

Multicultural and Global Education at the Dawn of the 21st Century: The Ethos and Experience of International Schools

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We live in a world that is increasingly changing, a complex and interdependent global society whose transitions are literally breathtaking. Inequities in power and justice are intertwined with the dramatic acceleration of economic, environmental, political and technological changes. In the United States, Japan, and many other countries a burgeoning ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity add yet a further dimension to this situation.

In response to these new complexities, educators in the United States and other societies have developed multicultural and global curricula for public educational systems. At the heart of their endeavor is the effort to understand the commonalities of being human, including human rights and responsibilities, while celebrating and revering the cultural richness of diversity. At the same time we can find throughout the world the unique examples of a large group of independent educational institutions that often directly embody these ideals.

International schools present the contours of varied, vivid, and striking landscapes the world over. These schools provide, at the crest of the 21st Century, special examples of 'a living, multicultural, and global education.' There are many international schools in the world today and a large number of students, at least 230,000 students in 564

schools located in 125 countries, including the United States.¹ Some figures which liberally define an international school even suggest the number of three to four million international students.² Wherever we decide to define this range, what we are seeing is a major, little-studied phenomenon, a powerful example of a living multicultural and global education.

International schools provide a rich field of study for those interested in the phenomena of cultural pluralism, local and global identity, and internationalization. Their experiences help us look through the larger perspective of multicultural rather than monocultural dynamics, multiple, not singular, patterns of change or growth. An active transnational culture, bilinguality and the fostering of a transcultural consciousness are special focus points of international schools.

Ethos and Experience: History and Recent Trends in International Schools

The ethos of international schools, the experiences of friendships and cross-cultural communication occurring naturally in such transnational communities can be seen as key lessons for global multicultural education. An image of humanity which assumes interdependencies, cooperation and the common nature of humankind is foremost in these relationships. While these aspects stand out in international schools, they can be emphasized anywhere, depending on the enthusiasm of teachers and administrators.³

Before World War II most international schools clearly reflected their national origins, usually American or British. Many international schools in Latin America had been founded with the support of the US State Department and the Rockefeller family as counters to a similar

movement begun by the Nazis in that area in the 1930s. It was in the post-war period, however, that the proliferation of a variety of international schools really began. Not only were many new schools started, but almost all schools began catering to more diverse clientele.

Confusion naturally arose as to what exactly defined an international school. To allay this confusion many institutions called themselves 'overseas' schools. It was at this time (late 1960s, early 1970s) that organizations like the Japan Conference of Overseas Schools (JCOS) were established. The US State Department also had an Office of Overseas Schools which disbursed money and other largesse from the 1950s.

The term 'overseas' unfortunately compounded the confusion, allowing many types of institutions to be classified as international schools. An important question arose as distances shrunk and student populations became more diverse: 'overseas' from where? The implication was apparently America, the term 'overseas school' originating in the 1950s when Americans were the dominant cultural and political influence. A former principal of one of Japan's international schools stated the emphasis on monoculturalism in the mid-1970s: "*Always remember, you are advancing a rather evasive U.S. culture in a foreign setting. Your curriculum must be geared to the mechanizations of American articulation.*"⁴

Yet by the mid 1970s Americans were numerically a minority in most of these schools. It became apparent with the changed world situation that use of the word 'overseas' could be taken as revealing a lack of commitment to the idea of internationalism. A distinctively new 'international school' concept began to emerge in the late 1960s, a concept at one stroke implying a new and broader acceptance of children from a diversity of backgrounds yet still including the original image of the international school as an enclave for diplomatic,

missionary, and business children. On the surface the change was mirrored in Japan by the mid-1980s in a shift in the name of JCOS (Japan Conference of Overseas Schools), which became JCIS (Japan Conference of International Schools). Similar trends could be seen elsewhere.

As the numbers of local and transnational children admitted rose dramatically, conflict emerged over non-native speakers of English 'lowering the school's standards.' By this some people seemed to mean the level of English spoken (and their own 'cultural standard or dominance'). Yet the increasingly 'multilateral policy' of many international schools was a realistic reflection of the polycultural direction of the Late 20th Century World. In fact, the evidence often showed that while scores on verbal tests may have dropped somewhat as fewer native speakers of English were enrolled, this was usually more than offset by a rise in non-verbal scores.

The question of the place of English/ESL remains a critical one for the future of international schools, however, both pedagogically and culturally. If schools wish to continue to strive for excellence new programs and curriculums must be developed. There are already encouraging developments along these lines such as courses which combine content teaching of subjects such as world history or science with ESL. Today these schools are proud and fiercely independent, illustrating by their educational product (their students) the effectiveness of decision-making at the local level. Most significantly, they have been a fertile proving ground for the high-powered curriculum/ degree program of the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) and other curricular innovations.

Special Educational Features of International Schools: Curricula and Cultural Capital

Most international schools are what some observers have called 'educational department stores,' or, even less charitably, educational smorgasbords, but a standardization of curricula at a high level is indeed taking place in some schools. The International Baccalaureate provides a course of study and set of examinations similar to the English 'A' Levels, although the IB is broader and more demanding in scope. These exams may be taken as a whole program (with the goal of an IB Diploma) or they may be taken separately for Certificates. Either way, college credit can be received later.

The curriculum consists of six subject areas : Language A, Language B, Study of Man in Society, Experimental Sciences, Mathematics, and an Optional Subject. The Optional Subject can be chosen either from a school-based syllabus approved by the IB Office or from the following : Art/Design, Music, Latin, Classical Greek, or Computing Studies.

High marks on the Certificates enable students to receive credit for basic college courses before they enter college. A full diploma will usually guarantee that a student can skip the entire first year of university (including elite universities such as Oxford, Yale, and Harvard) since it is regarded as equivalent to the study of basic subjects at that level. Arrangements for recognition and entry using the IB Diploma and Certificates have been completed with 75 countries.⁵

Part of the rationale for the establishment of the IB curriculum is also that of multicultural education: to further international understanding. This perhaps explains one of the most interesting developments in the history of the IB program: the spread of the IB to

hundreds of national public schools in dozens of countries.

These national schools are not ordinary high schools. Leading schools in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Spain, the Netherlands, and the USA, for instance, have elected to participate in the IB. There are 160 schools in the USA and Canada, many of which, like the national schools in Europe, see the IB not so much as an alternative to their national system of education as a supplement to it.⁶

Since the IB curriculum only reaches the very best students, and only for the 17-19 age range, moves began in the late 1980s and early 1990s to establish new international curricula for the middle school years (ISAC), a secondary school graduation certificate/diploma similar to English 'O' Levels (International GCSE), and, most recently, for the elementary years (ISCP).

These curricula are the 'hot topics' in international schools as we move into the mid-1990s,⁷ with many schools already either practicing some of the ideals in these programs or seriously interested in full implementation. The first, the International Schools Association Curriculum (ISAC) for middle school students, addresses many of the same needs felt by multicultural educators: learning how to learn, development of the whole person, an international/intercultural perspective, and "the acquisition of attitudes in the learning process in the context of cultural exchanges" are guiding principles of these programs.⁸ The ISAC curriculum is based on three guiding principles: globality, communication, and intellectual awareness. Its spirit has been defined by Gerard Renaud, one of the fathers of the IB, as 'international humanism.'

Cross-Cultural Contact, Conflict and Community

In contrast to the formal academic setting of international schools,

in their social setting, certain personal, curricular and cultural forces have lead to a diversity of groupings based on language, gender, academic performance, extracurricular interests/ activities, family income, and life-style. The manner in which international school communities meet the challenges of differing personal interests and world views recommends these schools to those interested in an effective multicultural education.

Teachers are the primary adult role models and mediators in this process, playing the central role in the running of international schools. They promote a setting characterized by tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect. Moreover, there is a committed effort to actualize such values. Displays of intolerance, discrimination, or chauvinism are social taboos.

The strength of any school ultimately lies in its faculty, and the specialized requirements for a teacher in an international school mean that many faculty will be unique, sensitive, committed, tough, flexible, and resilient. Their backgrounds are diverse : they are experienced in many countries, are usually more often women than men, have MAs and PhDs, and are mostly Americans, British ,or host nationals.

The influence of the local setting can be seen in international schools in Japan, where Japanese form and customs are ever-present. Similar patterns can be observed around the world. Language is a key issue For example in Japan. Even though some teachers and administrators wish to ban the speaking of Japanese in their international schools, the Japanese world-view cannot be ignored. The respect which it engenders for the position of the 'teacher' is a boon for faculty. The school becomes a "home" for students and teachers, too, a place where they feel comfortable and where they belong. Part of the stability of this system derives from the surrounding Japanese culture's emphasis on harmony, cooperation, and shared interests.

At the same time, international school students operate in a conceptual arena where 'horizons' are a key symbol. They continually chase after them, forcing confrontations with a wider reality. Horizons express a broad vision, a search for understanding. In one respect, an international school can be viewed as a collection of many out-groups, all contained within the three categories of *foreigners*, *natives who mix with foreigners*, and *international children*, the products of unions between these two groups. None of the three is entirely a part of the other or indeed of their own nation either. The international school provides a unique, setting for multicultural education.

Individuals who have experienced international schools report a set of basic universal symbols that are held in common, a set of values which newcomers who enter the system become socialized to and long-term members take for granted. At a deeper level for each individual is a specific set of skills which deliver shared meaning: *Mobility*: smooth handling of transitions/transience ; *Adaptability*: flexibility and resilience; *Tolerance*: prudence and patience.

If schools wish to improve and enhance their quality they should pay less attention to their formal structure and more to the particular socio-cultural contexts where values, constraints, and trust are expressed. It is in these contexts that opportunities for personal, and therefore institutional, transformation are offered.

Prospects for a 21st Century World Education: Learning from International Schools

What recommendations might the experiences of international schools have for educationeal systems around the world. Is the school's purpose to solely be an 'objective' purveyor of knowledge or does it have a defined role to play in acculturation? The general materialization of

modern culture and the high value placed on technique as opposed to imagination have seen education degenerate into instruction. The view then literally becomes that education *is* instruction. Instruction literally means "to build into," whereas education, *educes*, means "to lead forth," connoting more responsibility for socialization. What is regarded as an appropriate institutional focus becomes 'instruction' alone rather than the much wider and richer meaning implied by 'education.'

What is meant by 'education' can also be found in UNESCO's 1974 Recommendation on Education for International Understanding and Human Rights. Seven principles are set forth which in fact describe what many international schools do through their physical, personal and educational settings :

- (a) an international dimension and a global perspective in education at all levels and in all its forms
- (b) understanding and respect for all peoples, their cultures, civilizations, values and ways of life, including domestic ethnic cultures and cultures of other nations
- (c) awareness of the increasing global interdependence between peoples and nations
- (d) abilities to communicate with others
- (e) awareness not only of the rights but also of the duties incumbent upon individuals, social groups and nations towards each other
- (f) understanding of the necessity for international solidarity and cooperation
- (g) readiness on the part of the individual to participate in solving the problems of his community, his country and the world at large

Transcultural students who have attended international schools are especially adept at 'managing meaning.' This competence is both generalized and specialized. Transculturals are "people who can afford to experiment, who do not stand to lose a treasured but threatened,

uprooted sense of self."⁹ The real significance of the growth of transnational cultures lies in the mediating possibilities they offer. An awareness of this identity transcends the other bonds that hold individuals in international schools. The differences of language that normally hinder communication are also recognized in an international school as avenues for wider shared meaning. Multiple linguistic skills are a given.

Although *de facto* loss of elements of major national sovereignty/cultures will be (and are being) accepted for practical advantages, this is without *de jure* negation (a giving up) of national sovereignty/culture. National identities, challenged as never before, find themselves preserved in strong new forms and enriched by the possibilities offered by those multiple Others in their midst. Rather than becoming impoverished shells of their former selves, the experience of international schools indicates that national cultures will experience a renaissance while simultaneously encouraging the significance of Others as new brothers and sisters.

This truly international view is best voiced by the thoughts of the student of an international school in Japan :

Victoria, British, 11th grade, in Japan for five years:

Being in an international school makes people a lot more open-minded, not only to cultures and nationality, but to everything. It makes you more ready to accept new ideas and things different from what you've ever known. But it also makes you question things a lot more, too.

International people are constantly changing, too. They will pick up some custom, and then a couple of years later they will drop it. People who do not travel around usually choose certain views and customs, then they

become very set in their ways, like old people. They do not add new ideas, and they cling to all their old ones. They don't like changes. International people are like gypsies. They have to move on from one place to the next, and see new things and encounter new ways of life. International people are the ones who really work for advances in everything for the good of the world, not just for the good of their own nation.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) At least six million adults from developed countries (according to conservative estimates) have already spent a significant part of their formative years in international schools.
- 2) Jonietz, 1991, p.3
- 3) A caveat is called for, however. When international education becomes only 'we are international because of our multinational clientele', or 'because we are in a foreign country', or when such education becomes merely the study of 'strange lands and friendly peoples,' a study of other countries, peoples, and cultures, an 'other than us' mentality is built directly into the spirit of the program. The differences between peoples then becomes, at least implicitly, a focus. Those 'not like us' are thus subtly judged as 'second-class citizens,' while we are 'the first-class citizens.' Not all international schools can be said to be moving in progressive directions, and some of them are following the kind of reactionary thinking ('the old colonialism') these phrases suggest. Yet the overall, irresistible trend towards thinking globally and acting locally ('the new internationalism') is a major consensus.
- 4) Thomas, 1974, pp.121.
- 5) Blackburn, 1991, p.24.
- 6) Jonietz, 1991, p.219.
- 7) Renaud, 1991; Sadler, 1991; and Bartlett, 1992.
- 8) Renaud, 1991, pp.8-9.
- 9) Hannerz, 1990, p.243

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