Chapter 8
Beyond "Interculturalspeak":
The Need for More Critical Approaches to Intercultural Understanding in International Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critiques the way in which the concept of intercultural understanding is conceived in many international schools. It takes the international baccalaureate (IB) as a case study of the dominant approach to intercultural understanding and analyses IB documents to identify five key problematic assumptions that underpin this approach. A broader contextualisation locates these assumptions within a liberal multiculturalist paradigm in which intercultural matters are approached in simplistic and acritical ways, an orientation characterised by Dervin as 'interculturalspeak'. The chapter then draws upon theories of Adrian Holliday to argue that such an approach is inadequate given the inequities and power asymmetries present in many international schools, as revealed by recent ethnographic studies. It is argued that international schools should adopt a more critical and reflexive approach to intercultural understanding in which students can engage with rich cultural complexities and challenge the inequitable power hierarchies related to culture(s) within their schools.

INTRODUCTION

On 10th July 1867, the Prince of Wales stood 'amidst the fluttering flags of different nations' (Stewart, 1972, p. 121) and declared the new building of the London College of the International Education Society open. This 'Victorian experiment in international education' (Bibby, 1956, p. 25) at Spring Grove would bring together students of different nationalities, believing that 'the educating together of children of different nations would be one of the best means of softening down many asperities which previously existed between the inhabitants of different countries, and of removing national prejudices…' (Barbier,

1863, p. 3). As such, the school's first cohort of 70 pupils included those from France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the United States, India, Brazil, Chile, and Nicaragua, as well as Britain (Stewart, 1972, p. 121). Charles Dickens (1864, p. 107) supported this vision of international education that would enable students 'to acquire thoroughly several modern languages, each being learned with others, among schoolfellows of all nations', resulting in 'the tolerance that comes of near acquaintance with different ways of thought… [a student who] prides himself on being a citizen of the world at large'.

Contrast this vision with the recollections of one alumnus of the Spring Grove school, Maurice Hewlitt (1913, p. 54), who 'saw only conflict and hostility in the class of different nationalities':

There were no traces in my time of the Brotherhood of Man about it...The raw Brazilians, Chilians, Nicaraguans and what not who were drawn from their native forests and plunged into the company of blockish Yorkshire lads, or sharp-faced London boys, were only scared into rebellion, and to demonstration after their manner. They used the knife sometimes - they hardly ever assimilated; and they taught us nothing that we were the better of knowing. (Hewlitt, 1913, p. 54)

These words – infused with bigotry, racism, and imperialism – complicate the utopian vision on which this school, sometimes claimed to be the first 'international school' (Sylvester, 2002), was founded.

Jump forward in time to present-day Singapore's United World College of South East Asia (UWCSEA), founded in 1971 as the second member of the UWC movement (UWCSEA, 2022a), in which recent events similarly complicate the school's utopian vision. The school, which offers the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), aims to 'make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future', and the development of 'intercultural understanding' is one of five competencies through which this mission is enacted (UWCSEA, 2022b). However, in 2020, a group of students and alumni from the Dover campus released a report, entitled #DoBetterDover, revealing 'discriminatory practices that have long been normalised' at the school (#DoBetterDover, 2020b, p. 1), including a survey in which 87 of 199 respondents 'mentioned experiencing or witnessing a racist incident' at the school (#DoBetterDover, 2020a, p. 1). Quotations from the survey responses were published on the social media website Instagram (uwcdobetter, 2020), including examples such as:

- 'My white friends have made fun of me for eating my own cultures food (east asian), and have made fun of people for eating food from other cultures (e.g. mexican food, Indian food)' (sic) (quote from a Grade 10 student, posted on Instagram).
- 'Not too sure why Asian accents are so heavily mocked. It's an accent. It's the way a place speaks. My cousin had moved from India and attended UWC but left at the end of the year he joined because he was bullied for his Indian accent so much' (anonymous quote posted on Instagram).
- 'Mom was assumed to be a domestic worker by other parents because she is Filipino' (quote from a Grade 10 student, posted on Instagram).
- 'I am Chinese and have already gotten use to people making jokes and mocking my accent, but I find it unacceptable when people make fun of my country. I am not a nationalist, but I do appreciate the culture and history of my country and when people make jokes about it, or the way we look, it is really sad and I am scared to stand up to them.' (anonymous quote posted on Instagram).

These examples of Spring Grove and UWCSEA illustrate a contradiction at the heart of international education that motivates this chapter: while apparently aiming to promote a utopian vision in which

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