The elephant in the room?

James Hatch believes it’s time to lay to rest outdated and no-longer-digestible practices

In October 2019 I attended the Alliance for International Education (AIE) conference, hosted on this occasion by the International School of Geneva. If you care deeply about the mission, ethos and trajectory of international schools and international education, then this is the conference for you. Filled with people committed to the ideals of international education, it is a conference that both within and without vibrantly discusses the opportunities and challenges facing international education. At the heart of this year’s discussion was enabling social justice as a core international school value.

Demographic changes, increased competition and accreditation expectations ensured such a topic resonated and challenged all. From the group discussion to lunchroom chatter the conference vibrated with a cacophony of ideas. However, one of the most fascinating conversations took place daily at the lunch table and even during coffee breaks. It circled around the discord between international schools identifying justice as a cornerstone yet enabling and reinforcing inequality via teachers’ contracts.

Traditionally teachers have often been invisible players in international schools. The literature on them was sparse and, when available, it presented them as deliverers of curriculum and international mindedness. However, thanks to the work of researchers such as Tristan Bunnell, Margaret Halicioglu, Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson, a light has been shone into the precarious nature of the role of the international teacher; a precarity on the rise with the expansion of an unregulated field. The topic of teachers’ contracts is not new, but perhaps
the time is now right for a collective movement within international schools to align their stated missions with the lived lives of their faculty. As many will know, there are often three types of contract offered to teachers at international schools. For the sake of brevity these are summarised below in broad terms. By no means all forms and formats are included here, but academic literature and personal experience suggest them to be accurate.

Type 1 is offered to locals, who are locally trained teachers. These contracts include a salary which is often, but not always, on par with their international colleagues. Also included are holidays and medical coverage. Type 2 is for non-locals, who usually have a teaching certificate from their native governing body. Traditionally these were often the spouses of someone sent overseas by their employer. As such, they did not always receive all the benefits of Type 1 contracts as it was assumed their supporting spouse would carry medical insurance. Additionally, they may or may not have collected some of the benefits that Type 3 teachers receive. Type 3 is for overseas hired teachers. In the past, such teachers were hired at overseas recruiting fairs, although the recent trend has been to engage them via online interviews as the overseas fair is increasingly less utilised. Type 3 contracts may include the same package as Type 1, but also typically include a substantial housing allowance, a moving-in benefit and flights home either every year or every two years. It is not unheard of for a teacher who was hired locally to end their contract, fly to a fair, only to berehired on an overseas contract by the school from which they had just resigned.

On the one hand, this situation suggests that there is an economic, globalist agenda at play that exploits the local resources at a lower price than their similarly qualified international colleague. Moreover, as the latest report from ISC Research indicates, over 80% of teachers in international schools are female, thereby suggesting the potential for a historically grounded gender bias in the outdated practices of such schools. Recently, in some regions, it is being proposed that if a Type 3 teacher marries a local and purchases a dwelling they should lose their housing and flight home allowance. While I am not aware of such a proposal having been implemented, the suggestion is that of a colonialist and reflects a mindset that international schools should be leaders in eradicating. Clearly, such discrepancies do not place international schools in a positive light, and have largely gone undisputed as international schools often operate outside of local educational jurisdiction. This ‘do as I say, not as I do’ approach is at odds with the missions of the majority of international schools, which claim to be proponents of justice and equality. The need for consistency between stated mission and actual practice is of the utmost importance in the coming years, if international schools are to be considered legitimate.

However, all is not lost. I believe the time is here for us as a community to rally around what we know and believe to be ethical. The collective movement to define what is an international school, combined with a rapidly expanding demand for teachers, offers the potential to lay to rest outdated and no longer digestible practices. If we are indeed to live our missions, we must start with how we treat those we ask to embody them for our students and the local community. The elephant in the room is moving. If we truly view ourselves as a viable alternative to a globalist, instrumentalist and potentially exploitative marketplace, then the time is right to reconsider the choices we are currently making: to live our mission and create a better world for all, including those we employ.

Conrad Hughes’ opening remarks at the AIE conference in relation to the challenges Artificial Intelligence may pose to workforces is equally relevant to the current contract situations in international schools. Hughes stated that ‘it doesn’t have to be this way. We can choose to make a different decision’. I agree; we can choose to be better.

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