and techniques, and introducing teachers from other countries into the classrooms and communities in South Carolina” (SCDE, n.d.). In their rhetoric, the emphasis upon culture aligns well with the anthropological critics of world culture theory.

The philosophical underpinnings for the J-1 visa for teacher applicants seem directly contradictory to those undergirding its eligibility requirements. Indeed, the rationale aligns closely
with the anthropological critics of institutional isomorphism, whereas the criteria for the visa could have been derived from world culture theory. Together, they reveal the paradoxical ways in which the U.S. government, districts, and schools invoke the cultural differences that international teachers bring while operating on a premise of universal preparation and expertise that make teachers effectively interchangeable across national borders. The eligibility requirements for the J-1, also called the Exchange Visitor Program, include 3 years of teaching experience (in their home country or elsewhere), certification (in their home country), and English proficiency (though this is less important for language immersion teachers). The regulations frame experience, training, and certification as functionally equivalent, despite cross-national differences in these three professional domains.

The U.S. Department of State oversees the process by approving sponsors to manage the recruitment and placement of OTTs. In South Carolina, the SCDE and four private, for-profit “teacher broker” firms—Visiting International Faculty, Foreign Academic & Cultural Exchange Services (FACES), the Amity Institute, and International Teacher Exchange Services—handle the majority of the international placements. The SCDE, which organizes teacher exchange programs based on bilateral, Memorandum of Understanding agreements, has established links with five countries—India, France, Spain, China, and Taiwan. The financial dynamics of the J-1 arrangement differ significantly based on the sponsor. With public agencies like the SCDE, teachers and their SC host school/district pay neither recruitment nor placement fees. Private companies, however, generally charge teachers or their host schools/districts either a one-time placement or an annual fee. Sponsor organizations typically coordinate orientation and in-service training for the J-1 teachers in their program in addition to any programs offered by the host school or district.

Although a number of circumstances made SC particularly receptive to the policy—including its lack of an effective teacher union—four primary developments in education fed SC’s demand for the global recruitment of teachers. First, by passing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal government increased pressure on school administrators to hire highly qualified teachers. Former SC State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex drew attention to the relationship between the unmet needs of SC public schools and the recruitment of OTTs:

We are getting dangerously close in some parts of our state to having a demoralized and compromised teaching force. ... In many areas of our state, over the last seven or eight years, we have been increasingly hiring foreign teachers, teachers from other countries, India, Romania, and elsewhere because we cannot find U.S. citizens and South Carolinians certified to teach in those areas. (University of South Carolina, Witten Lecture, 1 October 2007)

Indeed, many schools found that it was easier to certify international teachers as highly qualified than it was to find domestic teachers who met the criteria.

Second, a persistent teacher shortage existed in many pockets of the country, particularly afflicting the most high-needs schools in rural and urban areas. The use of international teachers, what the National Education Association once claimed to be “a temporary solution to a long-term problem,” has transformed into a sustained approach to address widespread teacher shortages. Accordingly, the SCDE advocates the recruitment of international teachers as one method of bringing highly qualified teachers to meet “critical needs in hard-to-staff geographical and subject areas” (SCDE, 2006, 17). The same slate of hard-to-staff subjects—special education, math, science, foreign language, and English as a Second Language—is found in states like South
The third factor leading to the increased use of international teachers emerges from the heightened national concern to develop a globally competent citizenry and workforce. Both the federal and state departments of education assert that temporary teacher exchanges help to internationalize public education by bringing the “world to schools.” The U.S. Department of Education explicitly voiced its commitment to the use of international teacher exchange programs as a way to complement this 21st-century priority of the federal government ( Paige, 2003). Superintendent Rex, upon signing a teacher exchange agreement with France, echoed the U.S. Department of Education’s position on the use of international teachers: “I believe that the cultural focus for the exchange of ideas will go a long way toward ensuring that our young people are able to compete successfully both here and around the globe” ( SCDE, 2007). Similarly, the SCDE’s (n.d.) description of the International Visiting Teachers Program frames the use of OTTs as an opportunity for global enrichment: “School districts throughout the state have an opportunity to provide students with programs that are linguistically and culturally rich to better prepare them for future success in their personal, academic, and professional lives.”

Fourth, education faces difficult budgetary pressures, and the financing of international teachers is often cheaper than domestic teachers. South Carolina revenues plummeted with the economic crisis, yet Governor Sanford attempted to reject federal stimulus money to keep teachers employed (he was eventually forced to accept it). Despite this order, hundreds of teachers lost their jobs. International teachers offer an efficient means of hiring. As districts have to pay significant sums beyond salaries toward domestic teachers’ insurance and retirement, which don’t have to be provided for international teachers, they can provide the same salary, pay (in some cases) $10,000 to an agency, and still cut costs.

Together, these developments have led to an increasing number of OTTs currently teaching in South Carolina’s public schools. In the 2011/2012 schools year, 265 OTTs worked in the state (down dramatically from 768 in 2008/2009). Although the trend to hire international teachers, especially to fill critical vacancies, began in South Carolina in the late 1990s, the percentage of these teachers hired grew exponentially from 2000 until 2008, with a decline starting in the 2009/2010 academic year due to the recession and budget cuts. The SC Teacher Salary Schedule Revision Task Force (2006) observed that the number of OTTs hired in South Carolina increased by a factor of 10 from 2003 to 2005 (p. 55).

J-1 OTTs come to South Carolina from 39 different countries with India, the Philippines, Romania, Colombia, and Jamaica representing the primary “sender” countries. The international teachers working in South Carolina in 2008/2009 tended to follow a South–North migration pattern; that is, they hail primarily from countries located south of the equator, like India. Romania, an east European sending country, proves to be an exception to this trend. In addition to being developing countries in the South, three of the five the biggest “sender” countries for South Carolina—India, Philippines, and Jamaica—also recognize English as an official language. Teachers recruited from these countries are accustomed to using English as their professional language. The OTTs’ professional English ability is a key factor in facilitating their global migration to a new teaching context.

In South Carolina, as in other states, teacher recruitment and retention are toughest in “hard-to-staff” poor, predominantly minority school districts. In SC, the coastal south, the southern corner of the state, and the I-95 corridor remain stubbornly difficult regions to staff. Teacher turnover rates
for 2011 in various school districts reflect these challenges: 37.7% in Bamberg 2, 36.4% in Lee, and 22% in Florence 4. J-1 educators teach in schools across the state of South Carolina (in 51 of the state’s 81 school districts), but in many cases, the lowest performing school districts turned to foreign teachers to fill their teaching shortages and recruit “highly qualified” teachers. Richland 1 and Williamsburg 1 hosted the greatest percentage of J-1 teachers—17%—in 2008/2009. Although the relative proportions of J-1 teachers to district and school sizes are currently being determined, some evidence points to a concentration of J-1 teachers as new and renewed hires in particular districts and schools. For example, in Ridgeland Middle School in Jasper County, the percentage of foreign teachers constituted as much as one third of the faculty (“Program,” 2004). Finally, a geographic pattern has emerged between certain host districts and sender countries. Six districts only employ teachers from India (i.e., Williamsburg 1, Marion 2, Beaufort, Marlboro 1, Lee 1, and Allendale 1). Other districts tend to draw largely from the same regions. For example, Richland 1 hosted J-1 teachers from India and Colombia (65 out of 85).

OTT in South Carolina overwhelmingly teach hard-to-staff subjects—particularly secondary mathematics, science, foreign language, and special education. In 2008–2009, the greatest percentage of J-1 teachers (31%) taught special education, with math (24%) representing the second most-commonly taught subject. The Williamsburg School District alone had 46 teachers from India working in special education, math, and science. Data from the state certification files suggest that districts differently access the J-1 teacher market with the wealth of the district, as measured in part by free and reduced-price lunch rates, playing a role. For example, in Greenville 1, the ninth wealthiest district in the state, more than 80% of the district’s J-1 educators taught a foreign language. In Williamsburg 1, the second poorest district in the state, 58% of the J-1s taught special education and 23% taught math. These district-based J-1 profiles point to a differing demand across the state with wealthier districts seeking primarily foreign-language J-1 teachers and high-poverty, lower achieving districts hosting J-1s certified in math, science, and special education.

Finally, data reveal that in 2008–2009, J-1 teachers had an average of 9.5 years of experience, 80% were recognized as “highly qualified,” more than 40% of the J-1 teachers had a master’s degree or beyond, and 11% of the J-1 teachers returned to South Carolina for a “second tour” in the program. In practice, a second tour means that a J-1 teacher completed the first 3 years on the visa, returned home for the required period, then re-enrolled in the J-1 program. The greatest number of these returnee teachers come from India (n = 32), Romania (n = 19), and Colombia (n = 10) and typically return to their original host schools. Thirty-four percent of these J-1 educators teach special education and 22% teach a foreign language. The returnee rate among current J-1 teachers points not only to the sustained need of certain schools within specific subject areas and to the possibility of long-term international relationships developing within the restrictions of a short-term visa program but also the consistent interest among certain OTTs to take their skills global.

AGENTS OF CONVERGENCE?

Several key findings emerged from our analysis of the Romanian returnee OTT interviews that contribute to the dialogue between the world culture theorists and those who advocate for a more prominent role for culture. In this section we share data that attest to the reasons and the ways
returnee teachers function as key actors who carry and disseminate pedagogical practices across borders. Broadly speaking, the interviews illustrated the ways these OTTs define themselves as highly competent professionals, who could work seamlessly in a new national context, but still learned new approaches and techniques within their subject area to be applied “at home.” This strong sense of professional identity allowed the OTTs to frame their experiences teaching in South Carolina as professional development.

In this following section, we explore Victor and Christina’s reflections on lessons learned about (a) student–teacher relationships, (b) discipline and classroom management, and (c) pedagogy during their OTT experiences. We then consider the teachers’ identification of places where exchange of these “lessons learned” unfolds: in faculty meetings and the classroom. In discussing both the lessons learned and the moments of dissemination, we were attentive to the cultural explanations the teachers provided for their adoption and advocacy of certain strategies observed in the United States. Teachers, as is clear next, are active cultural agents observing, experimenting, and selectively taking up new things.

Victor is a high school math teacher with 39 years of experience. He has taught in multiple sites outside his home country—in France (1993) on a government-exchange program and in South Carolina (1996 and 1997) through the FACES program. Victor returned to teach in an elite Romanian high school in Cluj. Christina is an elementary school teacher with 11 years of experience. She taught special education in a South Carolina middle school through the FACES program (2001–2003). Christina returned to Romania in 2003 to pursue her doctorate in special education.

Student–Teacher Relationships

Returnee Romanian OTTs were struck by the different nature of student–teacher relationships in the United States as compared with those in their home country. Teachers like Victor and Christina observed the ways teachers in the United States had more “horizontal” than “vertical” relationships with students and parents. Teachers in the United States were no longer central authority figures but were expected to develop reciprocal relationships with students and parents. Teachers in the United States were no longer central authority figures but were expected to develop reciprocal relationships with students.

It’s a European style. The teacher is the magister and the teacher is still the most important person in the learning process . . . in France, which is similar to Romania, but a bit more open. In the United States, it is different. The teacher was more close to the students, employed and paid by the budget to teach the students. The relationship was more, more tight and you felt like you were directly responsible for this and this and this student. And, when you had the meet with the parent, the principal and the teacher, we discussed like partners not like magister and student.—Victor, March 2012

1In our research, we have encountered teachers who rotate between countries, as many teachers in international schools are known to do. The phenomenon we have come to call “teacher nomads” describes teachers who teach primarily domestic children in the (usually) public schools or (sometimes) private schools of countries around the world. They may return to their home country to work infrequently. Victor did not meet this threshold, as he maintained his permanent residence in his home country and went abroad for two stints of just a few years before returning home for extended periods. Teachers in international schools do not generally meet this threshold either, as they are not adapting as extensively to domestic educational practices and cultures.
Victor’s attention to broad continental (i.e., “European”) style of the teacher’s role and to regional similarities and differences reveals the way he triangulates (across French, Romanian, and U.S. contexts) rather than dichotomizes difference. Also, he was attentive to the nature of the discourse and interaction among himself, the parent, and the principal, who engaged “like partners.” Victor’s observation of the prevalence of the “partnership” in U.S. schools echoes in anthropological research that points to this cultural construction as a dominant model and paradigm for parental involvement in schools (Doucet, 2011; Lopez, 2001).

Christina also began to appreciate new, transformed roles for herself as a teacher resulting from her South Carolina experiences.

In Romania, we have this competition between the students and I didn’t see it very well when I left Romania. But, in the U.S., I began to understand that this competition is with the student first. The student has to be content with himself or herself; it has to be better than yesterday. So, when I came back [from the U.S.], I said to the students, “You can do more than that. It doesn’t matter what the others do. You have to do better than yesterday” and they understood this.—Christina, March 2012

In highlighting the value of the comparative teaching experience—“I didn’t see it very well when I left Romania”—she explains the way she observes everyday Romanian student competition in a new way. As a returnee teacher in Romania, Christina now positions herself as a teacher who encourages the students to do their individual best. Of importance, students are receptive to this advice—“they understood this”—and her new teacher practice.

Discipline and Classroom Management

Romanian returnee OTTs repeatedly noted that their U.S. experiences exposed them to new notions of discipline and classroom management. Teachers framed classroom management as a culturally neutral practice that may be present in one context but not perceived as culture or context specific—it can be picked up and brought back (“This is practical and it works”).

From my U.S. experience, I learned a very important thing—how to manage the classroom . . . classroom management. This is very well developed in the U.S. and I have learned a lot about this and have applied it in Romania. And, now, at the present, I am working with things that were not necessary several years ago in Romania, but are now. We need these things; they are necessary. Classroom management, rules, discipline, consequences. And, I have my own rules in my classroom, the students know the consequences, sign a contract. And, I’m working like I did in the U.S. ten years ago. This is practical and it works.—Victor, March 2012

Victor’s temporal focus on the arc of educational development in Romania vis-à-vis the United States (“I am working with things that were not necessary several years ago in Romania” and “I’m working like I did in the U.S. ten years ago”) points to the emergent moments of convergence in practice; only as a result of shifts in educational norms and values in Romania has Victor had to tap into his reservoir of strategies learned while working in the United States.
Pedagogy

Romanian returnee OTTs developed new insights into pedagogy as a result of their experiences. Teachers pointed to the differences in pedagogical approach and curriculum in the United States. In some instances, teachers voiced frustration that one nation’s norms and school standards created barriers to borrowing and adapting. Victor mentioned that although he appreciated giving students the opportunity to use calculators in U.S. math classes, this practice was forbidden in Romania. In other cases, examples of pedagogical convergence were highlighted.

In France and in the United States, [in math class] there are a lot of applications in real life compared to Romania. Here [in Romania] math is more abstract, there is more theory and fewer practical problems to show students why they need to learn mathematics and where they can apply it. . . . The necessity of learning something—why should I learn, let’s say, functions. There were examples taken from reality, then, they define the notion, and go back and apply. Now, in Romania, we also started to connect mathematics more to lived reality than before, but still we need to do more about this.—Victor, March 2012

Victor’s comment points to the logic he finds in this shift (“we need to do more of this”) and the perception of convergence. He also identifies a national “we” charged with continuing this reform, though teachers endorse general shifts in subject-specific pedagogy.

Other teachers pointed to the difference in teacher-preparation curriculum and the active role they assumed in transforming their practice based on U.S.-based learning.

Here, after we finish the university, we don’t have some courses to help us with individual education plans, accommodations, modifications of the curriculum. This is a big issue here in Romania, so it helped me a lot to have this. When I came back to Romania, I followed what I learned in the U.S. I applied the information in my classes.—Christina, March 2012

In this quote, Christina frames the lack of special education teacher training components typical in the United States as a “big issue” in Romania. As with Victor in his previous quote about bringing classroom-management strategies from the United States to Romania, Christina also actively transfers, assumingly without problem, the approaches that are helpful to her to “home” context.

Finally, the Romanian returnee OTTs noted key places and moments when they exchanged ideas with their colleagues and students. In their reflections, they noted the spaces and places of pedagogical transfer. Several teachers mentioned sharing “lessons learned from teaching in the U.S.” in faculty meetings. They recalled that upon their return from the United States (and France), colleagues expressed tremendous interest in their experiences and the nature of U.S. schooling. With students, teachers strategically deployed cultural sharing at particular times for pedagogical ends (e.g., for reward):

[The students] asked me a lot of times about my life before the fall of communism and we discussed a lot about this. . . . We had some moments to discuss not during class time and I gave this as a reward. I told them, “If you are doing your work, on Friday in the last ten minutes we can discuss [this], you can ask me questions.” And, they did. They asked me about school in Romania, about my life. This happened in France and America.—Victor, March 2012

Victor’s strategy of “culture exchange upon performance” echoes those shared with us by other OTTs from Kenya and Russia. These pedagogical moments reveal not only the common (and
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research reported in this article focuses on the rapid globalization of the teaching force of South Carolina and, more broadly, the United States. Since 1998, approximately 2,000 international teachers have taught in the state’s public schools. The majority of these J-1 teachers, who come to South Carolina largely from developing countries in the global South, are placed in high-need schools and teach hard-to-staff subjects like math, science, special education, and foreign languages. According to certification data, the globalization of the teacher market has led, in part, to a flow of credentialed and experienced teachers to many of South Carolina’s most needy public schools.

Despite their overwhelming placement in “hard-to-staff” schools, the Romanian returnee OTTs profiled in this article presented their experiences in U.S. schools as opportunities for professional development rather than experiences that were challenging due to cultural differences. The teachers’ confidence and pride in their professionalism allowed for a permeability of state and cultural boundaries. Victor and Christina communicated their understanding that many teaching strategies were applicable and appropriate to any classroom, not just those in the United States. Moreover, their time teaching in the United States was one that improved their professional repertoires. Thus, the returnee teachers perceived a certain universality to curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher practice, in general. These teacher understandings reflect an understanding of global homogeneity and serve to converge teacher practice.

The data also suggest a distinct direction to the exchange and transfer around pedagogical strategies—the global transfer was largely unidirectional. As the interview data illustrate, Romanian returnee OTTs borrowed techniques and strategies from the United States but were not positioned or pursued in U.S. schools as teachers who could help transform teacher practice in South Carolina. None of the teachers reported schools capitalizing on their presence to learn about pedagogy and curriculum in Romania. In a time when a great deal of educational literature explores what can be learned from international contexts to improve teacher training, quality, and practice (Akiba & LeTendre, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012), the “unidirectional transfer” is an everyday, missed opportunity for U.S. schools to learn from foreign professionals.

Finally, returnee Romanian OTTs engage in social practices that produce new meanings of space, territory, and boundaries around teaching. Qualitative research helps us to understand their rationales and understandings of professionalism, universal subject matter, and appropriate pedagogy (or teacher training). These teachers help to create and support notions of the universal math or special education teacher and work as teachers who contribute to global convergence through the refining of practice in their home country.

These conclusions are limited, of course, to one country-specific group of returnee OTTs. The perspectives are valuable in providing us with a window into the ways that one cultural group positions itself in a global system of teacher exchange. How might the insights of Romanian teachers at different stages in the exchange process (i.e., recent recruits or in-service teachers) differ from those shared by returnees? Will the perspectives of OTTs from India align with those from Romania? How do we explain the ways these teachers make sense of their J-1 experiences?
Are those explanations themselves deeply rooted in national culture and history or will we find the emergence of a universal teacher? We expect that these questions will begin to be addressed as we and others continue research on this topic.

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REFERENCES


