

No Excuses: From Following to Leading

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International schools have been around for over a century. Many were originally organized to provide a similar education to the one in the founders' home country. In later decades, the primary motivation shifted to the premise of an education based in the medium of English, in countries where children would otherwise study in the host country language. More recently, we have begun to define what we mean by calling our schools 'international'.

Throughout all these stages of development, we have looked somewhere outside of our own ranks to define what it means to be an effective school. While this may have made sense in the earlier stages, when most of our schools were attempting to simulate a national model, many of our schools are now at another stage in their evolution. Both morally and practically we should no longer hold our schools hostage to a standard set by cumbersome, often failing systems. Isn't it time we dropped all the excuses and start setting our own standards? And time to become leaders rather than followers in the advancement of the concept of international education and international schooling standards and practices?

All the right conditions

The moral obligation to become leaders rather than followers is firmly rooted in the reality of the conditions in our schools. Hands down over other schools around the world, we have all the conditions needed to be as effective as schools can be.

Our students are typically highly motivated. Our parents seek involvement (sometimes a liability but nonetheless one of the necessary conditions for effectiveness) and recognize their responsibility as partners. We have access to the most effective and inspirational teachers and leaders. Most of our schools have the money and the facilities, and, increasingly, opportunities for professional development. And we generally have an independent organizational framework which gives us a fair degree of autonomy to determine how our schools will operate.

No excuses

So how do we get away with making excuses for our schools not being the absolute most effective in the world amongst non-selective schools? Is it because in some cases we are the only game in town; or because "our kids" would learn from ANYONE. Some schools will argue that they ARE among the most effective, pointing to their IB and AP scores and their range of university acceptances. Congratulations to them.

Given that our schools around the world share so many of these optimum conditions, those schools need to help us understand the constellation of practices that leads to that kind of effectiveness. In the meantime, we have many schools making excuses. The list is long and often includes:

We cannot be more effective because:

- " 80% of our students speak English as a second (or third or fourth) language
- " Our families are from around the world and have such different expectations.
- " We have so many special needs students.
- " Our parents want our school to be just like the ones they just left, or what they remember from their own schooling.
- " We can't offer enough extra-curricular activities.
- " Many of our teaching staff have training which does not match the philosophy and ethos of the school.
- " We don't have enough money.

That list is, in fact, the REALITY of international schools. These are not exceptions, these are the norm for our schools and we have no business turning them into excuses for diminished

effectiveness.

Following questionable practices

Once we drop the excuses mentality, we can begin to examine the notion of leading rather than following in the pursuit of excellence in international education. While our families do seek familiarity and compatibility with their own national system or expectations, all parents seek best practice for their children. The oath we take regarding their children is not: 'We will meet all your expectations and offer your child educational practices that many schools use. It should be more like: 'We will offer your child the best educational practices currently available.'

Some of the practices we follow which are questionable, given what we know about learning are:

- " Creating curriculum based solely on subject disciplines, rather than problems or issues
- " Treating some areas of learning as 'natural talents' and others as capacities to be developed
- " Relying largely on traditional 'tests' (especially in secondary schools) as our primary form of assessment (and we do this because, "after all everyone needs to know how to take tests...")
- " Retaining the traditional, age-based, grade by grade organizational model
- " Creating an administrative structure based on tradition rather than on actual functions required in the school
- " Emphasizing and rewarding academic development far more than affective development, even though our mission statements claim otherwise

Where we are leading

To be fair, international schools have made some collective and some individual inroads into leading the march toward international education. Among these are: the International Baccalaureate programs; our regional associations framework which supports professional development; TIE itself which acts as a forum for the both news and commentary on international education, positions and schools; recruiting agencies which have responded to the need for outstanding teachers; a handful of doctoral programs which are beginning to pursue some research from international schools; and I would include the PTC in this list.

Where is the substance and where could we lead?

All of these initiatives support our international schools. But where are the substantial contributions to learning and the notion of 'international' versus something else? To begin to lead and contribute significantly to the critical body of practice in international education requires several conditions:

- " We accept that we enjoy most of the optimum conditions to be truly effective schools.
- " We move beyond the excuses mentality.
- " We see ourselves, for the purposes of impacting practice, as a collective entity rather than as individual schools.
- " We are unwilling to accept the status quo.
- " We feel a moral obligation to contribute to the collective development of our schools.

Given our more than a century of experience with schools that call them international, some of the opportunities to lead are:

- " Be bold about clearly articulating what we actually mean by providing an 'international' education, in substance rather than driven by who attends our schools.
- " Create a fuller array of curriculum models which emphasize and guarantee the learning so many of us claim in our mission statements.
- " Create common assessment schemes at a variety of learning levels which include affective learning goals.
- " Experiment with leadership models which are a better fit for the conditions in our schools

The message is simple. First we stop making excuses; second we confirm our moral obligation; and finally we select the opportunities that will make the greatest contribution to learning. A tough challenge, but if not us, then who?