

Staying behind – a challenge from the AIE conference

Terry Haywood looks at the opportunities and threats facing international education

During the October 2017 Alliance for International Education (AIE) conference in Amsterdam, Professor Marli Huijter presented a keynote speech challenging international educators to go beyond their established focus on innovation, mobility and a world that is driven by change, and to give more recognition to those who, in her words, '*stay behind*'. Prof Huijter is well-known for provoking her audiences to reflect on alternative and uncomfortable ideas. She was, after all, Thinker Laureate of the Netherlands as well as being a highly regarded philosopher with an interest in order and time in human affairs. The notion that an audience of successful, forward-looking internationally-transient professionals would follow her concerns for '*staying behind*' was an audacious one, yet her pitch continued to resonate throughout the conference. Those who *stay behind*, she claimed, can sometimes feel trapped and excluded from global trends, with lifestyles that are demeaned as being outside the socio-economic currents that are driving the world, yet their experience is anything but stable and their landscape is constantly evolving as newcomers bring novel lifestyle choices and cultural diversity to their geographical and psychological neighbourhoods. Significantly, they are beginning to want their voices to be heard.

I felt personally challenged by Prof Huijter. As if to emphasise her point, Microsoft had just decided to upgrade my Windows 10 Operating System without asking if I wanted to '*stay behind*' with the previous iteration, the implication being that 'moving on' is obligatory for my own well-being. But is it? I don't see anything essentially negative in 'staying behind' if this phrase implies a conscious choice; and it's a perfectly legitimate decision for someone to choose to 'stay' when others decide to 'move'. More disturbing, of course, is to be 'left behind'.

These ideas set up a train of thought about what is happening in our schools today and the pace of change in international schools. In the relentless expansion of our global impact, is everything going to be positive in the future of international schools? Or are there things we should consider '*staying behind*' for? Do we risk 'leaving behind' some of the things that we should be keeping with us? And, if we are looking ahead eagerly, what are the educational practices that we are happiest to 'leave behind' in our vision of an optimistic future? I don't expect that we will all agree on the answers to these questions, but that is the fun of debate. Are

there any of us who don't believe that it's beneficial to hear diverse perspectives? So in the style of Prof Huijter (although without claiming to be the Thinker Laureate of International Education), I propose to share a few personal insights about what I would leave behind, what I would stay behind for, and what I am afraid might really get left behind if we lose track of the inspirational ideas that got us where we are today.

The context for these thoughts is the astonishing era of expansion that international schools are living through today. From small and often fraught beginnings in niche markets for idealistic pioneers or transnational professionals, international education has become a success story of the globalized era. Demand for places shows no sign of faltering, with the growth charted by ISC Research showing a tripling of the number of schools over the past 15 years and a further doubling forecast in the next decade. From just 2,000 schools at the start of this century we can confidently expect that there will be over 17,000 in 2027. This is a wonderful period of opportunity – for educators, for service companies, for investors and for families fortunate enough to find and afford places for their children in our classrooms.

There is a lot for us to be happy about – but this is still a phase of transition. The future will not be simply a bigger and better version of the past. Some things will be different, for ever. Systems that evolved in a network that was small enough to be known as the international schools 'movement' have now consolidated and are on their way to becoming global corporations with structures that are less flexible and less open to input from grass roots. International schools were once dynamos of pedagogical innovation. They didn't get everything right, but they pioneered a multitude of novel approaches derived from the values of internationalism – and this is something I hope will not get left behind. Indeed, it's probably worth staying behind for if the trend will be towards innovation in curriculum and assessment driven by commercial organisations and not by the schools themselves.

The motivations that drive international education are also changing, as ideologically-driven schools are increasingly outnumbered by those that operate unashamedly for profit in a competitive market where shareholder returns might take priority over stakeholder benefits. There is also an evident tendency for school expansion to be driven by national and personal interest, with international mindedness

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and global citizenship interpreted as skill sets to enable the successful elite to gain admission to the most prestigious universities and the best-paid jobs. Even the way that schools evaluate their own success might be reduced to league tables based on quantitative testing and examination outcomes. Of course, these features have always been with us and they are in many ways inherent in how schools operate. But if the trends I have outlined are real, then it might be worth staying behind and seeking ways to ensure that the values of internationalism are not diluted to become mere cosmetic appendages to the institutional machinery.

Something that most definitely seems to have been left behind is the notion that international education is for everyone. It never was, you might say: international schools have always been elitist. But there have been moments of opportunity (which George Walker, once IB Director General, referred to as the ‘age of influence’) in which there might have been a coming together with the sharing of experiences and approaches across national/international lines. Not cultural colonisation – but genuine exchange. This moment seems to have evaporated as international schools thrive in their own domains with a sense of superiority that is necessary for them to attract families willing to invest in the expensive fees needed to keep them running and profitable. For those whose values in international learning were always founded on equity and inclusion, this is definitely something worth staying behind for. It’s a job that still needs to be tackled – and that is probably more important than ever.

If the future of international education is to be as dystopic in its success as I have suggested so far, then staying behind is a serious option. But wait a minute the future can be what we make it. Schools will still be staffed and led by passionate educators – there will still be learning goals that

incorporate values and attitudes, as well as parents who want their children to develop with an ethical framework as well as a cultural baggage and skill set that will enable them to find university places and jobs. And we thrive on diversity. Branding and kite-marking aside, the scale at which new schools are coming on the scene is creating a multitude of openings. Maybe the rate of innovation is slowing – but in absolute terms the opportunities for teachers to innovate will be greater because of all the new schools that need to have curriculum models developed for them. And just as the green economy will replace dirty engines with more ecologically compatible devices in our cars, most parents will still want their children to grow up with ethical principles and an awareness of global interconnectedness, so there will continue to be a place for idealistic and visionary educators.

This is certainly a fascinating time. International education has come a long way and it will have a dynamic and thriving, albeit uncertain, future. We don’t all have to accept the same role in the educational landscape that lies ahead. There will be places for those who accept the challenges provided in new schools that are appearing and in the organisations servicing our expanding sector. There will also be places for those who stay behind, perhaps to keep alive the principles of local innovation or to put down roots and strive to develop international minds in their localised context. Staying behind, as Prof Huijter suggested, can be an option – provided, of course, that we stay behind and are not left behind.

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