

Chapter 2

Leadership Through Critical Incidents in International Schools: A Study From Across the Greater ASEAN Region

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ABSTRACT

Schools outside of an English-speaking nation and delivering a curriculum in English have seen a rapid rise in numbers globally, more than doubling in the past two decades. As international schools have an ever-growing footprint, it is understandable that many would face situations or incidents of a critical nature, such as student or staff accidental death. International school leaders (ISLs) habitually rely on experience and knowledge to deal with incidents. This study defines critical incidents and aims to understand their nature and challenge. Scant literature exists on the nature of critical incidents occurring across intercultural settings. School leaders are often working in isolation and need to deal with critical incidents in a culturally diverse environment. In an environment where local parents and owners are increasing, it is intended that the findings presented will support and help prepare international school leaders.

INTRODUCTION

International schools have been broadly defined by Bunnell (2020) as “schools with a global outlook located mainly outside an English-speaking country delivering a non-national curriculum at least partly in English” (p.2). Understanding what is meant by a critical incident in the context of international school leadership underpins this study. International school leaders (ISLs) are the principals, heads, and direc-

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tors, they are the figureheads, working directly with the owners and governors of international schools. International schools have seen a rapid rise in numbers globally since the turn of the century (Gaskell, 2019 & Bunnell, 2020). In the latter half of the twentieth century, international schools and their teachers had enjoyed relative anonymity from mass research, the schools themselves were frequently autonomous from governments and regulations (Fertig, 2007; James & Sheppard, 2014). Often isolated geographically from each other with limited contact through collegiate relationships, the schools would govern themselves based on their native country's culture and principles with a majority expatriate population and dealt with any incidents that might occur in a quiet and unspecified manner. Over the past twenty years, there has been a rise in the global middle class (Koo, 2016), a rapid expansion of international schools has been seen globally, particularly across the Middle East and Asia (Keeling, 2011; Machin, 2017). Schools have become very profitable, with the range and scope of international schools for parents to choose from having equally expanded. This expansion has relied on the global middle class. Consequently, the population dynamics of international schools has changed. Expatriates are no longer the dominant community culture within these schools, what was approximately 80% expatriate students to 20% local students has flipped. International school populations with over 80% or more being host nationals has become more normal (Gaskell, 2019). The teaching and leadership staff have not seen the same reversal and remain, in the mainstream, an expatriate majority (Budrow & Tarc, 2018; Bunnell, 2019; Bunnell & Atkinson, 2020). The rise in international schools has led to an increase in the number of teachers and leaders recruited. Many from their home countries or other continents (Budrow & Tarc, 2018; Robertson, 2018). This is seen especially across Asia and, in particular, the Greater ASEAN region (GAR). Across the recognised types of international schools, many have a disproportionate number of local, host country, families compared to expatriates (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). Often the expatriate families come from different countries and cultures to that of the staff and leadership. Another challenge for the leadership is the increasing observation of staff being hired locally. This observation, supported by Bernado & Malakolunthu (2013), adds another working cultural dimension. As international schools have an ever-growing footprint, it is understandable that many would face situations or incidents of a critical nature. Leadership may habitually rely on experience or knowledge to deal with incidents, often this experience is gained in another country with a different culture to that found in the GAR international schools.

As will be explained later, I have defined a critical incident as an unexpected or unforeseen situation. It may involve or lead to emotional trauma, severe injury, or the death of a student or staff member. Incidents may cause institutional embarrassment or reputational harm, leading to a decline in student numbers or temporary school closure. A literature review revealed gaps in understanding how school leaders may respond to critical incidents. Aspects of culture, leadership, management, and school organisation were all identified as areas for development in relation to critical incidents. Relevant research from across the ASEAN region is scarce. The study focussed on ways leadership in international schools can be supported at times of crisis. The pandemic of Covid-19, while indeed a critical incident, was not initially a part of this study. It was out of all schools' control and dealt with at a national level in all countries. As time went by, critical incidents involving Covid-19 did develop at the school level. As they impacted local communities in different ways, these became included. Incidents outside of typical day to day routines occur all the time, in all industries. Schools are no exception. Many have robust policies to support an appropriate response on such occasions. However, critical incidents arise from time to time where policies cannot be easily referred to. For school leaders, often, the incident is thought through in terms of prior knowledge or experience. The incident may well be from a different country or culture.

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