'Teacher Shortages' in the U.S. and the Politics of Recruiting Abroad

Sue Books

bookss@newpaltz.edu

845-257-2879

Department of Secondary Education, 1 Hawk Dr., New Paltz, NY 12561

Sue Books is a professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She taught in an International Studies in Education program as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Iceland in 2009 and was a participant in a Fulbright-Hays summer seminar to Brazil in 2011. She is the author of *Poverty and Schooling in the U.S.* (2004) and the editor of *Invisible Children in the Society and its Schools* (1998/2003/2007).

Rian de Villiers

rian.devilliers@up.ac.za

+27-12-420-5621

PO Box 33528, Glenstantia, 0010, South Africa

Rian de Villiers is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, South Africa. His current research centers on intra- and intercontinental teacher migration studies, and teacher training in biology education. Recent publications include De Villiers, J.J.R. 2011. South African teachers as mobile knowledge workers in a global labour market. *The Anthropologist* 8: 53-60.

This commentary calls attention to the "importation" of overseas-trained teachers to teach in the U.S., to the assumption of a widespread teacher shortage in the U.S. (used as a rationale for this practice), and to the authors' fears that both local and overseas-trained teachers are being used as pawns in a high-stakes political battle.

The New York City comptroller recently rejected a $21 million contract for the New York City Teaching Fellows program because, he said, subsidizing a recruitment effort while the Department of Education was trying to lay off thousands of teachers seemed "curious at best" (Otterman, 2011, p. A23). Why would you do this? Comptroller John Liu asked in so many words. The same question cries out for a response on the national level. Why are school districts around the U.S. bringing in thousands of overseas-trained teachers (as they commonly are called in the literature) at a time when the K-12 teacher workforce seemingly is shrinking and when school districts are warning of more drastic teacher layoffs? The U.S. Department of

Education does not track the number of these teachers in U.S. classrooms (Wolfe, 2007). However, using a methodology employed by the National Education Association (NEA) and then the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), we estimate that at least 14,000 overseas-trained teachers are now working in U.S. public schools through the H-1B and J-1 nonimmigrant visa programs (Barber, 2003; American Federation of Teachers, 2009).

Undoubtedly, these teachers have provided students in U.S. classrooms with some excellent instruction, and U.S. jobs have provided teachers educated abroad with opportunities not only to earn a living wage but also perhaps to pursue careers otherwise unavailable. Still, the practice is fraught with difficulties, including inadequate regulation of international recruiting practices, loss to host countries of some of their best educators, kickback-type arrangements for hiring administrators, and in some cases "widespread and egregious" abuse of teachers who are "the profit point in the industry" (American Federation of Teachers, 2009, pp. 5, 7). A report compiled by The Black Institute for the Association of International Educators (AIE) documents the experience of 500 Caribbean teachers "aggressively recruited" by the New York City Department of Education with big promises, including a pathway to permanent residency. Now saddled with substantial legal fees and threats of deportation, these teachers are protesting what the report suggests was a bait-and-switch trap. Of the 3,340 overseas-trained teachers hired to teach in New York City between 2000 and 2005, less than 20% have gained permanent residency.

These teachers were recruited at a time, in 2001 and again in 2003, when, according to the AIE report, "New York City faced a severe shortage and did not offer salaries that would attract new local talent" (Black Institute, 2011, p. 7). A few years later, *The New York Times* issued a clarion call, based on a report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future about an impending teacher shortage nationwide:

> Over the next four years, more than a third of the nation's 3.2 million teachers could retire, depriving classrooms of experienced instructors and straining taxpayer-financed retirement systems. . . . The problem is aggravated by high attrition among rookie teachers, with one of every three new teachers leaving the profession within five years. (Dillon, 2009, p. A16)

U.S. Department of Labor (2009) statistics support this prediction. The Bureau of Labor Statistics ranks "elementary school teachers, except special education" 12th among the 30 occupations with the largest likely employment growth between 2008 and 2018. The U.S. Department of Education's (2011) *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listing* similarly reports a teacher shortage in one or more areas for this year in every state in the nation: 84% of the states report teacher shortages in math; 82% in science; 56% in foreign languages; 46% in English/English language arts; and 22% in social studies.

Other reports, however, strongly suggest not only that there is no widespread teacher shortage, but that the market is now glutted. For example, *The New York Times* reported last year that applications were far outstripping available teaching positions nationwide and that massive teacher layoffs either were occurring or soon would be (Hu, 2010). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan last year told a Senate subcommittee that 100,000 to 300,000 education jobs could be lost to state budget cuts. "In my home state of Illinois, they are looking at cutting 20,000 teaching jobs," he said. "California and New York have also announced more than 20,000 jobs cuts each. . . . Charlotte, North Carolina will cut 600 teachers next year" (Duncan, 2010). This year *The New York Times* reported that "America's public schools may see the most extensive layoffs of their teaching staffs in decades" (Dillon, 2011, p. A13). In a review of state-

level employment, Marguerite Roza and her colleagues at the Center on Reinventing Public Education found an overall decline of 1.4% in K-12 employment between 2008 and 2010. While this finding does not substantiate the massive layoffs many fear, it does suggest that "public education is in the midst of its biggest employment decline in years" (Roza, Lozier, & Sepe, 2010, p. 6).

Multiple explanations could resolve the seemingly contradictory discourses of teacher shortages and K-12 workforce reductions, including budget crises at the federal, state, and local levels that have worsened significantly very recently; common practices of school districts handing out pink slips and then rehiring teachers a few months later; and regional differences (teacher shortages in some places but not in others). Nevertheless, the confusing double-speak casts doubt on the widespread assumption of a teacher shortage, which has been used to rationalize not only expensive domestic recruitment efforts, but also recruitment of overseas-trained teachers by a range of U.S.-based agencies and organizations -- for-profit and non-profit, some with sterling reputations and others marred by allegations of abuse and exploitation.

In a case reported by the AFT (2009) (one of several such worst cases), Omni Consortium, Multicultural Professionals, and Multicultural Education Consultants were indicted on charges of conspiring to commit alien smuggling, visa and mail fraud, and money laundering in connection with the recruitment in 2004 of 273 Filipino teachers who were promised teaching jobs in the U.S. The teachers paid up to $10,000 for this "opportunity," many by taking loans from the recruiters with exorbitant interest rates. Housed in unfinished properties, the teachers were forbidden to own cars and were threatened with deportation if they tried to find jobs on

their own, which they could not do in any case because the recruiters had confiscated their transcripts and certifications.

That's one side of the story: the vulnerability of overseas-trained teachers who remain, at best, in a legally precarious situation while working in the U.S. What about their U.S. colleagues? In reporting the controversy around the New York City Teaching Fellows Program, Otterman (2011) noted that politics "appeared to be at play" (p. A23). The program, which offers a fast track into the classroom around schools of education, is run by the New Teacher Project, which has issued several high-profile calls for "flexibility from union rules" with respect to hiring and firing teachers (Otterman, 2011, p. A23). Politics are no doubt "at play" on a national and maybe international scale as well. Taken-for-granted assumptions about a widespread teacher shortage in the U.S. provide a rationale for displacing U.S. teachers with short-term and less costly overseas-trained teachers with no long-term stake in union negotiations. *Nothing in this commentary should be construed as an argument against the rights of workers everywhere, including teachers, to seek and find work abroad as well as in their home countries*. We do not side with those who would "protect American jobs" at all costs. At the same time, we are concerned that many overseas-trained teachers, lured by empty promises, are ending up in highly problematic and even dangerous situations, and unwittingly are being pitted against their U.S. colleagues.

From the perspective of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank, this is all for the best. The foundation advocates raising the annual cap on H-1B visas (now 65,000) and structuring teaching contracts "to give local districts more stability and flexibility" (Johnson, 2005, p. 1). By aligning contracts with the three-year visas, a school district could "eliminat[e] the possibility of [a teacher] moving to another school district or employer without

compensation" (Johnson, 2005, p. 4). This vision of captive teachers perpetually trying to acclimate to a new country is not in the best interest of students or teachers, in the U.S. or abroad.

Beyond this, we fear that teachers are being used as pawns in a high-stakes political battle that ultimately has nothing to do with teaching and learning. Although we see no direct link between recruitment of overseas-trained teachers and the current union-bashing, and especially teachers-union-bashing, in the U.S., we do see an indirect connection. Battles over teachers' collective-bargaining rights and the recruitment of overseas-trained teachers with little stake in those rights both are occurring in the context of a public discourse that takes for granted that teachers are both overpaid and in short supply.

Oversight mechanisms clearly are needed to ensure that recruitment of overseas-trained teachers is used neither to exploit their legally precarious status nor to disempower their U.S. colleagues. At the same time, purveyors of the public discourse on education (journalists, scholars, commentators, etc.) need to be much more conscientious about substantiating claims about teacher shortages. Assaults on teachers' collective-bargaining rights, the mean-spirited and demeaning talk about teachers that has arisen alongside these assaults, and the largely under-the-radar "experiment" in international teacher recruitment all arguably are components of an ideologically driven agenda that is fundamentally redefining what it means to be a teacher in the U.S. This nexus warrants far more scholarly attention than it has received.

References

American Federation of Teachers (2009). *Importing Educators: Causes and Consequences of International Teacher Recruitment*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved March 19, 2011, from http://www.aft.org/pdfs/international/importingeducators0609.pdf.

Barber, R. (2003, June). *Report to the National Education Association on trends in foreign teacher recruitment*. Takoma Park, Maryland: Center for Economic Organizing. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from http://www.cwalocal4250.org/outsourcing/binarydata/foreignteacher.pdf.

Black Institute (2011). *Broken promises: The story of Caribbean international teachers in New York City's public schools*. Retrieved April 1, 2011, from http://www.theblackinstitute.org/announcements/international-teachers-in-nyc

Dillon, S. (2009, April 7). Report envisions shortage of teachers as retirements escalate. *The New York Times*, A16.

Dillon, S. (2011, April 1). An annual rite, school layoff notices seem more dire. *The New York Times,* p. A13.

Duncan, A. (2010, April 14). *Testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies regarding the FY 2011 education budget*. Retrieved March 16, 2011), from http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/04/04142010.html.

H-1B visas: Designing a program to meet the needs of the U.S. economy and U.S. workers: A hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement Committee on

the Judiciary, U.S. House of Representatives (2011, March 31) (testimony by Ronil Hira).

Hu, W. (2010, May 19). Teachers facing weakest market in years. *The New York Times*, A1.

Johnson, K. A. (2005, October 5). How immigration reform could help to alleviate the teacher shortage. *Backgrounder 1884*: 1-6.

Otterman, S. (2011, March 11). City comptroller rejects contract to recruit new teachers amid talk of layoffs." *The New York Times*, A23.

Roza, M., Lozier, C., & Sepe, C. (2010, March 16). *K-12 job trends amidst stimulus funds: Early findings*. Seattle, Washington: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from www.crpe.org.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (2011, March). *Teacher shortage areas nationwide listing, 1990-21 thru 2011-12*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved March 19, 2011, from www2.ed.gov/about/offices/**list**/ope/pol/tsa.doc.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009, December 10). *Economic and employment projections. Table 6: The 30 occupations with the largest employment growth, 2008-18*. Retrieved March 20, 2011, from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t06.htm.

Wolfe, F. (2007, September 27). Foreign teachers benefit U.S. schools, unions: Districts look abroad for cultural exchange. *Education Daily.* Reprinted on the VIF International

Education Web site. Retrieved March 15, 2011, from

http://www.vifprogram.com/about/newsarticle.pl?id=457.