

## Book Review

# International Schools: Current Issues and Future Prospects

Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson, editors  
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In this edited collection, editors Hayden and Thompson note that while it is difficult to distil a clear definition of international schools, the broadest definition of the term includes “schools that are not national in their location, composition and focus” (p. 11). Many of the first international schools, according to contributor Tate, were founded in the wake of both world wars “to cater for the needs of an internationally mobile professional elite” (p. 19), providing education to the children of diplomats and employees of the League of Nations (and later, United Nations), World Bank, and multinational corporations. In his contribution, Waterson notes that these parents not only sought quality schooling for their children but also believed “enlightened education” was a “partial solution to the fractured world torn apart by two catastrophic world wars” (p. 186).

However, as the number of international schools proliferated since the 1960s, and especially since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the focus, characteristics, and student makeup of these schools has significantly diversified. As Walker notes in his chapter, in 2015 there were over 8,000 English-language international schools that enrolled over four million students. These numbers represent a doubling of schools and enrolments since 2000 and are expected to nearly double again by 2025. In consideration of this growth and of the shifting character of international schools, Hayden and Thompson offer a descriptive typology to refine their general definition: Type A, closest to the original type, catering to “globally mobile expatriates”; Type B, more ideologically focused schools (such as the well-known United World College); and Type C, which has most recently emerged with a more commercial focus and which recruit heavily from socially mobile host country nationals, rather than globally mobile expatriates (p. 13). These types reappear in relation to various dimensions of international schools throughout the subsequent chapters.

The first several chapters, by Tate, Walker, Stobie, Skelton, and Fabian, emphasize questions of curriculum, pedagogy, and learning in international schools. Tate refutes the idea of a universalized approach to international education and argues for contextual considerations in creating curriculum, while at the same time, he defends vigorously the centrality of liberal Enlightenment humanism in international schooling, which is a paradox that I return to later in this book review. In their chapters, both Skelton and Fabian emphasize that the goal of international learning is not to absorb standardized international content but rather to develop international mindedness (Fabian) and an international disposition (Skelton), in order to, as Skelton describes it, enable students to “become positively able to be with an *other*” (p. 80,

emphasis in the original), that is, to engage ethically with difference. Halicioglu also addresses curriculum in her contribution about international boarding schools, emphasizing the need to attend to students' physical and psychological well-being, not just their academic development. As well, she explores the ambivalent possibilities of having students from different backgrounds live together, which can either lead to important intercultural learning or reify discriminatory beliefs, depending how well schools facilitate learning and engagement across difference.

In their contribution, Fertig and James address how the shifting makeup of international schools affects school leaders and managers. In particular, they emphasize a central challenge for leaders and managers today: securing institutional legitimacy from external constituencies, "both as schools and also as *international schools*" (p. 106, emphasis in the original; see, for instance, Walker's contribution, centred on the question of what makes a curriculum truly international?). Legitimacy may be of particular concern for leaders and managers of the relatively new "Type C" institutions.

Writing about opening a new "world school," the Keystone Academy in Beijing, China, Booth, McKenzie, and Shanahan's chapter provides a valuable glimpse into the complex joys and challenges of merging Chinese and Western and local and global knowledges, values, and languages into one school, from the ground up. Richards offers an impassioned interlude chapter in protest of the deprofessionalization of international school teachers in the context of creeping performance management techniques and for-profit schools' search for brand uniformity. In the penultimate and final chapters, Waterson and Bunnell, respectively, take critical approaches to the growth and shifting political economy of international schools, examining the role of for-profit transnational corporations and raising insightful questions about long-term educational impacts.

Before I proceed any further, I should note that I am not a scholar of international schools, which encapsulate primary and secondary education, but rather a scholar of the internationalization of post-secondary education. Thus, I bring to this review my expertise around many similar theoretical and practical questions from a slightly different context. Like international schools, the international dimension of post-secondary institutions is not new, but there has been a marked growth of interest in it over the past few decades. Both the proliferation of international schools and the intensified internationalization of universities have much to do with transformations in the global political economy, including the expansion of middle classes in the Global South, which according to Gardner-McTaggart (2016), "are set to grow four to five fold by 2030; compared with a minimal rise in Europe and a steady regression in North America" (pp. 5-6). As several contributors to this volume note, much international school growth in the past decade and a half has been in response to increased demand for access to elite schooling by these burgeoning middle classes. Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ratio of international school students has shifted from 80% expatriates and 20% host country nationals to the reverse ratio of 20% expatriates and 80% host country nationals.

According to Walker, there are more international schools in China than anywhere else, with the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and India following close behind. Many of these schools are for-profit institutions. It is quite likely that many of the international students who eventually apply to Western universities for post-secondary education are graduates of these international schools. And, just as many have noted that international post-secondary students often pursue education abroad as a means of seeking competitive advantage (Fong, 2011; Waters, 2006), the families of international school enrolees who are host country nationals are often seeking to set their children apart from their domestic and global peers (see Stobie's contribution in this volume).

Though not solely focused on these shifts, many contributors are preoccupied by questions about what they mean for the future of international schools. In fact, several of the chapters rehearse similar debates over changing definitions and cite the same set of statistics about the growth and geographic makeup of the new schools. Some view newer and for-profit schools with concern, particularly around questions of their quality. Yet at times it can be difficult to disentangle questions of quality from those related to Eurocentric norms (Blanco Ramírez, 2014) or from concerns about competition and the possible dilution of the elite status and cosmopolitan reputation of older and non-profit schools.

It would perhaps be stating the obvious to note that most institutions in all three types of international school (i.e. A, B, and C) are rather resolutely Eurocentric and specifically, Anglocentric. To their credit, several of the contributors take up questions around the ethics of international education as it relates to local knowledge systems and students' own cultural differences (see chapters by Stobie, Halicioglu, and Booth, McKenzie, and Shanahan). In general, however, as Tate notes in his chapter, international schooling is deeply rooted in

a version of democratic liberalism derived from Enlightenment principles that has been unchallenged for so long that it has ceased to be seen for what it is, which is only one way of responding to the world and not how the world inevitably is. (p. 24)

However, Tate argues, having Eurocentric principles is “only a motive for self-criticism if one is unhappy” about it (p. 26). For Tate, these principles, such as individualism, rationalism, optimism, and universalism, are indeed the primary ones worth preserving. In fact, he argues, it is these very principles that affirm the freedom of expression in international schools. However, he suggests, differences of opinion must be voiced “courteously,” and somewhat tautologically, only need to be respected when they are deemed to be “worthy of respect” (pp. 25-26). This stance reproduces the familiar argument of liberal deliberative democracy theorists, such as Habermas, who generally fail to consider how power differentials significantly affect who decides whether a perspective is “worthy” and why (Kadlec & Friedman, 2007).

Questions about power inequities in the context of international schools are not limited to epistemological dimensions but also include political economic ones as well. Several contributors express concern that the for-profit orientation of many of the newer schools risks compromising their educational mission and/or misidentifies them as “international schools” at all, although most authors are careful to indicate that along with risks, there are many opportunities that come with this growth as well. There is, on the one hand, no doubt that the growing commercialization of schooling, international and otherwise, is a troubling global trend that threatens to compromise student learning and/or to reproduce or exacerbate national and transnational social and economic inequalities. Yet, concerns about these risks are not generally accompanied by analyses about how the previously hegemonic style of international education was also rooted in highly uneven social relations. In short, non-profit international schools have long been deeply entangled within global wealth and power inequalities and indeed, empire.

One of the more telling examples of the imperial entanglements of traditional international schools types comes from Fabian's chapter, in which she suggests that, as compared to national state schools, “international education, freed from political interests, can be, at its best, a source of aspiration and inspiration for students, for schools and for the world” (p. 85). On the next page, she notes, “People have always travelled to far-off lands to explore, govern, work or make money or all four” (p. 86), and international schools offer a means through which they can bring their

children. She indicates that in the early 1950s, her father turned down a post in Ghana working for Cadbury due to limited schooling options. While Fabian does not intend it as such, this anecdote illustrates the deeply political dimensions of international schooling: had there been an international school in Ghana then, Fabian would have attended it while her father worked for a corporation whose presence was rooted in Britain's colonial rule.

I make explicit this implicit imperial thread not to single out Fabian but rather to point to a noticeable absence of discussion about how both new and old international schools exist within a global political economy that differently shapes their ethical and educational possibilities. For instance, while the Keystone Academy's guiding principle of "learning from and for the world" is inspiring, what are the implications of the fact that the school is out of reach for most students in China? Several contributors reproduce the idea that international schools should prepare their graduates to "make the world a better place," but give little consideration as to why or whether students' elite educational backgrounds justify their global leadership. These concerns are not limited to a specific international school type, but as the landscape of international schooling shifts from what Bunnell describes as a largely "elite niche market" to an "elite mass one" (p. 223), there is a need to ask careful questions that open up larger and historicized conversations about the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts in which international schools operate.

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