



“International Education” What’s in a Name?

International education signals very different ideas to different people. When it comes to your school, what will you have it mean?

BY WALTER C. PARKER

Not far from my home is a public elementary school that closed for a thorough remodeling and then re-opened amid fanfare with “international” in its new name and dual language immersion as its focus.

Several years later, the middle school nearby added “international” to its name, too, with “global perspective” as its focus.

Across town, a blighted city high school was divided into small schools, and one of them became a “global studies academy.” Two other city high schools have added the International Baccalaureate.

These are not unusual events. A new “international education” movement — actually a new wave of an old movement — is under way in schools across the country. This movement consists of newly internationalized public schools along with state coalitions for international education, an annual International Education Week co-sponsored by the U.S. Departments of State and Education, an array of language initiatives, the Goldman Sachs Foundation’s awards for ex-

emplary “international” schools, and more. Phrases like “the global economy,” “our increasingly interconnected world,” and “global citizens” are rolling off many tongues. Audiences hear these words and nod their heads knowingly. “International education” appears to be the new common sense.

Today’s wave is dominated by nationalism.

But what does it mean? What forms is it taking, and what work is it doing? I have peered into the current wave from three angles: observing a handful of public schools that have transformed themselves into “international” schools, interviewing movement activists who are helping to shape them, and examining government and foundation initiatives.

NATIONAL SECURITY

National security is the justification for the new international education movement. To those who assumed that world mindedness, global citizenship, intercultural understanding, or something of that sort was defining and directing the movement, this may

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come as a surprise. Today's wave is dominated by nationalism.

International education as a national security initiative has two key dimensions: economic and military. The economic way to secure the nation is to improve the nation's economic competitiveness with other nations — maintaining it or regaining it if it already has been lost. The military way is to strengthen the nation's armed forces, including its intelligence communities.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings makes the economic argument for international education. "Through the No Child Left Behind Act, we are committed to having every child in the United States learn and succeed in our global economy."¹ She links school reform directly to success in today's world and defines that success in economic terms; school reform is a technology for accomplishing that goal.

The link is also expressed in a burgeoning number of state reports. For example, according to *North Carolina in the World: Increasing Student Knowledge and Skills About the World*, "Improving international education is about providing students the best opportunity for success in the emerging workforce."² Similarly, the Asia Society's annual conference "brings together high-level delegates from two dozen states. . . to address a significant problem in American education: the wide gap between the growing economic and strategic importance of Asia and other world regions to the United States, and U.S. students' limited knowledge about the world outside our borders."³

In each of these, international education is intended to address the key problem posed by globalization: the defense of the nation's competitive edge in the new worldwide economy.⁴ Schools are *the* solution. Only schools can produce the "enterprising individuals" who will be successful in this flat new world.⁵ This is the calculus of neoliberalism (free-market fundamentalism), with its strategies of privatization, entrepreneurs, and free-trade agreements.⁶ Without it, America will lose its edge to Dublin, Beijing, or Bangalore; or if lost already, never regain it.

This is plainly put in the influential report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, urgently titled *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. This excerpt frames the problem (competition in a flat world) and the ur-

gency (impending loss of leadership) of finding a solution:

Thanks to globalization, driven by modern communications and other advances, workers in virtually every sector must now face competitors who live just a mouse-click away in Ireland, Finland, China, India, or dozens of other nations whose economies are growing. This has been aptly referred to as 'the Death of Distance.' . . . The committee is deeply concerned that the scientific and technological building blocks critical to our economic leadership are eroding at a time when many other nations are gathering strength. . . . Although many people assume that the United States will always be a world leader in science and technology, this may not continue to be the case inasmuch as great minds and ideas exist throughout the world. We fear the abruptness with which a lead in science and technology can be lost — and the difficulty of recovering a lead once lost, if indeed it can be regained at all.⁷

Gathering Storm then moves to solutions. The first among four is K-12 education: "Enlarge the pipeline

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of students who are prepared to enter college and graduate with a degree in science, engineering, or mathematics by increasing the number of students who pass AP (Advanced Placement) and IB (International Baccalaureate) science and mathematics courses."⁸

MILITARY SECURITY

The military dimension to the national security argument is framed as a communication problem: We don't know our new enemies' languages.

In 2003, Rep. Rush Holt (D-New Jersey) expressed this in the National Security Language Act: "We need to do more to make sure that America has the language professionals necessary to defend our national security. . . . Changing our (armed forces) recruiting methods alone will not solve the problem. To meet new security needs, we need to create a new domestic pool of foreign language experts and we can only do that by investing in the classroom. . . in foreign languages of critical need, such as Arabic, Persian, Korean, Pashto, and Chinese." Later came Congressional

Resolution No. 100 of 2005, which urged the U.S. to “establish an international education policy” that would “promote a world free of terrorism, further United States foreign policy and national security, and enhance [U.S.] leadership in the world.”

In 2006, President George W. Bush himself introduced the National Security Language Initiative, which would provide \$114 million for the “teaching of language for national security and global competitiveness.”⁹ In his speech, the President laid out a combined front for the “war on terror” composed of a language-proficient military and intelligence network, a language-proficient diplomatic corps that is able to “convince governments” in their own language, and a language-proficient American people who, all together, can participate with greater effect in “spreading freedom.”

So, at least two national security arguments are at play in the current international education movement. Both are urgent — one with economic threat, one with military threat — and they overlap.

SCHOOLS ARE BROKEN

The popular belief that the school system is broken also fuels the international education movement. It tirelessly broadcasts the claim that public schools are failing (miserably) to educate students for life in the new, flat world.

The national security and school failure discourses are connected. Consider this statement from Operation Public Education, a reform project geared to “transforming America’s schools” so as to respond to “the challenge of human capital development” in the intensely competitive “level playing field of the global economy.”¹⁰

Terrorism and the war in Iraq are high on the list of the nation’s concerns, but the greatest danger facing America is, as (former IBM chairman) Louis Gerstner recognized, the challenge of human capital development. Our nation’s public schools, the foundation for this effort, are still failing far too many of our children despite an investment of some \$500 billion annually.¹¹

The author, an advisor to the Secretary of Education, continues by reminding readers that “sadly, we’ve known about this threat for quite some time.” His reference point is the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, which claimed that the “mediocrity” of our schools was so profound that had it been imposed by “an unfriendly foreign power, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”¹²

This is an urgent crisis-and-salvation narrative.

The crisis story is that schools are failing miserably to educate students for the new world order. The salvation story is that only schools can rescue the nation. It is a simple formula: Schools caused the crisis and schools can solve it.

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There is no small amount of magical thinking in the claim that schools can save society, since schools themselves are embedded in society. Schools are not autonomous arenas outside the fray, steering society in this or that direction. They are more its caboose than its engine. Lawrence Cremin, the historian of American education, observed that this formula — he called it a “device” — has been used repeatedly across the nearly two centuries of our education system. This formula was used by proponents of vocational education in the early years of the 20th century, by the post-Sputnik proponents of math and science education in the 1950s, in the 1980s by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, and now, apparently, by

the international education movement. "To contend that problems of international competitiveness can be solved by educational reform," Cremin wrote, "especially educational reform defined solely as *school* reform, is not merely utopian and millennialist, it is at best a foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about competitiveness."¹³

MARGINAL VOICES

While national security and school failure may together dominate the movement, they don't push other meanings and programs off the curriculum planning table. Percolating at the edges and closer to the ground of school practice are other interpretations of both the problem and the solution. Among them, I found three. One, *global perspective*, gives international education a transnational cultural meaning; another, *cosmopolitanism*, gives it a transnational political meaning; and a third, *student body*, gives it a cultural meaning again, but in a decidedly student-centered way.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The first of these emerged in the 1960s during an earlier phase of excitement about international education. In 1965, Congress passed the International Education Act. In 1969, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare published an influential report that called for developing the capacity of students "to view the world system as a whole," to comprehend "the interrelatedness of the human species *qua* species," and to think in ways that are "free from the influence of ethnocentric perceptions."¹⁴

That wave's high-water mark came in 1978 with the publication of Robert Hanvey's *An Attainable Global Perspective*, which argued for a transition from "pre-global" to "global consciousness." That meant understanding that we live in an interconnected world and developing what Hanvey called "perspective consciousness." Hanvey suggested that students needed to learn about political, ecological, economic, and cultural connections by studying problems that cut across national boundaries. "Perspective consciousness" is "the awareness on the part of the individual that he or she has a view of the world that is not universally shared, that this view of the world has been and continues to be shaped by influences that often escape conscious detection, and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from one's own."¹⁵

The Reagan administration dealt a direct blow to

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this era of international education in the 1980s, a decade that saw fierce contests over the meaning of “international” and “global” in schools. A 1986 U.S.

The global perspective emphasizes knowledge, recognition, and respect for diverse cultures outside the U.S.

Department of Education report, *Blowing the Whistle on Global Education*, accused the movement of pacifism, anti-capitalism, and capitulation to foreign enemies.¹⁶

The global perspective today has shifted our expectations for multicultural education from emphasizing knowledge, recognition, and respect for diverse cultures within the U.S. to applying the same standards to cultures outside the U.S. The slogan “celebrate diversity” is taken out of the national container and extended to peoples everywhere. This approach is intended to tackle the cultural provincialism and exceptionalism of American society along with high school graduates’ slim knowledge of the world.

Here’s an example of how this discourse shows up in today’s movement. Teachers at one new public “international” middle school embrace “global perspective” as the school mission. On the school’s web site,

they display their objectives. Both perspective consciousness and the interconnectedness of the world system are evident:

1. Global Challenges: Examine and evaluate global issues, problems, and challenges (e.g., students understand that global issues and challenges are interrelated, complex, and changing, and that most issues have a global dimension).

2. Culture and World Areas: Study human differences and commonalities (e.g., students understand that members of different cultures view the world in different ways).

3. Global Connections: Analyze the connections between the U.S. and the world (e.g., students can describe how they are connected with the world historically, politically, economically, technologically, socially, linguistically, and ecologically).

COSMOPOLITANISM

Another argument for international education boldly shifts the territory to world citizenship and, in so doing, raises questions about allegiance and belonging.

In contrast to putting the nation first, cosmopolitanism puts humanity and Earth first. In a brief essay that has drawn wide attention, University of Chicago ethicist Martha Nussbaum proposes a cosmopolitan education for students in American schools. She wants to transform civic education so that children are taught not that they are, above all, citizens of the U.S. and stewards of its interests, but that “they are, above all, citizens of a world of human beings.”¹⁷

To identify oneself as a citizen of the world breaks the old habit of loyalty to a nation and being defined primarily or solely by local origins and membership. That frees us, she argues (quoting Seneca), to dwell instead “in two communities — the local community of our birth and the community of human argument and aspiration that ‘is truly great and truly common, in which we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our nation by the sun.’”¹⁸

If the global perspective approach to international education takes *cultural* education beyond the national container, cosmopolitanism does the same for *political* education. It tackles not only the problems of American provincialism and exceptionalism, but also *nationalism*. World citizenship, after all, is more a political than a cultural concept. In most states, students are required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance (to the nation, of course). The cosmopolitan school board member will ask why students aren’t pledging alle-

giance to the larger civic community: humanity. A school may express this by quietly dropping the morning national pledge; another by adding a second, cosmopolitan pledge; and another by stronger forms of global environmental education, teaching a course on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or introducing students to the International Red Cross curriculum on international humanitarian law.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BODY

A third marginal approach returns the meaning of international education to culture but, in contrast to the global perspective, focuses squarely on the cultural composition of the school's student body. Some public "international" high schools serving high-need students in resource-starved urban areas have created a form of international education built on the demographic tapestry of the student body. Immigrant students, many of them refugees, add a new kind of diversity to the schools' already diverse populations. School leaders creatively seize the opportunity and claim theirs are international schools because they have an international student body.

Culture fairs showcase students' home cultures. English language learning is advanced as a central mission of the school and is, in effect, reframed as international education. The stresses on such schools — financial, the discourse of school failure, institutional racism — contribute to this reframing. International education can be deployed to mobilize new resources and media attention and, as one parent activist told me, "to attract market share back to the public schools."

The main emphasis of the approach, as a district superintendent said, "is making students and teachers aware of the diversity within their midst and finding ways to help them value that and trace that to wherever it originated." He continued:

Being a magnet for so many different kids to come together seems to me to be an advantage. . . . You can't avoid it. The kids are going to experience it on the playground, they're going to experience it in the classroom, in the lunchroom, on the bus. They're going to see kids who are different from them. It becomes almost a way of living. Even though kids may never leave this city, the world has come to them.¹⁹

SOLUTION ON THE LOOSE

International education today is a broad movement containing a disparate mix of meanings and mo-

tives. It is being deployed to bolster the nation's economic and military defenses, to liberate multiculturalism from its national container, to promote world citizenship, and, in some urban schools, to take advantage of a vibrant immigrant population. These are a handful of the alternatives curriculum planners will encounter when they consider how to "internationalize" school programs. The first two add up to a national security discourse, which is backed by no less

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than the federal government, major foundations, the National Academies, and the popular belief that the school system is broken. The other three aim in different directions and are peripheral by virtue of lacking this kind of institutional power to advance their goals. I have painted these five only in the broadest strokes, and no doubt there are plenty more.

The multiple discourses at play under the name "international education," some powerful, some weak, provide a golden opportunity for educators to decide, state by state and locale by locale, how best to prepare children and youth for a changing world. They can spread out the alternatives, weigh them against one another, and determine which one or two, or some hybrid, shall stand as "international education."

Deeply held values are woven into each of the al-

ternatives, including conflicting understandings of patriotism and competing visions of what schools are for. Disagreement is inevitable. Voting against House Bill 266 in Utah, which would have provided more funding for the IB program in Utah's schools, Sen. Margaret Dayton said she is "opposed to the anti-American philosophy that's somehow woven into all the classes as they promote the U.N. agenda." Aligning herself with the first of the two national security discourses and against cosmopolitanism, she clarified: "I would like to have *American citizens* who know how to function in a global economy, not *global citizens*."²⁰ Sen. Dayton's antipathy to IB is in stark contrast to the National Academies' support for it, but *both* operate within the strong discourse of economic competitiveness.

Is "international education" anchored somewhere? The short answer, based on the window that I opened here, is "no." It would be a gross oversimplification to assert that international education today is nothing but a continuation of national defense education under a misleading name. It is partly and strongly that, to be sure, but more accurate is to portray the movement as plural and discordant. There are multiple meanings and practices underwritten by multiple ideologies, and there is plenty of hype. International education in U.S. schools today is a solution on the loose; international education solves a variety of problems, serves an array of masters, and expresses diverse and sometimes conflicting values. There is no coherence to the movement, only an illusion conjured by the common use of a name.

That nationalism plays a starring role really shouldn't surprise readers who, like me, were expecting the movement's centerpiece to be something different. As historians have made abundantly clear, public schools everywhere have regularly served national purposes.²¹ In a nation's early years, the school system typically is devoted to developing a national community unified by common beliefs and customs. Later, the system turns to reproducing these in subsequent generations and making adjustments that are deemed necessary. International education is caught up in this pattern. As economist Kenneth Boulding observed during the 1960s wave, the challenge is to

develop an image of the world system which is at the same time realistic and also not threatening to the folk cultures within which the school systems are embedded; for if educators do not find a palatable formula, the 'folk' will revolt and seek to divert formal education once again into traditional channels.²²

Only with some clarity about the various and at

times conflicting aims of so-called "international education" can educators make wise decisions. Examining these alternatives should provide a starting point.

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