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**Localizing to Internationalize:**

**An Inverse Approach to School Internationalization**

**Prologue**

On an Autumn weekend in early October, 2017, I spent 24 hours trying to find my way through a storm – that had devastated rail lines and disrupted air travel across Northern Germany – to present at the Alliance For International Education’s Bi-Annual Conference in Amsterdam.

This experience reminded me that no part of the world is immune to the epidemic of extreme weather. These sentiments served as a symbol and metaphor for the talk I gave at the conference, on which this paper is based.

**Times of Change**

A well-known example of hard-hitting educational winds might be Indonesia, where, in addition to requiring the word ‘international’ be removed from all of the nation’s self-proclaimed international schools, the government’s “Education and Culture Ministry has banned the teaching of English language to elementary school children” (International Schools Review 2017).

You may, however, be surprised to read that like rains have also begun to fall on international schools in Germany, perhaps nowhere more saliently than Berlin, a city with a unique political past and present.

Berlin International School’s recent journey is a unique case study and perhaps inspiration for other international-themed private schools facing pressure from local or national education ministries. Though the lessons learned may also serve as foreshadowing for a segment of our industry in changing times.

**Pressure to Localize**

After an unsuccessful bid to have a special status that allowed us to facilitate instruction primarily in English, Berlin International School was pressured by its local department of education to facilitate an increasing amount of instruction in German, particularly in, but not limited to, Grades 7 – 10.

We complied – because we had little choice. To retain financial aid and maintain a realistic fee-structure, authorization as a state supported private school was necessary. Moreover, without such recognition we would not be able to freely educate most host-nation children.

For many stakeholders, new and old, these developments came as a shock, and elicited concerns that students would no longer be adequately prepared for leaving exams offered in English at the end of Grades 10 (IGCSE[[1]](#footnote-1)) and 12 (IBDP[[2]](#footnote-2)).

The school was presented with what a member of the leadership team called, at the time, a “crisis.” These were divisive words, and, on the one hand, seemed to blow events out of proportion. However, on the other, the sense of loss felt by many students, parents, and long-time employees of the school was very real and this was amplified by the speed with which the school was expected to comply with the Berlin Department of Education’s mandate.

Loss can elicit a range of emotions, and as such, it needs to be managed. Before discussing the renewal and revision of our Mission, which was one of the strategies we used to manage the loss of our primarily English language instructional environment, a few words on why the inability to facilitate instruction in English may have elicited such strong feelings.

Lowe (2000) has suggested that “the attraction of international qualifications” like those offered by the IB and the University of Cambridge may, in part, be due to the perception that “they represent a quality of the educational experience” higher than the “locally available” alternative (p. 366).

This, coupled with Lowe’s (ibid) hypothesis that “International qualifications are valued by those taking them” because they seem to authenticate an “internationally acceptable standard of fluency in English… valued as the lingua franca of the globalised economy” (p. 375), presents a lens through which we might see international examinations and curricula provided in English as offering a perceived edge in what Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) have called the “global auction” for jobs (p. 6).

Resultantly, in the case of Berlin International School, it might be argued that the loss of a proportion of this edge, served to unsettle parent and student stakeholders, leading to uncertainty that affected the entire community’s view of itself as an educational provider.

**Managing the ‘Crisis’ - but Managing to Learn**

Thus, one of many responses to this “crisis” was to engage the community in a review and revision of our school Mission, one that had not been revised since 2006.

Our goals in this process were dichotomous: to celebrate – if not highlight – our nascent local identity as a state supported multilingual school, while simultaneously confirming to our community a commitment to international education.

What follows will be neither an in-depth comparison of our 2006 Mission and 2016 Missions or a discussion of the varied ways we engaged the community in a discourse. Rather, more importantly, it will highlight a number of the most potent leanings and results of the Mission rethinking process in order to illustrates, as the title of the paper suggests, how we went about ‘localizing’ as a response to directives we were given, to paradoxically emerge as a more broadly ‘international’ school.

One of our first leanings was that our 2006 Mission did not mention our commitment to the values of the IB[[3]](#footnote-3). Doing this, we felt, would offer assurances to our community that, in the first case, we were an IB Word School, and would continue to promote excellence in international education. However, we were also bold in inserting into the 2016 Mission reference to the Educational and Pedagogical Goals (*Bildungs- und Erziehungsziele*) of the State of Berlin.

A community already weary of localization initially met this idea with some surprise and healthy cynicism. Yet as the spirit of these educational goals was made more widely know to stakeholders, it became clear, as the CEO of our school’s parent foundation put it, “you can’t win the game [of internationalization] with one card,” nor – I would add – with one set of cards.

Two aspects of the Educational and Pedagogical Goals of Berlin will be used to illustrate this point. First, living and learning in Berlin means you will see and experience considerable openness within society, and hence students in local schools and our school are now encouraged to “develop their own perceptions of reality, sensibility, expression, and artistic awareness” in addition to learning to “deal with the media appropriately, critically and productively.” There is little in the IB ‘Learner Profile,’ by contrast, that takes such a pointed stand, nor is there specific mention, secondly, of an intent to “celebrate the equality of men and women and recognize the achievements of women in history, science, economy, technology, culture and society.”

While the ‘Learner Profile’ may be ‘international’ in that it is malleable to varied locales, we had begun to see the added valued of ensuring our students are also exposed to and understand the origins of local essences.

Anotherissue that emerged in the mission redrafting process was concern with the 2006 Mission’s statement: “To promote respect for the variety of cultures and for the culture of the host nation.” The review steering team questioned whether the positioning of a “variety of cultures” in the first place elevated pan-culturalism above local culture, thereby delegating local culture to a secondary position, and serving to devalue it. Consequently, this objective was removed and supplanted in the 2016 Mission with the desire to facilitate “an appreciation and respect of our shared humanity and diverse community.”

Following on from this, as dialogue with the community ensued there was debate about whether or not we had, in drafts of the 2016 Mission, clearly articulated an explicit school specific definition of ‘internationalism.’ Ultimately, we chose – quite deliberately – not to do so, fearing any such attempt might become cliché and reductionist. On the contrary, we opted for what we believed to be, in our evolving context, a more potent and functional equilibrium: “offering a curriculum that was local and global, ” cultivating “multilingualism with an emphasis on English and German,” and, among other things, deliberately stating a desire for a “strong emphasis on inquiry.”

What had this begun to teach us? Though the concepts of 'international mindedness' and 'international understanding' have dominated the last decades of *internationalizing* schools, if positioned above, or considered without reflection, on ‘local understanding’ and ‘local mindedness,’ they might become alienating and divisive rather than uniting and transcendent as they are often championed.

For me as a school head, these deleterious potentialities crystalized while listening to a local colleague explain the rise of rightest politics in Germany. Globalization, modernization, and connectivity’s promises, he argued, were causing many to feel that they had been left behind, with no role to play in the future.

The reworking of our Mission, therefore, could also be characterized as an opportunity to find harmony in a city, Berlin, and country, Germany where “private” education carries negative and elitist stigmas, leading private schools to call themselves “free” schools to avoid perceptions of exclusivity.

Resolutely, no part of the 2016 Mission would exemplify this reconciliation better than the specified desire to “Develop awareness of our individual and collective responsibility to live sustainably,” which, we later found to dovetail with the Berlin Department of Education’s goal of assessing “the impact of technical, legal, political, and economic developments, as well as to meet the growing demands of social change brought on by the internationalization of modern society.”

Thus, it might be fair to say we had begun to foster, not necessarily by our own choosing, but by practical design, a project of school redesign that was locally responsive and globally dexterous to where we had arrived in ‘time’ and ‘place.’ Nevertheless, to exemplify this blended agility in practice would, equally, require, as the 2016 Mission, states: “a shared partnership between students, families and the school.”

Partnerships can only be shaped by discourse. Henceforth, for a community aspiring to be multilingual, no conversation was more important to the Mission review process than discussions surrounding the appropriate translation into German of the 2016 Mission. For some involved, this represented the apex of the Mission rewriting activity, from which valuable local and international insights were gleaned, resulting in final ‘wordsmithing’ of both the English and German drafts, and achieving, in effect, greater shared understanding and commitment.

With this came a replenished consciousness:

**though we were ordered to *localize*, unexpectedly we may have emerged more robustly *international.***

**Varying and Changing Perceptions**

Even so, though a renewed Mission is now in place, we have not convinced our entire community that our current localized/international identity is sensible or practical. There remains considerable resentment of the Department of Education for what was perceived to be a political power play – forcing more German language instruction on our school. As one might imagine, a sense of loss lingers and a long journey lies ahead. Continued and creative discourse will be needed from subsequent leadership for the school to maintain commitment from all stakeholders.

This story, it is also important to point out, is only one perspective on a process that has been formative for many. Like most, my initial irritation was directed at local authorities, but with time, this too would be inverted. Although it is argued our school ‘localized’ to further ‘internationalize,’ my initial frustrations with what I perceived as parochialism in Berlin, would morph into disconcert with many of the perceived-to-be bright-lights of the ‘self-styled ‘international education movement – curriculum purveyors, accreditation agencies, professional development consortiums, and the like – that I had begun to see operating more akin to what Ball (1998) calls “‘policy entrepreneurs’” (p.123) marketing their know-how and promises and creating “a kind of cultural and political dependency which works to devalue or deny the feasibility of ‘local’ solutions” (ibid, p. 123) and action. This has ethical implications that we have only begun to come to terms with, and could, as Fertig (2007) has argued, be serving to replicate theoretically international solutions; in practice, conversely, this may be moving schools further away from discovering their unique and local “small cultures,” (Holliday 1999, p. 241) thus diluting, if not denying diversity.

Alas, this has led me to the acceptance and conviction that quite unwillingly at first, Berlin International School pioneered a path other schools are, for now, free to travel. Yet we might do well to heed Robert Browning’s words: “So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!”

‘Localization’ remains somewhat of a dirty word; ‘cross-branding’ (MacDonald 2006) and interdependency are increasingly characteristic of our industry; and entrepreneurial organizations of all types have become the harbingers to international school ‘legitimization’ (Bunnell, Fertig, and James 2015) collectively creating a sort of communal paralysis that may be clouding our ability to be our own best critical proponents – and thus acknowledge that ‘*Internationalization’* alone is no panacea.

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1. International General Certificate of Education [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. International Baccalaureate Diploma Program [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. International Baccalaureate [↑](#footnote-ref-3)