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London Research is a new London Education Research Unit publication.  
It aims to bring research findings to policy audiences in a timely and accessible way.

## Understanding migrants in London

Migration is one of the key phenomena of the modern world and a key issue for London. As the host to a disproportionate amount of incoming migrants, London is frequently described in terms that attempt to capture its extensive diversity. It is 'pluralist', 'multicultural', 'multiethnic' and 'multilingual' (Block, 2006). Yet, perhaps because of the complexity of the situation and the rapid pace of change, the experiences of London's different migrant communities are not yet well understood. In particular, there is a tendency to see all people from one nationality or geographical region in a monochrome way as having the same experiences, behaviours, needs and wants. The multiple dimensions of migrant identity such as race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, sexuality, language and religion can be overlooked, as can the ways in which identities are reconfigured by the process of migration itself.

This publication summarises key findings of a recent book by David Block, *Multilingual Identities in a Global City: London Stories* (Palgrave, 2006), to shed new light on migration and migrant groups in London, with particular relevance to education, learning and the labour market.

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Understanding London's migrants better is crucial, not only in order to help the city capture the economic and cultural potential that migration offers, but to ensure social inclusion, facilitate cohesion, and ensure appropriate service provision. A number of key current policy issues, both national and local, demand close understanding of the phenomenon of migration and the experiences of migrants. For example, to what extent should British society expect migrants to learn English? Who should be responsible for both the organisation and finance of English classes? How can London engage the increasing numbers of highly educated people who come to the city to study, retaining them in its labour market for the longer term? In what ways can the capital's education system make the most of London's linguistic resources, engaging migrants as teachers in our own education system, and what challenges are faced in doing this?

Block's findings point to a number of policy related issues. In particular:

- It is too simplistic to imagine that migrants either retain their original identities or assimilate into English society. Rather, some have 'transmigrant' identities, in which they draw on both original and new linguistic and cultural experiences. Some migrants, including those who are highly skilled and well educated, resist notions of assimilation, and actively aim to contribute to London's economy and society by continuing to draw on communities of their home language and culture. These findings call into question attempts to assimilate migrants into host cultures.
- Migrants taking up work as pedagogues in England will also bring their own experiences and cultural understandings. The education system needs to react and respond to this challenge and opportunity, not assume assimilation into English educational culture.
- Migrant workers can occupy marginalised labour market positions in which they lack time and money to learn English and therefore to improve their position. Policies based on assumptions that they 'don't want to learn English' are unlikely to resolve the problem.
- New patterns of migration, including the increasing migration of women both for economic and general self-fulfilment reasons, mean that we need to move away from stereotypes of particular groups, and understand the range of experiences and trajectories within groups.

## Migrant Communities in London: Diverse Experiences and Implications

### Introduction

London has always been a city of immigrants. Its broad cultural diversity marks it out among British cities and is one of its most attractive features for Londoners (PMSU 2004). However, the super-diversity of the city and the rapid pace of change create many challenges for policy and practice. While large and longer standing migrant groups, such as Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean communities, have been researched in many ways over time, the experiences of smaller and more recent groups are much less well known.

The research on which this briefing is based, involved in-depth interviews with members of particular under-researched migrant communities, at particular points in their experience of migration to London: Spanish-speaking Latinos occupying contrasting positions in the London labour market, French immigrants training and working as foreign-language teachers, and Japanese graduate students<sup>1</sup>. The experiences of these groups are clearly particular to them: not representative of all migrants. However, between them, the chosen groups span a range of circumstances that illuminate important policy issues. Small samples were taken – for each group no more than five interviewees. Respondent's life-stories and identities were discussed through extended and repeated conversations, in one case ten interviews over three years, to provide a rich picture of their experiences as migrant Londoners, and important insights into what it means for London to be a global city.

### Spanish-Speaking Latinos: Assimilated, Cosmopolitan or Marginalised?

Spanish-speaking Latinos, hailing from virtually every Spanish-speaking nation state in the Americas, from Mexico to Argentina, are a rapidly growing multinational migrant group. According to census figures, there are an estimated 75,000 Spanish-speaking Latinos in London, making them one of the city's larger migrant groups. In addition, unofficial sources put the figure at closer to 300,000. Their physical dispersion around London, the variability of their physical appearances, the wide range of social and cultural capital they bring with them, and the illegal migrant status of many makes them practically invisible both to researchers and official institutions. Insights into their experiences of learning and working in London, therefore, are particularly valuable.

The three participants in this study revealed the diversity of Latino migration and of experiences in London. Two of these were university educated and relatively advantaged. One adopted a policy of assimilation, saying that he preferred to speak English when possible and that he was not interested in preserving a Cuban or Spanish-speaking identity. The other, a university lecturer in Colombia, chose to live almost exclusively in Spanish and positioned himself as a member of a transnational community of educated Spanish speakers. His case demonstrates a resistance to ideas that cultural or linguistic assimilation is either necessary or desirable.

The third respondent was in a much more marginalised position. He had poor English, and few marketable skills, and worked very long hours as a cleaner. This respondent seemed doomed to a marginal economic existence in London, lacking the time to study English, but without English, lacking the capability to improve his labour-market position. In this sense, his story serves as a counter-narrative to one that is propagated in much of the popular press in Britain, the notion that migrants simply 'do not want to learn English'. As a result, he lived primarily in a Spanish-speaking world. However, he did not see himself as a part of any community, Spanish-speaking or otherwise. Indeed, he told the story of an individual, trying to eke out an existence in a dog-eat-dog labour market and send remittances back home. Like so many labour migrants around the world, he had few prospects for socio-economic advancement and little reward in his personal life.

### French Foreign-Language Teachers: Culture Shock and Shifting Pedagogic Cultures

Although little-mentioned in policy debate, French people are one of the UK's largest migrant groups. Official figures for 2004, put the number of French nationals in London at about 37,000. However, Block also notes that the Consul General told him that these figures were out of date and that in the age of free movement across EU member state borders (due to the 1993 Maastricht Treaty), the true number is far higher. Thus, while there is the older, traditional French settlement concentrated in the affluent areas of west and southwest London, there is also a new generation of French Londoners who are (1) relatively young (25–40), (2) come from a wide range of educational backgrounds and (3) work in a variety of job sectors. Thus there are French nationals with few qualifications working in Blockbusters or Café Costa, and there are French nationals, highly qualified in IT and finance, who work in the City and Docklands.

The French nationals whose stories are presented in Block's book fall somewhere between these two extremes. They are four women in their mid 20s to early 30s, who all hold BA degrees in English. All had completed PGCE courses in London and all four were teaching French in London secondary schools. Through them and others like them, London's education system could hope to capture some of the specific linguistic and cultural knowledge that migrant communities can bring to the UK. However, their stories reveal some of the tensions and difficulties involved in importing skilled labour into educational systems.

Throughout their training as teachers (the Postgraduate Certificate in Education or PGCE) and indeed during their first years as qualified teachers, all four went through a kind of educational culture shock. In particular, they lamented what they perceived to be a lack of high standards in British education, which was embodied in the communicative method enshrined in the national curriculum. All four women believed that this meant that they could not focus explicitly on grammar, which they saw as essential to understanding and learning a foreign language. In addition, grammar became something of a metaphor for rigour and clarity of thought, two elements that they found missing in British education. However, over time, the four women moved from a certain resistance to the expectations of teachers in London classrooms to the development of third place teacher identities lying somewhere between British and French.

These accounts suggest that as more and more non-British students train as teachers, particularly in modern foreign languages, there will be a need to provide more background information about British education and to engage in intercultural teacher education which involves both teacher educators and trainees in an ongoing exploratory process. Teaching cultures in London might also begin to be transformed by the presence of large proportion of teachers who were not themselves educated in Britain: an issue with which government and the teaching profession will no doubt want to engage with.

### Female Japanese Graduate Students: to be or not to be a Londoner

Japan's increased wealth has led to a rise in migration to other countries, but relatively little is known about the experiences of migrant Japanese worldwide. London has about 30,000 Japanese, almost all middle class and wealthy. This makes the Japanese group

similar to other privileged migrant groups in London, such as Americans, Canadians and Australians, as well as the nationals of different EU member states.

The research focused on five Japanese women who had come to London to study at postgraduate level. In many ways, all of these women were what Kelsky (2001) calls 'internationalist women', that is, they could count themselves among the growing number of women in Japan who live their lives with an international dimension and not entirely within the confines of traditional Japanese society. However, their life stories and present practices varied considerably. Three had actually lived and been schooled in English-speaking environments for parts of their childhoods. These respondents framed their London experiences as part of their generally more cosmopolitan lives and had no intention of staying in London after their studies had finished. By contrast, two of the interviewees had only begun to travel intensively in their 20s. Both women claimed that London had become their home and that they intended to stay in the city indefinitely.

The experiences of these women do not point directly to policy issues, as those of some of the other interviewees do. However, the case is an important one, because it draws attention to a group which is largely invisible, and thus to the fact that some migrant groups are over-looked in public and media debate about language and citizenship, perhaps because of their considerable accumulated economic and symbolic capital.

### Understanding Migration and the 'Transmigrant' Phenomenon

These case studies reveal the complexity of the experience of migration in a globalised world to a globalised city like London, and the need to differentiate both between and within ethnic and migrant groups. They show the need to understand the different identities and positions that people take up as migrants, and how public policy decisions enable them to, or prevent them from, taking up such positions. Cohen's (2006) categorisation of migrants in global cities (Table 1) helps us to frame the picture more systematically. Cohen sees migrants not in terms of their ethnic group or religious origin, as they are often seen, but in terms of their rights, privileges and labour market position. His framework allows us to differentiate among migrants within nation-state affiliations (e.g. migrants from Nigeria might fall into any one of the three categories) and to understand that generalising across such affiliations is a crude way to understand migration.

In terms of the case studies reported here, the French nationals can be seen as citizens, the Japanese graduate students as denizens, and the marginalised Spanish speaking Latinos as helots.

Another key issue emerges strongly from the case studies, that of 'transmigrant or transnational identity'. Official discourse, and public and media debates about "the cricket test" or the need to learn English, tend to hold on to a classic notion of immigration in which people either belong in one country or another, either retaining their 'home' culture or taking

up a new identity, assimilating to local norms, and limiting their links to the homeland to family contacts. However, Block's case studies illustrate a more complex picture. In fact, they pose the question whether the classic model is even possible, in world cities which are such because they simultaneously bring together Appadurai's (1990) ethnoscapas, technoscapas, financescapas, mediascapas and ideoscapas, ever more extensive and intensive flows of people, technology, money, media and ideas around the world. People do not necessarily come to world cities like London to take on the characteristics of white British Londoners. They may come to live in a world city, where their lifestyles are drawn more from outside than inside the national culture. They are 'transmigrant' i.e. they:

stay in touch with family members left behind. They organise daily economic, familial, religious, and social relations within networks that extend across the borders of two nation-states. Transnational connection takes many forms, all of which go beyond immigrant nostalgia in which a person who is removed from his or her ancestral land tries to recreate on the new land a sense of the old, through foods, music and storytelling.  
(Fouon and Glick Schiller, 2001: 60)

Taking on board the notion of transmigrancy challenges politicians, opinion-formers and the public to engage in a more complex and mature public debate about migration than the one which currently pertains.

Table 1: Migrant types: Citizens, denizens and helots (based on Cohen, 2006: 150)

Category	Gloss	Examples
<b>Citizens</b>	Those with full rights within a nation-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nationals by birth or naturalisation</li> <li>Established immigrants</li> <li>Convention refugees</li> </ul>
<b>Denizens</b>	A group made up of 'privileged aliens often holding multiple citizenships, but not having the citizenship or the right to vote in the country of their residence or domicile' (p. 151)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holders of one or more citizenship</li> <li>Recognised asylum applicants</li> <li>Special entrants</li> </ul>
<b>Helots</b>	This term refers to people with no rights within the nation state. In essence, they are 'foreigners who are regarded as disposable units of labour power to whom the advantages of citizenship, the franchise and social welfare are denied'. (p. 152)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Illegal entrants</li> <li>Undocumented workers</li> <li>Asylum seekers</li> <li>Overstayers</li> <li>Project-tied unskilled workers</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Due to space restrictions, we will not discuss here a chapter in the book written by Siân Preece about the children of migrants from South Asia.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

A recurrent message from this research is that the complexity of migrant identity needs to be more fully understood and elaborated, as London becomes a city of so many different cultures and migration trajectories. The prevailing way of referring to migrant groups, in terms of their ethnic group, obscures the experience of migration, relationships to geographical and linguistic communities and the decisions that people make about who and what they belong to, and about their assimilation in English culture or/and decisions to learn the language or not. Further work is needed to support a more nuanced understanding of migration and more sophisticated public debate.

In particular, better understanding of, and better data on migration patterns and trajectories is needed, to enable finer descriptions of migrant experience according to labour market position,

language, class, education, length of time in the country and other variables, as well as ethnicity and country of origin. There is a clear need to avoid homogenising and stereo-typing tendencies in describing the experiences of people from particular countries or parts of the world. In educational practice, particularly, incorporating migrants as teachers and as learners may mean taking the time to learn much more about individual positioning and experiences, rather than drawing on cultural assumptions. A key issue is to understand experiences of transmigration. What does it mean for school children to be living their lives in two or more places? Indeed, what does it mean for professionals, and educators, to have transmigrant lives? These are issues with which much greater familiarity is needed in order to inform policy and practice.

Related to this point, the research also highlights the need for open debate about the effect of migration on receiving communities,

in this case London. The contribution that migrants make to London's economy and culture is widely recognised and welcomed. However, particular issues relating to policy over funding for English language tuition for migrant workers need better solutions. Migrants are often exhorted to learn English, integrate and become British, but funding for effective English programmes is limited, and migrants may lack resources to self-fund.

Are migrants therefore only welcomed on the basis that they will assimilate and become like English people? Or how much is London, and England, willing to take on the possibility of changing to become more like its migrants, taking on and adapting to different cultural influences, and how can this be facilitated through intercultural events and discussion of norms and expectations? This issue may be of particular relevance to the involvement of migrants as teachers in London's education workforce.

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### How to find out more

Further details can be found in David Block's book *Multilingual Identities in a Global City: London Stories*, published in London by Palgrave and available to buy on [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

If you have found this publication useful, you might be interested in a recently published book: *Education in a Global City: Essays from London* Edited by Tim Brighouse and Leisha Fullick

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