

Chapter 5

International Schools and the World: Divergent Realities, Uncomfortable Truths, and the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

The autonomous and franchised international schools' context tends towards starry eyed conscience marketing to supply a very real bottom line. Despite this, these schools live or die by authenticity and quality. Educators and their students are often deeply invested in the rising calamity of our time and demand real, cogent, and affective practice and policy from their schools. Any senior leader in this sector can easily struggle to locate their school in a 21st century reality of melting icecaps, species extinction, hyperbolic injustice and inequity, particularly balancing these facts with the consumer narratives of their customers. Educational leaders then are often faced with little more than the ubiquitous reproduction of privilege for a banal cosmopolitan class of individualist consumers, where school values act to sanctify personal inequity and school membership confers the absolution of the confessional. This work is notable for its critical engagement with a phenomenon of lapsed moral and epistemological rigour at a time when crises threaten humanity's ongoing existence.

WHERE VANITY MEETS IDEALISM

This contribution of this chapter lies in the intersection of international schools, global (climate) crisis, and critical scholarship. Its significance is afforded due to a problematisation of these disproportionately influential global schools and their claims of equipping students to be international leaders in a time of increasing global crises, where critical, intellectual leadership for positive planetary futures is at a premium.

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International Schools and the World

As the title of this chapter suggests, international schools might well have something to do with the world. After all, they teach international curricula, the origin, focus and aim of which is purposefully ‘non-national’. However, ‘the world’ can be interpreted in many ways, and while international schools claim a notional space of ‘worldliness’ for themselves, alone through their naming, the realities often diverge. Already in the early 2000’s, a very small proportion of scholars were beginning to look at the dualisms, or tensions in this sphere of schooling. These exist in all areas of human activity, and education is full of them. However, the particular realities and uncomfortable truths of the emerging field of international schools stand out due to the dissonance between self-image and social reality.

For example, Pearce (2013) considered that these schools were narcissistically self-absorbed in themselves, and so I am left with the image of Fragonard’s Flamingos as captured in Paris’ Zoo by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, secretary to August Rodin in ‘Flamingos’:

*In these Fragonard-like mirrorings
no more of their white and pink
is proffered than if a man
said of his mistress: “So soft
she was with sleep.” Then stepping up into the grass,
and standing, slightly turned, on pink stems,
blossoming together, as in a flowerbed,
they seduce themselves more seductively than
Phryne herself; and then, extending their necks,
burrow the paleness of their eyes into their own softness,
in which black and fruit-red lies hidden.
Immediately shrieks of jealousy go through the aviary;
but already, astonished, they have stretched themselves
and stride off one by one into the imaginary.
Rainer Maria Rilke ‘Die Flamingos’ in Galway (2000)*

I have stolen from you the joy of the original German text with the alliteration of ‘F’: ‘*verführen sie verführender als Phryne*’ (... they seduce themselves more seductively than Phryne herself), but the English translation conveys some of the key points I would like to make here regarding these establishments of non-national education:

*... so soft... with sleep,
... they seduce themselves,
... burrow the paleness of their eyes into their own softness,
... [fruit] lies hidden,
... stride off one by one into the imaginary.*

These discrete metaphors of indolence, vanity, self-absorption, transformational potential and imagination will be picked up as themes of analysis in the concluding sections, as the following makes clear by developing the poem into a stimulus. The poet Rilke’s Flamingos were observed in *Jardin des Plantes* (the Zoo in Paris) in a bygone era, by him - a European emigre - possessed of exquisite cultural capital. Allow me to unpack the connections to international schools as follows:

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