

International schools as ‘institutions’ and the issue of ‘legitimacy’

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There is no denying that the number of transnational spaces of education (Hayden, 2011) being classified as ‘International Schools’ has grown enormously over the past two decades (Brummitt, 2007; Brummit & Keeling, 2013). Delegates at the Alliance for International Education World Conference in Bangkok in February 2016 were informed that the host city now has over 100 ‘International Schools’, compared to having only a handful in the 1990s. This paper is based upon a presentation given at that conference. It has been reported (Gaskell, 2016: 24) that the past 16 years has seen a ‘staggering growth’ in the number of schools worldwide being classified as International Schools, and the ‘market continues to expand at pace.’ The size of this growth, and the underpinning demand for International Schools, were largely unforeseen (Hallgarten *et al*, 2015).

Alongside the huge growth in scale there have been other largely unforeseen changes. There have been major changes in the nature of operation of the field (Bunnell, 2014): most notably there have been major changes in the demographics (towards more schools catering for local children), geographical location (with Dubai emerging as new centre of operation), ownership (with most new schools operating for-profit) and mode of governance (with most schools not being accredited or authorized by established agencies).

This landscape can be contrasted with Jonietz’s (1991: 54) comment in the seminal 1991 *Yearbook* that the ‘biggest growth area is seen in the number of independent, community-based, English-language of instruction schools offering education to third culture students’. Furthermore, we have seen the growth of new forms of International Schools which differ markedly from previous normative forms. Hill (2016: 67) has recently explored the theme of ‘What is an International School?’ in this journal, where he states that the ‘concept of an International School becomes complex and confusing if we consider the range of manifestations it can have’. Hill, in exploring how the categorizations of International Schools has changed over the period

since the 1960s, shows how the normative model (*eg* Jonietz, 1991) has effectively broken-down over time.

Using a relatively new framework, we can view that the ‘traditional’ International School terrain of ‘Type A Traditional’ and ‘Type B Ideological’ schools is being reconfigured by the rapid growth of a ‘Type C Non-traditional’ type (Hayden and Thompson, 2013). A variant of this new form are the branded English private schools, termed ‘satellite colleges’ (Bunnell, 2008), being established in other countries. This is illustrated by the example of Repton School Dubai, a recently-established satellite college of Repton School, a fee-paying school in England founded in the 16th century.

With such growth in numbers and diversity, international schools become a matter of increasing interest. In particular, evidence indicates that the term ‘International’ is increasingly being used in various ways for different purposes, with some ‘International Schools’ using it in ways that have little veracity (Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015).

For example, a recent discussion about the sudden huge growth of the number of schools in Sri Lanka has stated that: ‘Since then, there has been a profusion of independent primary and secondary education institutions claiming to be “International Schools”’ (Wettewa, 2016: 67). This is not new comment, as such; even a decade ago, Jackson (2005: 22) had said: ‘We are all now aware that the title *International* is used by many schools without any real justification...’

Bringing in institutionalisation theory

With these developments and the rapid growth of International Schools, it is timely to ask: what is international about International Schools? and to analyse the legitimacy of International Schools as providers of an international education. Institutional legitimacy focuses on the sense that the actions of an entity of some kind in the social world are what is required, right and suitable in a way that is consistent with a system of socially-created customs, ideals, meaning and definitions (Suchman, 1995). It is a complex notion with a range of institutionalising forces contributing to it and establishing organisations as legitimate institutions (Scott, 2014).

Arguably, institutional legitimacy is crucial for the success and survival of International Schools, as it is for all schools. For International Schools, though, there is the added obligation to establish themselves legitimately as ‘International’. To refer to themselves as ‘International’ without underpinning that claim robustly would undermine their legitimacy. The institutional legitimacy of International Schools is also critically important for the students who attend them, for their well-being and

development, and the appropriateness of their education.

This legitimacy is also important for the growing cadre of teachers seeking to make working in International Schools their career-choice. Additionally, it is relevant to the notion of international education and what constitutes such a form of education. The legitimacy of a claim to be an 'International School' is also critically important to researchers in the field. Arguably, the quality of research into practice in a school that claims to be an 'International School' would be undermined if that claim is not legitimate.

This discussion forms the basis of work undertaken by ourselves, plus our colleague at the University of Bath, Chris James. Over the past year we have addressed the issue of the legitimacy of 'International Schools'. Our initial intention was to explore an analytical framework for the institutionalisation of 'International Schools' and to illustrate and develop that framework (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2015). We drew in particular on the work of American sociologist William Richard Scott on institutionalisation theory (Scott 2014), and the notion that institutions are social structures that 'provide stability and meaning to social life' (Scott 2014: 56). We took the stance that legitimacy is an important concept in distinguishing between an 'organisation' and an 'institution'. Many organisations are institutions, and they become so through institutionalisation.

Scott (2014) had argued that institutionalisation has three distinct elements: regulative; normative; and, cultural-cognitive. He refers to these elements as 'pillars' as they underpin and support institutionalisation. The regulative pillar of institutionalisation comprises those influences associated with rule setting, monitoring and sanctioning activities. The normative pillar of institutionalisation is those aspects that give prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory aspects to institutional life. It comprises values and norms.

The cultural-cognitive pillar of institutionalisation is centrally concerned with shared notions of the nature of reality and the shared sense-making schema that enable meaning-making and interpretation. The three pillars of institutionalisation are conveyed and communicated by means of 'carriers' (Jepperson, 1991), which are very wide-ranging. Scott (2014) identifies four types of carrier: symbolic systems; relational systems, activities, and artefacts (See Table 1).

Carriers of Institutionalisation	The Regulative Pillar	The Normative Pillar	The Cultural-Cognitive Pillar
Symbolic Systems	Rules, Laws	Values, Expectations Standards	Categories Typifications Schemas, Frames
Relational Systems	Governance systems Power Systems	Regimes Authority systems	Structural isomorphism Identities
Activities	Monitoring Sanctioning Disrupting	Roles, Jobs Routines, Habits, Repertoires of collective action	Predispositions Scripts
Artefacts	Objects complying with mandated specifications	Objects meeting conventions and standards	Objects possessing symbolic value

Table 1: The institutional pillars and carriers of institutionalisation (adapted from Scott, 2014).

Symbolic systems as carriers of institutionalisation

In relation to the regulative pillar, identified by Scott (2014), rules and laws are the carriers of institutionalisation. Thus ‘International Schools’ will be governed by the ‘law of the land’, by the requirements of any accreditation and inspection bodies and indeed by its own policies and codes of practice that relate to significant aspects of practice that require legal conformance, such as employment law. The core focus of the normative pillar is the values and norms of the institution, and carriers of this pillar include the values and principles that underpin practice (Scott 2014), the expected standards, prevailing customs and accepted patterns of appropriate practice.

In an ‘International School’ context, carriers would be evidenced in a school mission statement which seeks to identify the central values that underpin daily practice. Such a statement would perhaps refer to the centrality of ‘international mindedness’. Carriers of the cultural-cognitive pillar might include assumptions about pedagogical practice, such as a focus upon constructivism for those schools working within the International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes.

Relational systems as carriers of institutionalisation

In respect of the regulative pillar, relational systems as carriers include systems of institutional governance. For ‘International Schools’ the governance system is likely to vary according to the school’s location, the schools ownership and institutional governance arrangement,

for example, whether the school has a governing body and how it is constituted, the associations of which it is a member, such as the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) and the Northern European Council of International Schools (NECIS).

In an 'International School', arguably, although many of the norms would be enforceable managerially, conformance to many norms would depend on the standards and sense of professional obligation experienced by the members of staff. Carriers of the cultural-cognitive pillar relate to the extent to which the institution conforms to other similar institutions and has a broadly similar identity to other comparable institutions, which then informs and enables a shared sense-making of the experience of being part of the institution. Thus in an 'International School' legitimacy is gained through the nature and authority of systems that ensure proper conduct and the operation of those systems to ensure conformance to the norms of an 'International School'.

Activities as carriers of institutionalisation

Activities that carry the meaning of the regulative pillar include checking, authorising, or monitoring processes, and preventing inappropriate practice. In the context of 'International Schools', such activities would include school inspections and accrediting body monitoring visits. Carriers of the normative pillar include the practices of those holding particular organisational positions, such as the work of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) Co-ordinator who regularises organisational procedures, for example managing external examinations.

Carriers of the cultural-cognitive pillar relate to tendencies, inclinations and dominant modes and logics. In the context of an 'International School', these could be the Principal describing the international nature of the school's mission to parents of prospective students. They also relate to rehearsed and well-used practices learned over time, many of which are carried across schools as educators move between jobs.

Artefacts as carriers of institutionalisation

In the context of institutionalisation, artefacts are material objects which are discrete and are created by people under physical/cultural influences (Suchman 2003). Artefacts as conveyers of regulatory pillar of institutionalisation include objects that comply with legal/regulatory requirements, such as policy documents. Those artefacts that support the normative pillar would include setting out the schools mission statement and core values on the school website. Artefacts that carry the cultural-cognitive pillar are those objects which have some form of

emblematic or representational significance. They would include the display of International Baccalaureate Learner Profile posters and maps showing where students have lived; flags of various nations in schools and outside; multilingual noticeboards and 'Welcome to our school' signs in different – perhaps numerous – languages.

Having analysed these conceptual issues, we subsequently developed this framework (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016a; Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016b) to show how a school that has been authorised by the IB to offer the IBDP can be seen to hold legitimacy as an institution. We have developed Scott's (2004) framework to illustrate how a particular issue may be 'carried' across the three pillars. For example, the Regulative Pillar involves a ruling regarding 'IB World School' authorisation that teachers must attend regular IB professional development workshops. This is expensive, and disrupting, but has to be done to allow the school the authority to profit from its 'IB World School' status.

In turn, this leads to teachers offering a repertoire of collective action as they use the IB Learner Profile in their everyday teaching. This in turn creates a predisposition for teachers to actively engage in contact with each other, sharing ideas and materials among the Online Curriculum Centre (OCC), for instance. Put together, this framework offers a powerful model for isomorphism. Moreover, a school operating at all levels of this framework can be viewed legitimately as being an 'internationally-minded school' fully committed to the IB philosophy and mission.

Bringing in the notion of the 'primary task'

Our latest work (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016c) has begun to build on Scott's (2014) framework by introducing the concept of the 'institutional primary task' (Rice, 1958; and 1963). We argue that defining an institution's 'primary task' is crucial in establishing institutional legitimacy; it is the task it was intended to perform, and it must do it in order to survive. We bring the idea of the 'institutional primary task' into institutionalisation theory where it assumes a significant but previously unacknowledged and under-explored place and a key consideration in institutional legitimacy.

Despite its challenging nature, the notion of the primary task is a valuable heuristic device and is useful in organisational analysis (Miller & Rice, 1967). For a number of reasons, defining an institution's primary task can be difficult. Too narrow a definition may threaten the institution's survival; too broad in terms of the institution members' resources, and prioritising work on it will be difficult. Regardless of those difficulties, we argue that clarifying an institution's 'primary task' can be valuable in securing institutional legitimacy.

Within our analysis, the provision of an international curriculum has emerged as dominant and central; it is what an International School must do to be legitimate as an 'International School'. The provision of an international curriculum is therefore an International School's 'primary task', which, according to Lawrence (1977) is the 'formal' or 'official' task.

Concluding comments

To summarise the situation; the number of schools being classified or claiming to be 'International Schools' has grown enormously and will no doubt continue to do so. This growth, coupled with changes in the nature of operation and characteristics, calls into question the legitimacy of some of these organisations. We have in our recent work brought new theories and insights into the discussion (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2015; 2016a; 2016b; and 2016c).

We have used Scott's (2014) theory of institutionalisation to explore the institutionalisation of 'International Schools', to illustrate the process, to consider some challenges, and to develop new insights. In particular, we have shown that the IB authorisation process creates a robust isomorphic model of activity, legitimising any school's claim to be an 'IB World School'. It is also arguably the case that a teacher also becomes institutionalised: they become an 'IB Educator'. We have also introduced the notion of the 'institutional primary task' (Rice, 1958; and 1963), and have presented for discussion a model showing that the delivery of an international curriculum has a strong institutionalisation effect.

We believe the framework of the 'institutional primary task', institutionalising 'pillars' and 'carriers' could be of value in a range of ways. It could be used by the teachers in an International School as a heuristic device for reflecting on their (international) educational practices and how they might be improved. For a teacher considering joining a school describing itself as an 'International School', the framework could be of value in checking the extent to which the school is indeed 'International'. The framework could be developed into an instrument for auditing schools and their 'International' nature.

This kind of auditing and assessment might also help to prevent the dilution of and damage to the International School brand referred to by Hallgarten *et al*, (2015). For those researching in International Schools, the framework would be of value in providing analytical clarity for establishing the context of their research. It could also be of value in charting the growth of International Schools worldwide. We consider there is considerable potential here for further exploration and analysis and we invite other researchers to engage in that research.

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