

Commentary to Part III: Why Is “Being International” So Attractive? “Being International” as a Source of Legitimacy and Distinction

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A common theme across all the chapters in this section is the significant rise in the number of schools that aspire to “being international” in various ways and the increase in the demand for these schools across various parts of the world. However, the chapters also show that individuals and organisations conceive of and make use of the term “being international” in quite different ways. At one end of the spectrum, the case of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in Ecuador as discussed by Howard Prosser, the quality of “being international” is supposed to be extended across the whole school system. In the other cases discussed, “being international” applies to individual schools or particular groups in the context of school systems that still mostly operate within a national frame of reference—in terms of the end of school qualifications being prepared for, the social groups schooling is being provided for and so on.

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So, it appears that “being international” is a highly sought-after quality for a wide variety of different actors across many education systems. Why is “being international” so ubiquitously attractive? The chapters suggest that a purely functional explanation for this phenomenon in the sense of changing “needs” of the economy and—connected to this—the rise of a postulated “global middle class” (Ball and Nikita 2014)¹ does not capture the full story. Rather, the accounts presented in this section of the book suggest that “being international” by receiving or offering an “international” education has become a potential source of legitimacy (Waldow 2012) and distinction (Bourdieu 1979), both for individuals and for organisations such as schools, universities or even—as in the case of Ecuador—whole nation states.

Organisational legitimacy can be defined as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995: 574). Taking an institutionalist perspective, being perceived as legitimate by their environment is key to an organisation’s survival (Brunsson 1989; Meyer and Rowan 1977). The concept of legitimacy cannot just be applied to organisations but also to policy agendas and social structures; they, too, need to be legitimated as “desirable, proper, or appropriate” (Suchman 1995: 574).

The concept of “distinction” as developed by Bourdieu (1979) refers to the ways and mechanisms in which (privileged) social groups mark their differences, their “distinction”, from others. It is a relational concept, that is “[w]hat ‘distinction’ is, what ‘difference’ is, can [...] only be said in a relative way, in relation to others. [...] The dominant culture is always marked by a distance” (Bourdieu 2005, quoted according to Dazert 2017: 17). This marking of (socially meaningful) differences can occur in indirect and seemingly non-intentional ways, for example, through demonstrating certain cultural preferences, including preferences for certain types and forms of education (Dazert 2017: 46).

So why is “being international” a potential source of legitimacy and distinction to so many individuals and organisations across a range of contexts? An important reason seems to be that it is possible to connect “being international” to a range of important and quite diverse educational principles, “storylines” and intended outcomes. Bellmann and Waldow (2007) have argued that some current educational reform agendas such as “learner-centred education” or “school autonomy” are so successful² because they can tap into a number of widely different—sometimes

even contradictory—legitimate arguments at the same time, ranging from “education for human capital formation” on the one hand to various demands and programmes often associated with “progressive education” on the other. In this way, these reform agendas can garner support from a variety of different actors with different political and educational orientations. Thereby, they become hard to resist, precisely because the coalitions of actors supporting them are so diverse.

Similarly, “being” or “becoming international” is an aspiration behind which many different actors can unite and one that can be connected to a number of quite diverse, possibly even contradictory, educational agendas. “Being international” is seen as being critically connected to the needs of the “global knowledge economy” on the one hand and the production of “world citizens” on the other. Seemingly, international schools prepare for the needs and requirements of a globalised knowledge economy by producing the right kind of human capital. At the same time, these schools claim to produce “world citizens and international mindedness”, as Keßler and Krüger argue in their chapter. While the contributions in this section show that it is possible to combine these two arguments, their political connotations and origins are quite divergent, with the “knowledge economy”—argument coming more from a human capital-oriented “education for growth”—perspective and the “citizens of the world”—argument coming more from a left-liberal “progressive education”—position.

VAGUENESS AS AN ADVANTAGE

In this way, “being international” can be connected to widely divergent, even partly opposing educational agendas. The apparent ease with which “being international” connects different stances is further enhanced by the fact that the concept itself is sufficiently vague. Therefore, schools, pupils, parents and other actors can project different meanings onto this ideal—so it comes to mean quite different things in different circumstances.

“Being international” seems to share certain characteristics with other concepts about which there is a wide-ranging consensus in the field of education, such as “quality” or “fairness”. These are concepts whose importance in educational matters is no longer fundamentally called into question. Few would speak out against quality and fairness in education as principles to aim for, although different actors might have widely divergent positions on what “quality” or “fairness” actually mean and how they might be achieved. It is possible to argue for

various conceptions of “quality” and “fairness” in education; however, what has become very difficult (or at least what is done very rarely) is to dispute that the principles of “quality” and “fairness” in education are important.

To a certain extent, the same seems to be true for “being international”. The value of “being international” no longer has to be justified in each individual instance; it has seemingly become self-evident. On the contrary, an educational programme (i.e. school programme, curriculum etc.) that expressly claimed to not contain at least some element of “internationality” nowadays would arguably encounter questions about its value and legitimacy, at least in many Western democracies. It would appear from the literature that “being international” is even more important and expected in the field of higher education than in the K-12 education phase. Even small institutions of higher education, catering mainly to a local clientele, are eager to demonstrate their ties to the wider world in various ways (Altbach and Knight 2007; De Wit 1999; Knight 2011).

Despite the claim that concepts such as “quality”, “fairness” and “being international” are assumed to be inherently “good” principles which should be integrated into the development of educational programmes, there is one significant difference between the first two ideals and the latter. As emphasised in the chapter by Kotzyba et al., only certain forms of “being international” are deemed desirable (a phenomenon also discussed by Zymek 2009). For instance, a high number of “international” pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds are not viewed as increasing a school’s status, but on the contrary, are thought to decrease it. This is perhaps not surprising, as according to Bourdieu (2005) “‘being distinguished’ means ‘not being of the common people’—nothing else” (quoted according to Dazert 2017: 17).

Furthermore, since the whole purpose of processes which lead to “distinction” is to mark the social difference between those who possess it and those belonging to the *classes populaires* (Bourdieu 1979), any strategy that seeks to extend the state of “being international” to becoming a system-wide norm is likely to change its meaning and the ways it is pursued. Thus, in Ecuador, where the government plans to roll out the IB across the whole secondary system, simply studying for the IB will no longer be enough to distinguish oneself from others. Dominant social groups will in turn need to further diversify what “being international” might mean and how it is achieved.

CONCLUSION—“BEING INTERNATIONAL” AS RATIONALISING MYTH

To conclude, I have argued that the quality of “being international” is now commonly used as a source of legitimacy and distinction both by individuals and organisations. Apparently, demonstrating that a school, a curriculum or a graduate are “international” in some, often quite general way, seems to be an effective source of legitimacy and distinction. “Being international” is a concept particularly well suited to these purposes because it is relatively vague and therefore open to a range of interpretations. Partly because of this conceptual indeterminateness, it can be easily connected to a wide range of other educational concepts and desired outcomes and can therefore be agreed on as a goal by quite diverse coalitions of actors.

How can we theorise the attractiveness of “being international”? Sociological neoinstitutionalism offers some interesting points of departure, which unfortunately can only be sketched very briefly here. Neoinstitutionalist theorists of society and education have pointed to the importance of “rationalising and legitimating myths” for the shaping of models of reality (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Ramirez 2012). “Myths” in the neoinstitutionalist sense are not “falsehoods”, but “symbolic accounts that tell us who we are, providing us with a sense of entitivity and a perspective on the world around us” (Ramirez 2012: 429). In order to ensure their survival, organisations have to conform to the myths in their institutional environment, at least at the level of their “formal structure”; that is the way they present themselves to their environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Myths thereby shape the institutions in the institutional fields they dominate. Myths are acted out in ritualistic ways and tend to appear as self-evident to individual actors (Ramirez 2012). Seen in this light, it makes sense to ask whether the desirability of “being international” may have become one of these “rationalising and legitimating myths” surrounding and thereby shaping education.

NOTES

1. Hartmann (2016) has recently demonstrated that the “transnational capitalist class” as postulated, for instance, by Sklair (2001) is much smaller than often assumed, to the point that it is not clear if it really exists. This leads to the suspicion that the size of the “global middle class” (and as a consequence its impact on education) might likewise sometimes be overstated.
2. Successful in the sense of enjoying widespread support; whether these policies really achieve what they promise is quite a different matter.

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