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MIGRATION, IDENTITY AND THE POWER OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: A MIGRANT'S REFLECTION ON THE UK SYSTEM

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*Migration and globalisation offer a wonderful gift: the gift of **each other**. They provide the ability to develop our learning from, and service to, one another, forging a more equitable and informed society.*

This article reflects on my personal and professional journey as a migrant teacher in the United Kingdom, specifically England, and examines the complex intersection of migration, identity and education through the lens of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI). My reflections are framed by the reality of being a Black migrant from Jamaica who arrived in the UK over two decades ago to support a struggling education system. This journey reveals how institutional structures both challenge and enrich the migrant experience, ultimately demanding a deeper commitment to social justice from host countries and their educational systems.

The Migration Paradox: Contribution vs. Demonisation

My journey began two decades ago when I was recruited to teach in the UK at a time when England faced a severe teacher shortage. I was marking regional English Language examination scripts in Barbados when recruiters from the UK sought out experienced teachers. The stated rationale for recruiting teachers of Caribbean heritage was to help support students "falling behind" and "getting into trouble," suggesting that teachers who "understand their cultural heritage" would be beneficial. Within a month of that recruitment drive in July 2003, I was in England, stepping into a reality that was far more complex than the initial promise.

I am a proud migrant. This pride stems from the facts that directly confront the common, negative stereotypes perpetuated by some of the British press and politicians over the last 20 years, namely, that migrants "take our jobs" and "take our benefits".

The reality is starkly different:

- Addressing Shortages, Not Taking Jobs: I was recruited not to take someone's job, but because there was a critical shortage of 17,300 teachers in England at the time, a figure that soared to 43,000 by 2006. Locally trained teachers were exiting the profession due to poor working conditions, pupil behaviour, and low pay. We came, and indeed, sustained England's education system, especially in London, making an undeniable contribution to the continuity and stability of teaching and learning.
- Fiscal Contribution, Not Welfare Recipient: The stereotype that migrants "take anybody's benefits" is directly refuted by the immigration policy we faced. Our Work Permit visas explicitly stated "No recourse to public funds". Benefits were inaccessible unless one was a UK citizen, which required living and working in the UK for a minimum of four years. This rule, later extended to five years, meant many of us gave significantly to the UK's GDP and social security system through our work and tax contributions, rather than benefitting from it.

My pride, therefore, is rooted in the **actual contributions** made, and in the knowledge that these demonising stereotypes are simply not true.

The Challenges to Identity: Navigating Institutional Insecurity

The journey of living and working as a migrant in the UK has not been easy, largely due to systemic issues that profoundly affect one's

sense of security and professional identity.

The "Unqualified" Professional

Upon arrival, I—an experienced, senior teacher and assessor of regional examinations—was classified as an **"unqualified teacher"**. The official classification of an Overseas Trained Teacher (OTT) at the time was "any teacher who has undertaken teacher training outside the European Economic Area and Switzerland and has been recognised by the competent authority in that country".

This classification had problematic outcomes, particularly concerning the evaluation of professional qualifications. UK NARIC's (now ENIC) evaluation often resulted in significant downgrading: my colleagues' University of Guyana BA was deemed equivalent to a Higher National Diploma, and my own PG Diploma from The University of the West Indies (UWI) was bafflingly equated to a BTEC level 3 qualification. This administrative belittling of professional status and qualifications is a profound challenge to a migrant's identity. The ironic thing is that at 695, UWI is ranked much more highly in the global Times Higher Education league table than several UK universities.

The Insecurity of the 4-Year Rule

The identity of an OTT was tied to a stringent **4-year work visa**, known as the **4-year rule**. If one did not "become qualified" (i.e., secure UK Qualified Teacher Status, or QTS) within this timeframe, they faced the prospect of employment termination and could not apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR).

Securing QTS was not up to the individual teacher but lay solely at the **discretion and timing of a headteacher**. This created an

environment of deep insecurity. Many teachers came and were forced to return after four years because they "failed the personality test" and were never put on a QTS programme. Imagine the unsettling experience of new migrants, often joined by their families, living with the constant threat of deportation, their long-term contribution entirely reliant on the subjective approval of a single school leader. This systemic design, which linked residency to the acquisition of QTS rather than to the already-proven act of teaching, exemplifies institutional precarity imposed on skilled migrants.

External Challenges and Microaggressions

Beyond institutional hurdles, I encountered overt discrimination and microaggressions. These included a pupil telling me to **"get out my country you effing dirty migrant"**, confirming my "outsiderness". The instability of the 4-year rule also led to denied mortgage and loan applications, with lenders questioning my future after the visa expired. Furthermore, cultural misunderstandings at work meant myself and colleagues were often perceived as **"too direct"** or **"too aggressive"**. This led to us having to perform a less direct approach to providing feedback. This is characteristic of what Maryln Frye describes as "behaving whitely".

Education as Evolution: Gifts of the Migrant Experience

Despite the challenges, the migrant experience in the UK education system has been profoundly developmental, acting as a catalyst for professional growth and an **epistemic shift** in my understanding of education, diversity and pedagogy.

Developing 'Feedback Diplomacy'

In Jamaica, giving parents direct, honest feedback on pupil behaviour and progress is the cultural norm; anything less is seen as disappointing. Coming to the UK, I had to learn an entirely **new language** for feedback, often finding myself "wrapped into contortions" to phrase difficult news diplomatically. Though initially frustrating, this necessity developed a more thoughtful way of communicating, a skill I describe here "**feedback diplomacy**". That is, *"skill of communicating difficult or critical feedback in a thoughtful, nuanced, and culturally sensitive manner. It's a professional ability developed through the necessity of adapting to a new cultural context"*. This new approach to communicating is an essential EDI skill: learning to deliver truth with nuance and sensitivity across cultural differences.

Exposure to Neurodiversity and Disability

One of the most significant professional gains has been the exposure to teaching students with **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**. Twenty years ago in Jamaica, routine testing for learning differences was uncommon; attainment problems were often misattributed to "lack of attention" or "poor behaviour".

Teaching pupils with named learning differences (like SpLD, ADHD, BESD) in the UK was **eye-opening**. It provided a reference frame and a language register to understand and articulate what I had previously experienced but lacked the tools to name. Before coming here, I had never planned lessons around these specific needs, it was an "**unknown, unknown**" that hadn't been part of our training or reality in Jamaica.

The Gift of Multicultural Diversity

Beyond neurodiversity, teaching in the UK provided a daily immersion in **multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious diversity**. I was challenged to plan lessons for classes with up to 30 nationalities and 41 languages spoken. I learned to pronounce names I had never heard, was exposed to new festivals like Eid and Diwali, and learned first-hand about the practices of different cultural and ethnic groups. These powerful learnings would have remained outside my experience had I not migrated.

Building an International Research Profile

The UK context, with its performative conditions like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and established academic publishing channels, has enabled me to build an **international research profile**. While professional recognition might have been possible had I remained in Jamaica, the same high levels of visibility, with my work cited by UNESCO, the World Bank, and the UK Cabinet Office, would have been improbable. It could be argued that I was catapulted systems of whiteness that conferred validation on "white sanction" on me.

Conclusion: Always 'Coming to Rhythm'

Migration is fraught with challenges and turbulence, but it is also a profoundly rewarding experience that constantly challenges and changes identity. As James Marcia suggested, migration influences identity resulting in migrants always "coming to identity". Beyond migration, individuals are always coming to identity through exposure to and engagement with different people, places and experiences. I suggest therefore that our identities are in a state of constant flux and that as humans we

are always, and should embrace "coming to identity".

For the a host country, migration is a powerful force for change, impacting everything from food, festivals and language to institutional policy, leadership profiles and behaviours, and the very subjects taught in schools.

Despite the systemic challenges, the demonisation of migrants, the institutional insecurity, and the cultural friction, migration and globalisation offer a wonderful gift: **the gift of each other**. It provides the ability to develop our learning from, and service to, one another, forging a more equitable and informed society. The experiences detailed here are not simply personal anecdotes; they are evidence of the persistent EDI challenges within the UK education and immigration systems that must be addressed to truly leverage the talent and commitment of the migrant professional.

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