Straddling the Global and National:
The Emerging Roles of International Schooling - an Overview
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Abstract

This Commentary reflects upon the articles in this Special Issue to provide an overview and discussion of their core arguments.

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COMMENTARY

Historically, international schools were a long established but marginal feature of many school systems around the globe. Initially established to provide schooling for the children of expatriates, military personnel posted overseas and diasporic communities, some sought to provide the curriculum of the children's motherland, others a more varied or international curriculum. They primarily catered for the children of parents who were working overseas, who planned to return home and desired access to schools which ensured minimal disruption to their children's education. They were a relatively small sector of educational systems which remained fairly insulated and detached from the school systems within the nations where they were located.

That portrayal has changed significantly and affected both the beneficiaries and providers of International Education. The sources of the change involved a confluence of factors including initially the slow process of decolonisation and the rise of independent states,post-World War Two, the end of the cold war, the subsequent accelerated pace of economic globalisation since the late 1980s and rise of it's handmaiden, 'neo liberalism', as the prevailing political ideology. Globalisation and Neoliberalism both encouraged choice, marketisation and competition within education and this was manifested in the rapid internationalisation of education systems. This was most evident in the Higher Education sector, where there was a massive growth of student mobility. Millions of students are now travelling around the world in an attempt to purchase credentials from prestigious institutions and/or to gain access to Higher Education places which are not available in their own nations. Universities in many nations, especially in the English speaking nations of Australia, UK and the USA, have become dependent on the fees of those students. Governments encourage and sometimes fund such student mobility for a mixture of motives, which range from obtaining access to skills and knowledge that will benefit their "knowledge" economies; generating export income and reducing the burden of public funding of universities; promoting intercultural awareness and a cosmopolitan outlook to exercising a form of soft power designed to promote the nation.

In parallel, but less visible, has been the marked growth in the scale and nature of the international schools' sector. Bunnell (2019, p. 23) predicts that the number of students at international schools will increase from 4.8m in 2017 to 7m by 2022. Along with this growth, there has been a shift in the nature of the curricula offered and the pupils enrolled. Instead of primarily offering the national curricula of the pupil's nation of origin, there has been a considerable expansion of schools offering international curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate and Cambridge Assessment International. These are offered as an alternative to national curricula and often stress their potential for providing pupils with the skills to work in the global knowledge economy and to develop global competencies and a cosmopolitan mindset.

In terms of the profile of pupils, there has been a decline in the proportion of expatriate children and a growth of local children enrolled in international schools. Brummett and Keeling (2013) calculated that 30 years ago 80 per cent of international school places were filled by expatriate children and 20 per cent by local children. They estimated that by 2013 the ratio had been reversed. Further, many nations, such as South Korea and Australia, have moved to establish international schools as part of their national public schooling systems.

In brief, the rapidly growing international schools sector now caters mainly for the children of local elites; often provides instruction mainly through English; tends to not follow the local/national curriculum; is increasingly integrated within the system of public schooling; and, claims to provide a liberal and progressive curriculum and pedagogy that develops both cosmopolitanism, access to elite western universities and skills for working in the global knowledge economy.

Whilst there have been a number of country studies of these specific developments, this Special Issue brings together studies from a range of national contexts, which allows a comparative analysis of the tensions and issues that arise from those features. In his article, **Bunnell** argues that the traditional portrayal of international schools as a marginal sector catering for mobile elites, which performs a benign and neutral role within school systems, has shielded it from critical inquiry. This Special Issue directly addresses that by providing a seriously critical perspective. This combination of a comparative and critical perspective results in an important and significant contribution to the literature.

Many of the themes addressed throughout this volume derive from the appeal of international schools to local elites. These include: what is the attraction of international schools? How do societies deal with the issues that emerge when the children of the growing middle classes and local elites are purchasing international schooling for their children, which is disconnected from the national curriculum? This raises issues related to both equity (it is not available to most children) and identity (the children will not receive the mainstream schooling designed to develop the prevailing culture/national identity).

Howard provides a fascinating insight into one of the ways international schools promote and differentiate themselves from mainstream schooling, which helps explain their appeal

to local elites. He focusses on six international schools in different nations and analyses the different ways in which they enact global citizenship education to provide pupils opportunities to develop an awareness and knowledge of differences, to establish and maintain relationships across differences, to gain a sense of obligation towards others, and to accumulate valuable forms of human and cultural capital. Affluent parents seek these competencies as they provide a powerful basis for their offspring to thrive in a globalised and competitive labour market. Consequently, international schools are playing an increasingly powerful role in making and remaking local elites.

Howard highlights the heterogeneity and diversity of the international schools sector, which is a recurring theme across the Special Issue. repeat of above]. Two further observations were especially pertinent. Firstly, he notes how the pupils were exposed to a curriculum that encouraged a sense of "noblesse oblige" towards those less fortunate than themselves through engagement in charity work and philanthropy. Secondly, he notes across the schools that the GCE curriculum was depoliticised and adopted a distinctly uncritical perspective. An idealised better world was thus promoted, but the political challenges to achieving that were intentionally avoided. This depoliticisation mirrors the OECD's approach to measuring Global Competencies and the tendency to see the absence of those competencies as a consequence of the actions of schools and families and not political leaders (Auld and Morris, 2019). A depoliticised curriculum, an uncritical stance towards power and politics and a sense of "noblesse oblige" may well combine to produce future global elites who accept the status quo and see acts of charity , philanthropy and the 'development industry' as the means to support the most disadvantaged rather than wider societal changes.

The question that warrants further research is to understand the diverse motives for this de-politicisation of the curriculum in different contexts. Possibilities include the desire to avoid conflict within a diverse student body; to avoid challenging the beliefs of local elite parents; and/or to avoid challenging the political ideology of the largest and rapidly growing market of new middle-class parents from the PRC.

The article by **Wu and Ko** reinforces the theme of diversity across the sector in their examination of three international schools in the Peoples Rebublic of China. They provide a salutary reminder that we need to look beyond focussing on the international schools or their curricula to understand both their appeal and how they differentiate themselves from both mainstream schooling and other international schools. They portray international schools in the PRC as part of a global education industry centred on the USA, UK and Canada that travels globally and sells an "international positional good"; one which is perceived to give pupils a relative advantage over others with the promise of increasing their competitiveness when applying to western universities. They note how the nature of that advantage varies as the schools seek to differentiate their offerings. The American international schools stress that they provide their pupils access to Higher Education in the USA; the British ones market themselves as providing access to British culture; and the Canadian schools are designed to provide a hybrid model, part Canadian – part Chinese. In essence, international schools in the PRC have emerged as a giant feeder system for China's

growing middle class who wish to maximise the possibilities of their children studying in prestigious western universities.

The study by **Flesh et al** takes us more directly into the less explored world of politics and international schooling. They analyse the tension between the cosmopolitan and humanitarian values promoted by the United World Colleges (UWC), a prestigious group of international schools, and the values/ideology promoted by the state. Specifically, they focus on how Israeli students who had spent a year abroad at a UWC were shaped by and dealt with the humanitarian and cosmopolitan ethos of the UWC and reconciled it with their national identity as Jewish citizens. They compared this with pupils who studied in mainstream Israeli schools that promoted a distinctly national perspective. They found that the Jewish students at the UWC often faced criticism from other students, mainly through social media and other non-formal channels, of the actions of the Israeli state, which were portrayed as contrary to the UWC's ethos.

The study found that both groups of students expressed a strong sense of national identity, and this was most marked amongst those who attended the UWC. Under criticism from their peers, they became defensive and developed a strong sense that they needed to defend the nation's actions in the face of attacks and accusations. They identified selective reporting by the media and their peers' ignorance of the realities in Israel to reject their critical views towards Israel. In contrast, pupils at mainstream Israeli schools were provided with, and took for granted, the nationalist narrative they were exposed to that largely went unchallenged. The major difference between the two groups was in how they envisaged their futures. The locally educated pupils saw their futures in Israel. The pupils who attended the UWC saw themselves working overseas, and whilst they opted into the cosmopolitan ethos of the UWC they opted out of it when it applied to Israeli geo-politics.

The article provides a powerful insight into how pupils deal with political conflicts within international schools when they do emerge, albeit outside the formal curriculum. It suggests that pupils' exposure to nationalist narratives is deeply embedded and tends to be reinforced rather that modified when exposed to criticism rooted in a more internationalist and cosmopolitan ethos. That these tensions were manifested outside the formal curriculum echoes Howard's observation that the formal curriculum of the six schools he studied were depoliticised. As the authors note with regard to the UWCs, it also points to the need for such schools to consider how they could provide within the formal curriculum a space where such issues could be discussed in a more structured and respectful climate than that of social media. To do so would seem to be central to pursuing their mission of promoting peace, tolerance and understanding.

Bunnell's article takes a global and historical perspective to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the rapid growth of both the demand for and supply of international schooling is changing and becoming more problematic. He begins by noting the massive recent growth of international schooling, especially that provided in English within nations where that is not the national language. He describes the ways in which forms of state-backed "Public International Schooling" have blossomed as a form of "crypto growth" achieved through "fast policy", as this has happened surreptitiously and rapidly, with little

public debate or engagement. He argues that the discourse of pursuing global peace, cosmopolitanism and internationalism has shielded international schools from critical scrutiny. The reality he portrays is one in which the sector's crypto growth is driven by states seeking to rapidly maximise their economic competitiveness, which has served to exacerbate social injustices and inequalities. He aptly describes this as representative of a form of "educational neo-colonisation, whereby agencies based in the Global North exploit the growing wealth, aspirations, and ambitions of individuals, families, and governments based in the Global South". He identifies a backlash to the growth of the sector in some nations and notes Saudi Arabia's decision in August 2020 that all foreign nationals must leave their posts as leaders of private schools and be immediately replaced by Saudis. This raises the possibility that the future growth of the sector may not be sustained or may be reversed as nations seek to reduce their reliance on western models or reject its role in selecting academic elites.

Bunnells article provides a clear outline of the key issues which are now emerging as International Education has moved from the margins to play a central and influential role in national educational systems. Those issues provide an initial agenda for further critical analysis which, as he notes has been largely absent. As this Volume has demonstrated further critical analysis is important as that the sector tends to: operate outside standard systems of governance; cloaks itself within a humanitarian/progressive discourse; provides social mobility and capital for elites and the more affluent; provides a depoliticised curriculum which eschews questions of power and politics; serves as a 'Trojan Horse' for initiating domestic educational ; and, provides a neo colonial education, primarily in English, for the children of elites.

In their article **Park and Hong** also focus on pupils. They investigated how Korean pupils who studied the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme reflected on their experience when they returned to study at local universities. The case of South Korea is especially interesting as the government has moved to incorporate international schools and curricula, such as the IBD, into the system of public schooling. The intention is that international schooling will help to improve the quality of secondary schooling by encouraging pupil-centred pedagogies and inquiry-based learning. The hope is that this will help ameliorate the problems (exam pressure, private tutoring and pupil stress) associated with the nation's public school system. Their findings suggest that pupils who attended the international schools were exposed to a range of different experiences, which did not always match the ethos of the IB. Their attitudes to their experience were mixed and ambivalent. Further, many of them continued to employ the strategies they had learnt in their mainstream schooling (using private tutoring, exam cramming etc.) during their time overseas and in university. Overall, the findings suggest that the incorporation of international schooling into public school systems may be based on false hopes. The findings also underline two recurring themes in this Special Issue: the diverse nature of international schooling and its limited capacity to change beliefs and behaviour rooted in local and national contexts.

The major way in which international schools distinguish themselves from mainstream schools is the claim that they seek to develop global citizens by providing an educational experience which is variously described as international, cosmopolitan or global. Whilst

these terms are used interchangeably, they are polysemous and can embody very different conceptions. In his article, **Tarc** interrogates the different ways in which two influential international bodies, the OECD and the IB, approach the assessment of pupils in those domains. In so doing, he underlines the need to reflect on what those normative terms mean and how they are operationalised. The promulgation of the Sustainable Development Goals by the UN in 2015 identified the promotion of "global citizenship" as one of its educational goals, and this has resulted in a marked increase in interest in global citizenship and how it can be promoted in schools and measured.

The OECD has recently moved to assess and compare nations in terms of their pupils' "global competencies" as part of the PISA programme and the results of this exercise were reported in 2018. The IB has for a long time provided an assessment of individual pupils 'international mindedness' which is a key goal of its curriculum. By focussing on what is assessed, the author is able to go behind the normative rhetoric of internationalisation and examine what counts and what is valued. The IB promotes and assesses international mindedness indirectly through the provision of a broad, progressive and liberal educational model, which seeks to instil empathy, peacefulness, and mutual understanding. This was manifested in a formal curriculum that promotes inquiry learning, service education, bilingualism and project work. The avoidance of a more explicit approach to teaching and assessing "international mindedness" allowed the IB to maintain its malleability across different national contexts and, as the author notes: ''A more political or politicised orientation, or even a more universal notion of international mindedness, may not 'travel' as well across different societies or geopolitical power blocs''.

The OECD faces the same problem, as they acknowledged with reference to its measurement of global competencies:

> The most salient challenge for the PISA assessment is that — through a single international instrument — it needs to account for the large variety of geographic and cultural contexts represented in participating countries (OECD, 2018, p. 21)

However, in contrast to the IB, the OECD addressed that challenge directly and developed a standardised instrument. Tarc identifies the range of problems that are a consequence of that decision. These include a conception of the globally competent citizen defined by experts from the west, which approximates to a member of the globally mobile elite. Further, he demonstrates that whilst the OECD frames their test of global competence around a humanitarian/social justice discourse, it is deeply rooted in a human capital orientation. Analysis of the results of the global competence test reported by the OECD suggests that the problems of measuring and comparing across cultural contexts were deeply embedded and not addressed. For example, Goren (2020) reports that some questionnaire items were removed from the test administered in some nations as these were deemed sensitive (e.g. on immigration). In another nation, a sector of the population was not administered the test as it conflicted with their values.

The article by **Maire and Windle** goes to the issue at the heart of this Special Issue: namely, the impact of international schooling on social inequalities within a mainstream system of schooling within which it is deeply embedded. They focus on Australia, which has a highly stratified and segregated public school system within which the International Baccalaureate

Diploma has thrived, and address the following questions through an analysis of quantitative data.

Where in the school system is the IB Diploma available, and how economically restrictive is access to these schools? Who studies the IB Diploma within these schools, and what academic resources do students bring to the IB Diploma? What is the academic trajectory of IB Diploma students into higher education?

The IBD is often portrayed as an indicator of increased concern for and promotion of humanitarian values, internationalisation and cosmopolitanism in school systems. The authors demonstrate how that positive portrayal serves to mask its role in reinforcing social inequalities. They found that the IBD was used by affluent families to gain economic and cultural capital that served to reproduce social class hierarchies. The academic standing of the IBD, rather than its international ethos, was decisive for parents as this provided access to selective high status courses in prestigious local universities. The IBD is thus providing a new academically selective schooling route for elite reproduction, which reinforces social inequalities and undermines the long history of reforms designed to reduce them.

Lee, Kim & Wright provide a comparative analysis of how the legitimacy of the IB was presented in South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, all societies where it has grown rapidly. Through documentary analysis they identify the subtle ways in which its legitimacy is promoted by its advocates, including their respective governments, and shaped by the prevailing educational systems of the three societies. In all of them, the IB is portrayed as providing a high-quality liberal progressive education that maximises access to prestigious universities. The differences across the three systems are described as: "substantive legitimacy as the international curriculum of choice in Hong Kong, a quiet supplement to elite education in Singapore, and instrumental curriculum borrowing for fixing the education system of Korea".

In Hong Kong, the IB has flourished within the Government's Direct Subsidy Scheme, which was designed to support parental choice and the provision of a diverse range of options in the system of public schooling. In Singapore, the IB is well established within the private school sector and is growing slowly within some elite public schools. In South Korea, it is being promoted in public schools primarily by local education authorities as an educational import that will help fix the major problems which face the educational system. Their article provides an insightful analysis, which underlines the need to avoid an overreliance on analyses of the visions and marketing of the IB and its schools as evidence of its appeal, goals and purposes. As the authors show, the IB has been harnessed by governments to support their domestic educational policy agendas, especially in Hong Kong and South Korea, which positioned the IB to help promote marketisation and progressive reform, respectively.

This Special Issue identifies the changing nature and rapid growth of international schooling and sets out to unveil some of the major tensions, encountered by national education systems in incorporating international programes. Together, the articles have very effectively achieved that purpose by providing a critical and comparative analysis, which

distinguishes it from much current research that is instrumental, promotional, technical and apolitical.

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