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# Raising Student Achievement: The work of the Internationally Minded Teacher

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to introduce one principal's transference of experience from one school to an international setting. Although in the early phase, the discussion begins with a brief discourse on multicultural education and the nature of the international school setting. It then introduces a concise overview of a staff professional development outline that could be adapted by principals in various school settings.



## Introduction

After overseeing two strategic five-year plans at a large regional systemic Catholic primary school the author embarked upon an international principalship in a private K-12 school in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Dubai.

Having developed and implemented a professional learning model known as the Collaborative Teacher Learning Model (CTLM) to build teacher capacity to raise student achievement, the opportunity to further the author's professional learning presented itself. It also offers a logical pathway to explore the success of the model within an international setting.

The new school is in its infancy having been built in 2008. It's Candidate Pack<sup>1</sup> for recruitment for senior leadership offers insight into the purpose for building the school:

*...provides a healthy learning environment and a balanced curriculum that creates children who are well developed socially and academically, and able to become positive citizens within their own communities.*

*One of our core aims is to help each child understand their own culture and identity as well as those of others. We place strong emphasis on respect for the local culture and values. We encourage celebration of diversity and involvement with the community through international days and other events including world food day.*

*We encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning and to view this as a lifelong process. Our staff and children share our high standards and aspirations. Discipline, teamwork and taking pride in our achievements are qualities that our whole school community shares.*

*We provide a challenging bilingual curriculum in Arabic and English. Team working is important in the classroom, as is encouraging the children to develop enquiring minds.*

## International School Setting

While there is much interpretation on the distinction between national, multicultural and international education, this paper does not attempt to provide a definition of bilingual education. As an IB school, the implementation of the International Baccalaureate Organisation's document, "Learning in a language other than mother tongue in IB programmes", offers the school stance on this matter. Building educational experiences where students are not only learning about language but also learning through language provides a

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<sup>1</sup> PDF found on school website - [www.daralmarefa.ae](http://www.daralmarefa.ae)



greater depth to a student's ability to communicate understanding and meaning (International Baccalaureate 2008).

Across the world the implementation of a multicultural education program offered schools a platform to build awareness around a country's specific national identity. This view of multicultural education focused on providing understanding the culture of the people of the land. In doing so, through the establishment of school based programs like "English as a Second Language" or "Refugee Education Programs" or even the establishment of Centres for Cultural Understanding and Community Relations as set up in Dubai (see Sheik Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding<sup>2</sup>) the philosophy purports improved student acceptance and possible action will occur as they develop a deeper appreciation and respect for others.

This educational viewpoint focuses on the collective approach of gathering knowledge about a range on cultures predominately from the vantage point of a school having a significant majority of a single cultural background. However, with the increased rise in the international schooling system, where the demographic mix of nationalities is not only diverse but transient, the move from a multicultural education stance to that of an intercultural understanding offers a more dynamic approach to learning.

The underlying principle of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), initially constructed from the emerging international schooling scene, emphasizes the building of a specific learner profile. This profile leads students to be responsible global citizens where a commitment to peace, justice, understanding and co-operation are the consequences of the education system.

With a wealth of experience in the operation of culturally diverse school settings the IBO Mission statement outlines the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes that an international education program needs to develop to support the transient nature of the learner today. Its mission is to"

*"...develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. To this end the IBO works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment. These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right."*<sup>3</sup>

For schools, like Dar Al Marefa Private School in Dubai (the only bilingual IB school in the UAE), the implementation of a bilingual education program that underpins the educational philosophy for the establishment of the school centres on a number of key strategies. Building

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<sup>2</sup> Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding - <http://www.cultures.ae>

<sup>3</sup> International Baccalaureate Mission Statement - <http://www.ibo.org/mission>



an international mindedness approach and instilling the vision of globalization and internationalism, the learning program embeds the integration of core content via the immersion of real life examples from a variety of cultures to illustrate the concepts being taught.

Through the IB instructional framework, the open inquiry, centred on a central concept, engages the student through what Garner purports as multiple intelligences. Such openness offers students from differing cultural experiences the opportunity to enrich their learning by connecting their cultural backgrounds to the learning. Consequently the framework provides equity for all students regardless of ethnic background.

Although this commentary is contextualized within an IB school, the International School sector, in having a number of origins, has four distinctive characteristics:

1. **Curriculum:** National schools are required to follow the host country's curriculum requirements while the international school, depending on the host country's regulations, offers a wide assortment of curricula depending on the establishing body.
2. **Students:** Being an international school implies an international student demographic as opposed to the national culture.
3. **Staff:** Expatriate based staff dominate the recruitment program as schools seek "like minded" experience (ie IB school require IB trained staff)
4. **Governance:** Given the local perspective, the type of curriculum offered and student/staff populations there are distinctive issues for governance to support the leadership and management of the school.

However, there is a growing group of enterprises where 'national' schools are being established within the international domain with schools being established to provide the international education program to what is essentially a local school context. The reasons for the interest in such international programmes (like the IB<sup>4</sup>, the International Primary Curriculum<sup>5</sup>) are worthy of further research.

Such influences may include the need to raise the rigor of teaching and raise the achievement level of the students or even simply to provide an international perspective to the students growing up in a globalized world.

As interest in international educational standards grow and countries are being ranked (see PISA<sup>6</sup>, TIMSS<sup>7</sup>), monitoring and assessing the performance of schools has become 'big business' both within host nations and internationally.

### School Inspections in Dubai

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ibo.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.greatlearning.com/ipc/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/>



All educational institutions have some system of performance evaluation and Dubai, under the direction of the Dubai Education Council founded the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in 2006 to foster alignment across schools in Dubai. As a consequence the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau DSIB was established to develop a school inspection system.

In 2008 the DSIB completed 189 inspections of the 220 schools in Dubai. With a panel of inspectors comprising between two and seven inspectors, the team spend up to five days in the schools assessing the performance of the school. The compilation of the visits resulted in a rating system covering four distinct categories; unsatisfactory, acceptable, good and outstanding (Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau 2009).

Under the framework for monitoring and assessing school performance the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau focuses on seven key areas:

1. Student Attainment and Progress
2. Student Personal and Social Development
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Curriculum
5. Protecting and Supporting Students
6. Leadership Management, and the
7. School's Overall Performance (Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau 2013)

The building of Dar Al Marefa Private School coincides with the initial inspection process. Given the history of the school and the results of the DISB reports on school performance over the past six years, that the desire to embark on a school improvement program was discussed. With the appointment of a new principal the focus on improving teacher capacity is a key strategy to raising student achievement.

### **Implications for an International School Staff**

While there is diversity within the student population it is also true within the teaching population. Given the research (Preetika and Priti 2013) declaring the constant turn over of staff within international organisations of between 20-25 percent each year, the need for continuous induction of staff reveals a number of challenges for the principal and leadership team of the school.

Besides the lack of understanding by international staff on the culture of Dubai, and the language barrier of not being able to speak Arabic the impact upon student learning is presented in a number of layers. Given the author's initial introduction as a new Head of School within the international school setting, these layers are described as (but not limited to):

1. **Curriculum backgrounds:** Teachers working in the international scene originate from diverse curriculum backgrounds largely based on their own country experiences. Given such diversity there is a lack of skills and knowledge when first appointed. For example staff may lack IB experience when appointed to an IB school, or lack the knowledge of



- the British or American, etc curricula)
2. **Staff personal beliefs and values:** There maybe a myriad of reasons why teachers move away from their home country (ie to see the world, better remuneration, affiliation to a particular culture, etc) but each staff member brings their own repertoire of personal history and personality. These influence one's approach to teaching.
  3. **Disparity in Appointments:** There are two categories of recruitment in Dubai (ie. local hire and overseas hire). Salary and benefits vary between teachers and may seem inequitable causing tension between staff
  4. **Language Barriers:** Although international school staff are predominately English speaking the difficulty in communicating with non English speaking parents is a barrier for staff. Even within the staffroom the language barrier can inhibit the communication of meaning and intent when discussing school operations, curriculum delivery and school based issues.
  5. **Local Culture Customs:** Staff lack of cultural awareness and the implications for school decision making need careful consideration (eg the integration of Islamic studies and the nuances for timetabling to include the separation of boys and girls and arranging for movement around school).

An initial staff attitudinal survey administered during the first few weeks of the new principal's appointment offered some insight into the implications of an international staff at the school. Notwithstanding the discussion above a few inter-related matters add to the mix of challenges and are worthy of further exploration. For example:

1. **New to the 'local' culture and need time to adjust:** The start of the 2014/2015 academic year saw 20 new staff inducted into the school.
2. **Turnover of staff:** Being an IB World School the imperative for recruiting qualified IB staff with IB experiences and understanding is self explanatory (Lee, Hallinger et al. 2012).
3. **Growing school pains:** With an initial enrolment of 57 students in 2008 the need for staff to multitask and take on additional roles and responsibilities across school has seen some disparity in workload.
4. **Yearning for Stability and Consistency:** Staff are wanting reliability in decision making that supports rather than hinders their work.

One of the challenges in a school with frequently changing principals, is that the new principal has to deal with the previous model of functioning and may need to iron out inherited difficulties and problems (Preetika and Priti 2013). A unique characteristic of international schools seems to be their short durations. As far back as a study by Hawley (1994) highlighted the average tenure to be a meager 2.8 years. As with all averages there are a number of Heads of School that exceed the average, as there are Heads that have finished much "earlier" than expected (Hawley 1994). A significant consequence of a high turnover of leadership in schools is the challenge it provides for strategic and long term planning.



### **Developing a Professional Learning Plan**

One way forward is the support teachers, both new and current, receive through professional development. To this end the school has attempted to address some of the implications for staff around the barriers inherent in moving to a new culture.

The employment of Razi Education<sup>8</sup> over the previous two years has offered a cross-cultural teacher training program to help teachers acquire skills, which will assist them in understanding, respecting and appreciating cultural differences. The expectation of the program is to prepare them to teach in the school (ie cultural and linguistic diversity) and lead them to a successful integration into the school culture.

Through the appointment of the new principal, the next iteration of the partnership with Razi Education has seen a shift away from a specific focus on cultural relevance building for staff and is more in alignment with the Collaborative Teacher Learning Model (CTLTM) developed by the author (Lynch, Madden et al. 2014).

Given the many responsibilities of the school principal, one of the keys to sustained school improvement, is the attention the principal gives to building teacher capacity. It goes without saying that if teachers improve their performance the consequence follows with improved student achievement.

However, when developing the ability of teachers (and non teachers) to be more effective in their teaching practice it is in effect, embedded in the task of the school leader to create and foster the development of a learning culture within the school (Madden 2013). Ultimately the key goal of capacity building is for teachers to be more able to incorporate new skills and behaviours that will yield different and enhanced results in student achievement.

As argued elsewhere (Lynch 2012, Madden 2013, Madden and Smith 2013) establishing a new culture of teacher learning which is strategically focused on improving the “TEACH”ing capacity of the teacher is best placed within a collaborative model of learning. This being the case, a revised stance to teacher professional learning was discussed and an adjusted approach was designed. A brief overview is provided below.

### **Development of a targeted PD Program**

Given the previous two years of training the new focus is more on coaching rather than the rationale for the need to change teaching perspectives. Teachers are saturated with the theory of effective practice and teaching and learning in 21<sup>st</sup> century environments and the need to personalise and differentiate student learning. In recent years the educational sector is saturated with webinars, conferences, workshops, courses and the like educating the masses on the need for changed teaching practices to meet the needs of the learner growing up in the technological adaptive era. What teachers are calling for is the practicality of learning on the job (Fullan 2011).

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<sup>8</sup> razieducation.com



The first phase of the school's PD program was to bridge the gap between national students and the largely non-national staff. Implementing a cultural relevance program to help educate teachers was seen a critical step to building a culturally relevant pedagogy. While this is more than just representing a variety of cultures in the daily teaching and learning experiences, it offers guiding points to tailor teaching strategies to ensure success for all learners.

The next phase is more focussed on improving instructional capacities. The mantra of the new principal is outlined in three steps:

1. Collaborate and Align: The central purpose of this step is to build bridges between school operation and the professional development provider. Such a focus will ensure school co-ordinators and the external trainers work collegially to determine ways to enhance teacher performance. Success in any coaching and mentoring programs relies upon alignment between both parties.
2. Observe and Coach: Once the school co-ordinators and external trainers are aligned and are working side by side, the creation of a targeted observation and coaching framework provides the platform to engage teachers in the learning process. The fostering of an observation program that allows targeted coaching provides a 'hands on' approach to improving teacher performance. The key here is that the focus is on all teachers in the school from Kindergarten to Year Twelve.
3. Collaborate, Plan and Reflect: With the philosophy that the planning of a unit will help to guide the teaching practices in the classroom, this third step, coupled with ongoing workshops on the IB inquiry process, aims to guide teachers through the daily teaching regime. By careful and precise lesson planning and the sharing of daily planners, a subtle form of moderation takes place.

When setting up a targeted professional development plan with an external provider, some guiding questions were posed. Such questions guides the teacher learning process and enables the school to 'keep on track' amidst the daily hustle and bustle of school life. It provides a reference point to keep the plan on track.

1. What are the school's goals for the professional development program?
2. How will the school measure the success and effectiveness of the professional development?
3. How can the professional development provider support/reinforce the school's existing educational action plans?
4. How can the professional development program align with the school's training provided by the IB organisation?
5. Should the external trainers observation process feed into the school's formal performance appraisal system?



6. What processes need to be established to ensure relevant data is collected?
7. How will we measure impact, growth, and improvement?

Knowing that teachers tend to be more motivated when they have a goal to work toward these clear goals give teachers and the leadership team a common purpose and ensure that everyone is working in the same direction. Given the initial purpose of the professional development program, this next phase places teachers at the heart of the teaching and learning cycle.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, international schools were established to meet the needs of expatriates and government officials wanting their children to have the education as presented in their home countries. In recent times there is a newer phenomenon in which the desire is to foster a global outlook and to prepare students to live and work in a globalized world. This explains the growth in building new schools, like the author's new school, and using international curricula and frameworks, (like the International Baccalaureate) in many countries around the world.

However, the challenge for leaders in the international sector is to continue to meet the learning needs of educators. Notwithstanding such a task, the implementation of professional learning programs for teachers, as highlighted in this article, will provide much fuel for researchers in understanding the place of the international school in today's global world.



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