

MOBILITY PRIVILEGE AS AN EPISTEMIC FILTER: PASSPORT HIERARCHIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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Abstract: International knowledge production is increasingly global, yet access to the spaces where knowledge is exchanged, validated, and made visible remains often structurally unequal. This article examines passport hierarchies and visa restrictions as political conditions that have consequences for the international circulation of research knowledge. Research on global visa regimes has shown that mobility rights are distributed asymmetrically and remain structured by geopolitical power relations (Mau et al., 2015; Czaika, De Haas and Villares-Varela, 2018; Czaika and Trauner, 2017), while recent work on academic mobility documents how costs, delays, refusals and uncertainty restrict participation by scholars holding passports from the global South (Yildiz et al., 2026). Visa authorities do not assess the intellectual value of research knowledge. Nevertheless, by shaping who can attend conferences, sustain international collaborations, conduct fieldwork and enter informal professional networks, border decisions can indirectly affect which knowledge circulates, gains recognition and contributes to shaping international scholarly agendas. Rather than explaining visa policy itself, bell hooks' reflections on structures of privilege and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti's critique of global citizenship education provide conceptual resources for examining how unequal mobility intersects with academic participation and epistemic visibility. Universities cannot determine visa decisions or eliminate global mobility inequalities, but they can consider whether arrangements within their sphere of influence intensify or mitigate these effects. Development education, therefore, requires attention not only to whose voices are represented, but also to the structural conditions that enable participation, collaboration and the circulation of knowledge.

Key words: Mobility Privilege; Epistemic Inequality; Passport Hierarchies; Development Education; Global South.

Introduction

In January 2023, members of Ibali, an international network of scholars and practitioners working on storytelling research, planned a workshop in Cape Town. One Nigerian researcher applied for the required visa, received a refusal, reapplied and finally obtained the visa eighteen days after the workshop had ended. Her absence was not a minor administrative inconvenience: it removed a particular researcher, perspective and set of relationships from the production of the project's knowledge. By contrast, a British colleague described her own journey as easy and fast to organise (Nebe, Agbaire and Buckler, 2023). This experience captures a problem that universities and international organisations often place outside the intellectual work of scholarship. Academic knowledge is described as global because research teams are transnational, conferences are international, and journals circulate across borders. Yet the spaces in which research knowledge is discussed, validated, and made visible are reached through passports, consular procedures, visa application fees, proof of financial means and administrative decisions. The aspiration to build a global and international research environment is therefore built on a mobility infrastructure that does not distribute access equally. This reflection asks whether the critical scholarship produced in the global North interrogates its own mobility privilege. Thus, the article uses mobility privilege to describe the unremarked advantage enjoyed by people for whom crossing a border for academic work is affordable and administratively straightforward. On the contrary, there is not simply immobility, but a condition of uncertainty in which travel requires repeated proof of legitimacy and resources.

Recent scholarship has named these dynamics with increasing clarity. Yildiz et al. (2026) conceptualised a 'global academic mobility divide', while Gülel (2025) examined academic immobility as a privilege structured by geopolitical hierarchies. Thus, the purpose of the present reflection is to bring these perspectives into development education (DE) and ask what transformational education requires of a field committed to facing inequality. The theoretical framework draws on hooks' analysis of class as a material and cultural relation of

privilege, together with Andreotti's distinction between soft and critical global citizenship education (hooks, 2000; Andreotti, 2006). Through this lens, visa regimes are considered to have indirect epistemic consequences: by shaping who can enter particular relationships and institutions, they can affect whose knowledge becomes present, connected, and visible. This does not mean that visa authorities judge intellectual value. It means that political decisions about movement structure opportunities for participation in knowledge production. The purpose of this Viewpoint article is not to suggest that universities can determine visa policy or eliminate mobility inequalities. Decisions on admission and border control remain within the state's powers. Rather, drawing on accounts from researchers affected by visa restrictions, the article asks how these political constraints shape the circulation of academic knowledge and how institutional practices may mitigate their effects or begin to critically reflect on them. The question is whether academic institutions can recognise unequal mobility as a condition of knowledge production and respond within the areas they can influence.

Furthermore, academic conferences, international workshops, research partnerships and professional networks are not merely settings in which knowledge is disseminated; instead, they are educational spaces in which concepts, professional identities and curricular priorities are formed. Unequal access to these spaces therefore shapes what development education can know, teach and imagine.

Mobility privilege and the production of knowledge

Academic mobility is often presented as a neutral mechanism of internationalisation and knowledge circulation. Yet it takes place within an unequal academic geography in which research infrastructures, funding, publishing networks and sites of scholarly recognition remain unequally distributed. Under these conditions, mobility can facilitate exchange while also reproducing existing institutional and epistemic hierarchies.

Passports look formally similar, but the mobility rights attached to them differ dramatically. Mau et al. (2015) traced visa-waiver policies across more than 150 states and found that average visa-free mobility increased between 1969 and

2010 while becoming more unequally distributed. OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries and high-income countries gained mobility rights, whereas gains were weaker or negative in other regions. Using the Determinants of International Migration (DEMIG) VISA database (International Migration Institute, 2026), Czaika, de Haas and Villares-Varela (2018) showed that global visa regimes reflected geopolitical inequalities, regional alliances and colonial histories. Czaika and Trauner (2017) further examined how European Union (EU) visa policy governs mobility before travellers reach the territorial border, filtering movement through prior assessments of legitimacy and risk. Mobility is therefore a political resource, distributed differentially.

These inequalities acquire epistemic force because academic resources are also geographically concentrated. Many highly ranked universities, research institutions, major professional associations, conferences and publishing networks are located in the global North. When access to these sites depends on restrictive visa regimes, unequal mobility and unequal access to academic recognition reinforce one another (Yildiz et al., 2026). A person may have an accepted paper, institutional funding and a formal invitation and still be prevented from participating. Thus, academic merit does not neutralise the geopolitical judgement encoded in a passport. Visa applications demand time, money, documentation and patience to wait. These procedures may cause financial losses. For example, hooks (2000) highlights the fact that in these cases class matters, avoiding the idea that this is due to nationality alone. Class also intersects with residence status, race and institutional prestige. Two holders of the same passport can consequently experience different degrees of constraint. The global North and global South are political categories, but they are not homogeneous geographical contexts.

The experience of the Ibali team illustrates these layered inequalities. Two researchers with Nigerian passports followed the same nominal procedure for travel to South Africa, but the one residing in the UK had faster reimbursement, stable internet access and a residence status that may have made her application appear less risky. Their British colleague moved with far greater certainty. The example shows ‘hierarchies within hierarchies’ rather than a simple binary (Nebe, Agbaire and Buckler, 2023). These different characteristics, such

as passport nationality, place of residence, contractual security and institutional infrastructure, shape mobility.

Visa-related exclusions affect knowledge in different ways. First, they determine presence: who can attend a workshop, present a paper or conduct fieldwork. Second, they redistribute time, as hours spent navigating visa procedures are taken away from research, teaching and rest. Third, they influence professional visibility, since conferences generate feedback, collaborations, and informal encounters that cannot be fully reproduced through the circulation of a paper. Fourth, repeated uncertainty may discourage future participation before an application is even submitted. A visa is not in itself an epistemic judgement. Its consequences can nevertheless become epistemic when restrictions sort, delay or prevent the participation of particular scholars. It may favour knowledge carried by people who can move easily, while making other contributions intermittent, mediated or absent. In this sense, mobility restrictions can create conditions that contribute to epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007): not by directly assessing the value of knowledge, but by unequally structuring opportunities to participate in the spaces where knowledge is exchanged, recognised and legitimised.

Mobility privilege is similarly obscured by its own ease. For those who rarely need visas, travel appears to follow from an invitation and a budget. Their movement is read as evidence of international experience, flexibility and academic success rather than as a benefit enabled by citizenship. Institutions then evaluate mobility as though everyone had faced the same starting conditions. A structural advantage is converted into an individual achievement, while restricted mobility may be misread as a lack of ambition, internationalisation or productivity.

The key question is, therefore, not only who has a voice, but who can reach the sites in which a voice is heard, challenged, cited and incorporated into future work. Knowledge production is never disembodied. It depends on bodies that move through materially unequal worlds. These processes are both educational and epistemic. Conferences and transnational collaborations function as sites of professional learning where educators encounter new frameworks, revise teaching materials, form partnerships and influence which perspectives and experiences are later incorporated into teaching materials and

curricula. When participation is filtered by mobility regimes, the consequences can travel back into classrooms and organisations: some knowledge gains legitimacy and circulation, while other knowledge remains localised or is mediated through more mobile actors. Mobility privilege can therefore shape not only academic paths, but also the educational resources through which global inequality is interpreted.

Theoretical framework: class, positionality and critical global citizenship

The framework developed here brings together bell hooks' (2000) account of class and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti's (2006) distinction between soft and critical global citizenship education. These concepts serve as interpretive lenses, not as empirical explanations of visa policy, and their application to academic mobility is necessarily an adaptation. The framework does not collapse their distinct intellectual projects into a single decolonial theory. Instead, it uses their complementary questions to examine how privilege becomes normalised, how benevolent action can leave unequal structures intact, and what it means for education to become transformative.

Hooks made class visible as both a material relation and a culture that shapes belonging, aspiration, shame and authority. In *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, she connected class to race and gender while refusing the idea that individual success dissolves structural hierarchy (hooks, 2000). She emphasised that education is shaped by the lived experiences, social positions, and power relations that educators bring to educational spaces. Additionally, in another foundational work, hooks describes education as the practice of freedom, challenging the idea of a neutral transmission (hooks, 1994). These insights influence academic mobility and positionality, which are not merely the result of nationality, race, gender or institutional location. In the context of academic mobility, positionality also encompasses class-related differences in scholars' capacity to access funding, obtain administrative support, tolerate uncertainty and easily occupy international space.

Mobility privilege may be particularly important for scholars and educators in the global North who work critically on migration, coloniality, development or inequality. Their analysis may challenge borders at the theoretical

level, while the conferences and collaborations in which they participate depend on privileges structured by those same borders. This contradiction does not invalidate critical scholarship. It does, however, require the critical perspective to turn towards the material arrangements through which that scholarship is produced. Moreover, Andreotti's distinction between soft and critical global citizenship education sharpens this reflection (Andreotti, 2006). A soft approach frames the problem in terms of poverty, helplessness or a lack of resources and invites privileged actors to take responsibility for others. A critical approach begins with inequality, injustice, historical complicity and the structures that maintain exploitation. It asks actors to analyse their own position and take responsibility towards others by changing assumptions, relationships and power arrangements. Similarly, in the discourse on academic mobility, a soft response may help an individual applicant navigate the visa system, while a critical perspective also asks whether some institutional arrangements determine an exclusion produced primarily by a nation's policy and which of those arrangements can reasonably be changed.

Drawing on Andreotti's HEADS-UP social cartography, these distinctions can be addressed by identifying hegemony, ethnocentrism, ahistoricism, depoliticisation, salvationism, uncomplicated solutions and paternalism in global education (Andreotti, 2012).

A conference may reproduce 'hegemony' when it presents itself as international or global while treating one region as the default institutional centre of academic exchange. It is ahistorical when visa inequalities are detached from colonial relations and uneven development. It is depoliticised when a refusal is treated as the applicant's administrative problem. A response may become paternalistic when organisers or donors retain control over who receives support and on what terms, enabling a limited number of selected participants to attend while leaving their dependence on external assistance and the underlying barriers to wider participation unexamined.

This perspective also clarifies the fragility of decolonial solidarity. Solidarity can be rhetorically expansive while remaining materially conditional. A partnership may promise reciprocity but schedule its decisive meetings in places

that some partners cannot access or have issues reaching. Inclusion efforts may support a limited number of invited speakers from the global South while leaving the mobility barriers faced by non-invited participants largely unchanged. A project may celebrate co-production while contracts, reimbursements and visa support reproduce different levels of security. Good intentions do not remove these asymmetries; sometimes they make them harder to name.

Similarly, Abdi's (2026) 'politics of accompaniment', although developed in the context of migration research, challenges the assumption that knowledge is produced from a neutral position. Applied to academic mobility, this perspective suggests that conferences and research networks are not neutral spaces of exchange: their locations, languages and conditions of access shape who can participate and whose knowledge becomes visible.

The central argument can now be stated more precisely. Mobility privilege confers material advantages on individual scholars and can have indirect epistemic consequences by shaping presence, circulation, and recognition. Andreotti's distinction suggests that individual assistance, while valuable, remains insufficient when changeable institutional arrangements are left unexamined. The critical question, therefore, is what academic institutions and actors in development education can realistically change, given the political conditions they do not control.

Implications for transformative development education

The theme 'learning for transformation' asks development education to move beyond diagnosis and connect reflection with changes in practice. Mobility privilege provides a demanding test of the theoretical framework. A soft approach may teach passport inequality as an example of injustice elsewhere and focus on assistance to excluded individuals. A critical approach asks how the effects of a political inequality may be compounded or mitigated by practices within the influence of DE institutions, educators, funders and researchers, including meetings, partnerships, curricula and criteria of professional value (Andreotti, 2006). hooks' (2000) class analysis adds the question of who can bear the costs and risks even within the same passport category?

Transformational learning therefore invites reflection on institutional congruence. Teaching learners to question global inequality can be accompanied by attention to how educators' professional learning is organised under unequal conditions of mobility. The curriculum comprises not only formal content, but also institutional decisions about who is present, whose experience acquires authority and where educational exchange is expected to occur. Dillon (2024) similarly argues that critical global education in higher education should be examined not only through programmes and curriculum, but also across institutional policy, research, partnerships, non-formal engagement and institutional culture. Extending this perspective to academic mobility allows conferences and transnational networks to be understood as part of the institutional environment through which learning, participation and knowledge production are organised.

The first implication is curricular. Passport and visa hierarchies should be treated as part of the political economy of knowledge, not only as topics within migration education. Learners can examine how access to international travel is shaped by citizenship, wealth, colonial history and perceptions of migration risk. They can then trace how restricted mobility affects whose research appears at conferences, whose work enters syllabi and which institutions are recognised as international. Such enquiry links border regimes to epistemic justice without reducing the global South to a single experience.

The second implication is reflexive. Critical global citizenship education places responsibility not simply for an excluded other, but towards others through an examination of complicity and power (Andreotti, 2006). HEADS UP can then be adapted as an institutional audit. Who selected the conference location, and whose mobility was assumed? Which historical and geopolitical relations are absent from the planning process? Who carries the financial risk of an application? Is hybrid participation equivalent and visible, or is it a diminished alternative offered after exclusion has occurred? Whose language, time zone and professional calendar establish the norm? These questions transform reflexivity from a declaration of awareness into scrutiny of budgets, timetables and decision-making power.

The third implication concerns organisational practice and the distinction between individual assistance and broader institutional reflection. The Ibali team responded to visa inequality by covering the costs of repeated applications, budgeting for professional visa support and flexible travel, preparing reusable documentation, beginning applications early, and considering meeting locations accessible to all participants (Nebe, Agbaire and Buckler, 2023). Assistance with forms and invitation letters is valuable, although it may be insufficient when the applicant continues to carry avoidable financial risks. Yildiz et al. (2026) proposed rotating conference locations towards less restrictive visa regimes, expanding multilingual and hybrid participation, and strengthening institutional assistance. Such measures cannot guarantee mobility, but they can reduce some of the burdens placed on individual scholars.

Development education organisations can consider context-sensitive responses within their financial, legal and logistical constraints. Funders may recognise visa, biometric, translation, care and flexible-booking costs as legitimate project expenses. Partnerships may plan visa applications earlier and consider flexible travel, alternative locations or equivalent hybrid participation. Conferences may collect anonymised data on visa-related non-attendance, while research evaluation should avoid treating frequent international travel as straightforward evidence of excellence. These measures are not universal obligations, particularly for smaller organisations, but illustrate how institutions can mitigate mobility inequalities without implying control over border policy. Nor is online participation a complete solution. It can widen access, reduce costs and protect a project from visa delays, but it can also reproduce inequalities in connectivity, time zones, language and informal networking. A remote participant displayed on a screen while decisions are made in the room has been technically included but politically marginalised. Transformative design asks which activities require co-presence, who defines that requirement and how authority will be shared across modes.

A recent case in Ireland illustrates these limits. In 2026, a number of students from Gaza who had been admitted to Irish universities and awarded fully funded scholarships were refused study visas. Reported grounds included the absence of original bank statements, gaps in education and insufficient evidence

of an intention to return – requirements that were particularly difficult to satisfy under conditions of war and displacement (Smyth, 2026). The case shows that institutional admission and financial support do not, by themselves, secure access when participation remains contingent on border decisions.

Finally, DE needs a more material account of solidarity. An invitation alone may not be sufficient when unequal mobility prevents effective participation. Within their resources and authority, institutions can consider whether reasonable changes in location, format, timing, decision-making or financial support would make participation more equitable. Such choices connect learning about inequality with practical attention to the conditions through which its effects may persist.

Conclusion

International and global knowledge can obscure a simple material fact: scholarship crosses borders, and borders do not receive all scholars in the same way. Passport hierarchies distribute certainty to some and scrutiny, delay and cost to others. Because conferences, research sites and institutions are also unequally distributed, mobility regimes help determine who becomes present, connected and recognisable within academic life. For critical scholarship in the global North, acknowledging mobility privilege invites examination of how apparently ordinary arrangements – conference locations, reimbursement rules, deadlines, invitation letters, hybrid formats and measures of international experience – may convert geopolitical advantage into greater academic visibility. Efforts to decolonise knowledge may remain incomplete if the mobility conditions underpinning participation are left entirely unexamined, even though those conditions cannot be resolved by academic institutions alone.

For development education, the issue goes to the heart of transformational learning. Transformation concerns not only what learners understand, but also how institutions organise participation within the limits of their authority. hooks makes visible the classed resources that allow mobility privilege to appear as ordinary achievement, while Andreotti helps distinguish individual assistance from reflection on changeable structures. Before asking whose voice is represented, DE practitioners can also ask who can cross the

border, reach the room and take part in shaping what the room is for. Mobility privilege can have epistemic effects by shaping access to participation. Making those effects visible, while remaining realistic about institutional power, is part of the transformative task.

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