

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

Between localization and internationalization: how does the global international school industry establish legitimacy?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1q0365hg>

Journal

Globalisation Societies and Education, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)

ISSN

1476-7724

Authors

Wu, Shiqi

Wang, Yiping

Publication Date

2026

DOI

10.1080/14767724.2025.2605259

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



Between localization and internationalization: how does the global international school industry establish legitimacy?

Shiqi Wu & Yiping Wang

To cite this article: Shiqi Wu & Yiping Wang (12 Jan 2026): Between localization and internationalization: how does the global international school industry establish legitimacy?, Globalisation, Societies and Education, DOI: [10.1080/14767724.2025.2605259](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2605259)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2605259>



Published online: 12 Jan 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 64



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Between localization and internationalization: how does the global international school industry establish legitimacy?

Shiqi Wu and Yiping Wang

Department of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

With shifting customer demographics, the global international school industry faces the legitimacy dilemma of attracting potential customers from local while maintaining its international identity. Drawing on institutional theory, 30 international schools in Shanghai, Geneva, and New York are selected as cases to identify common marketing strategies adopted by schools from the industry when navigating the legitimacy dilemma. This study found that international schools position themselves as elite institutions to meet local aspirations for social mobility and emphasise their international characteristics, such as multilingual curricula, diverse student backgrounds, to maintain their international identity. Findings advance understanding of international schools' role in reinforcing social inequalities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 March 2025

Accepted 7 December 2025

KEYWORDS

International school;
Globalisation;
Institutionalisation;
Marketisation

Introduction

Neoliberal globalisation, defined as limited state autonomy and promoting the free market (Robertson 2008), has facilitated the marketisation of education by prioritising efficiency, competition, and profit. As a part of the educational ecosystem, international schools, as international education providers, have increasingly expanded and commercialised, becoming a lucrative business (Altbach and Knight 2007; Cambridge 2002; Hayden and Thompson 1995). As of 2024, the international school market is a 64 billion USD industry with around 14,000 schools, 7 million students, and 650,000 teachers (ISC Research 2024). Among the vast expansion, the new privately-owned and profit-oriented international schools (Bunnell, Fertig, and James 2016) became the mainstream, holding more than 80% of the market share and continuing to grow (ISC Research 2024). With the fast-paced expansion, some scholars (Bunnell 2016; Cambridge 2002) pointed out that international schools have become globally institutionalised, leading to the formation of a highly homogeneous industry.

The hallmark of the contemporary international school industry is its significant market transition alongside shifts in customer demographics (customer refers to parents who pay for their children's education and thereby bring revenue to international schools). Traditional international schools, which originated in the early twentieth century after World War I, were often regarded as the mainstream model and met the educational needs of expatriate families, including globally mobile diplomats and business professionals. However, there has been a noticeable shift over the past few decades. Rather than targeting globally mobile families, contemporary international schools have shifted to targeting more local middle-class families with social economic advantages as their new 'customers' seeking the best education and services for their children (Bunnell 2022; Hayden and Thompson 2013).

While the transition has brought an increase in student enrolment and in school revenue to ensure the survival of international schools, it has also led to a legitimate dilemma for them – how to align with local market demands and respond to the needs of local customers while keeping their international nature (Hayden and Thompson 1997; Hollis 2023). As traditional international schools naturally legitimize themselves as ‘international’ by advocating their provision of education to diverse student populations from globally mobile families, contemporary non-traditional international schools have lost this important source of legitimacy when localising and attracting local customers who are relatively homogenous. To understand how international schools address the legitimacy dilemma while localising, this research first examines the common strategies used by international schools to promote themselves by considering three aspects of their institutional environment – regulatory constraints, social norms, and cultural beliefs. Then, this study examined how these strategies are applied to solve their legitimacy dilemma.

Literature review

To date, the academic discourse remains unsettled in defining international schools. Scholars define and categorise international schools based on the founder (Sanderson 1981), the catalysts for the establishment (Matthews 1988), the provision of international curricula (Hayden and Thompson 1995; Hill 2001), the demographics of students’ demographics (Bunnell 2005; Hayden, Rancic, and Thompson 2000), and the ethos of the schools (Matthews 1988). In this article, due to our focus on the whole international education industry, we adopt a broad definition of international school. We define international schools as K-12 educational institutions that offer international curricula and diverse learning experiences designed to serve global mobile families as well as the increasingly aspirational local middle class.

Although the definition and classification of international schools is controversial, most scholars (Heyward 2002; Hill 2001; Walker 2000) agree that the origin of international schools began with the establishment of two international schools after the First World War – the International School of Geneva and Yokohama International School. They both cater to the children of globally mobile professionals, usually expatriate diplomats and employees of transnational corporations. International schools of this period, always referred to as ‘traditional type’ or ‘ideal type’ (Leach 1969), are not profit-oriented and are usually funded privately by fees paid by parents. In addition to the traditional type, a second type of international school is called ‘ideological type’, the purpose of which is to advocate for idealistic values such as peacebuilding and understanding. For instance, United World Colleges was founded for promoting intercultural understanding rather than responding to the market needs (Hayden and Thompson 2016).

However, the landscape of international schools has significantly changed after the Second World War. The change is reflected in the emergence of a new type of international school, known as the non-traditional type (Hayden and Thompson 2013). Non-traditional types of international schools are characterised by being privately owned and profit-based. Unlike the first two types, private actors established this type of international school following market logic and focusing on economic returns. The target customers turn out to be the local families, especially the growing aspirational middle class (Brummitt and Keeling 2013; Hayden and Thompson 2013; Poole 2018), who demand alternative education options for their children. As a result, the international education industry experienced rapid market expansion (Bunnell 2022). In 2015, there were 10,255 international schools, and by January 2025, the number had increased to 14,833 worldwide with 7.4 million students enrolled (ISC Research 2025). Some established and prestigious international schools, such as Dulwich College and Harrow School in England, seek their expansion in the global market by opening satellites in Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Hayden and Thompson 2016).

With the growing number and intensified competition for market share among international schools, scholars have turned their attention to identifying the strategies that international schools adopt to promote themselves, attract potential customers, and expand their market share. The

literature suggests that international schools, in their marketisation efforts, generally promote themselves along two dimensions – international and local.

The international dimension includes efforts to promote the provision of international curricula that can grant students highly valued credentials (Cambridge and Thompson 2004; Heyward 2002). For example, many international schools promote that they adopt the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), as it is considered a high-quality and rigorous curriculum that can make students more competitive in college admission (Dvir et al. 2017; Badu and Mahajan 2021; Wright and Lee 2019). In addition to providing international curricula, other strategies under the international dimension include promoting bilingual education, especially by using English as one of the instructional languages (Hayden, Rancic, and Thompson 2000; Machin 2017) and promoting the diversity of the student and teacher body (Hayden, Rancic, and Thompson 2000).

In parallel with the international dimension, international schools also promote their role in meeting local educational needs. Studies in this body of literature usually focus on a specific region. For example, Bunnell (2015) studied the international schools in China and found that the international schools promote a dual-culturalism, aiming to create citizens who are influenced by both Western and Eastern values. Badu and Mahajan (2021), by examining international schools in India, found that the cultural practices and resources in the school operated within a forward caste-Hindu ethos to cultivate ‘appropriate Indian’, which matches the demands of elite Indian parents. We found that the local dimension mainly involves efforts to portray themselves as schools offering elite education that students in other local schools cannot access, and that meets the needs of middle-class families for better education services (Dvir et al. 2017; Hughes 2021; Resnik 2012; Sunyol 2019). In much of the literature, elite education is framed as a practice aimed at cultivating global citizens. Scholars found that international schools always promote their cultivation of global citizens by emphasising their incorporation of global ideologies (Bailey and Cooker 2019; Bunnell 2008; 2019; Poonoosamy 2016) and their capacity to prepare students for engagement in a global economy and facilitate students’ global mobility (Bunnell 2019). However, the current literature is vague regarding what is meant by ‘local’. In some literature, ‘local’ refers to the entire country, particularly when the country is relatively small and demographically homogeneous. In contrast, in others, it refers to the city where the international school is located or a particular area of that city, which is common when the country is large and demographically diverse.

The promotional strategies outlined above demonstrated how individual international schools or schools in specific regions position themselves in the market competition. Some scholars also found that international schools around the globe have converged and institutionalized into a homogenous industry, adopting same or similar competitive strategies across contexts (Bunnell 2014; 2019; Cambridge and Thompson 2004; Hayden and Thompson 2013; MacDonald 2006). However, our understanding of how international schools, as an institution, attract potential customers and legitimize themselves to retain their international identity is still limited. In doing so, this paper will aim to fill in the research gap with two research questions: What are the common strategies adopted by international schools to promote themselves and the education they provide? How do international schools use these common strategies to address their legitimacy dilemma?

Theoretical framework

This study draws perspectives from new institutional theory. Specifically, we draw from the three pillars of institutionalisation proposed by Richard Scott (2014) to identify the common strategies international schools use to promote themselves and attract customers.

New institutional theory answers how institutions, defined as established laws, practices, and customs (Scott 2014), shape and maintain organisational behaviour over time. It focuses on the connection between organisations and macro forces in their environment, rather than focusing on specific actors in the immediate external environment. According to this theory, institutionalisation refers to ‘the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a

rulelike status in social thought and action' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 341). As the outcome of institutionalisation, institutions are social structures that 'provide stabilities and meaning to social life' (Scott 2014, 56). Meyer and Rowan (1977) use 'legitimacy' to explain how individual organisations obtain stability and ensure their survival by adopting specific organisational practices from their institutional environment and legitimize their existence. They found that organisations often gain legitimacy through ceremonial conformity, an activity in which they use visible symbols to demonstrate their alignment with institutional norms and to allow external societal actors to believe they are accepted members of an institution (Parsons 1956).

Scott's institutionalisation theory, constituted by three pillars, provides a structured way to understand how institutions shape organisational behaviours and practices and how organisations confirm institutions to gain legitimacy in social contexts. We apply this theory to the present study. The International school industry, as mentioned in the previous sections, has become an institution whose laws, practices, and customs have been established and maintained. To ensure their survival and gain legitimacy, international schools confirm these established laws, practices, and customs. By applying the three pillars of institutionalisation proposed by Scott, this study can identify the common strategies international schools use to promote their education to targeted customers in the local markets and then examine how they adopt these strategies to address the legitimacy dilemma.

Pillar one: regulative pillar

The regulative pillar of institutionalisation refers to the institutional power coming from formal rules, laws, and regulations usually established by government bodies. It emphasises compliance, which is enforced through potential sanctions, rewards, or punishments. Organisations obey these established regulations to gain legitimacy by legally justifying and validating their existence and associated behaviour.

In our study, the regulative pillar is illustrated in the compliance with formal rules, laws, and regulations issued by the government, accreditation organisations, and themselves. They can be regulated by the law of the land (such as requiring visas for enrolled students), by the requirements of accreditation organisations, and by the formal policies and codes of conduct formulated by international schools themselves to regulate their behaviour and practices (Bunnell, Fertig, and James 2016). For example, some international schools were required by the government of the host country to incorporate the national curriculum into their curriculum structure.

Pillar two: normative pillar

The normative pillar of institutionalisation refers to the prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory impacts on organisational behaviour. The pillar consists of values and norms: 'Values are conceptions of the preferred or the desirable together with the construction of standards to which existing structures or behaviours can be compared and assessed. Norms specify how things should be done; they define legitimate means to pursue valued ends' (Scott 2014, 64). Compared to the regulative system, the normative pillar constraints organisations in a softer way by imposing social expectations and moral responsibilities. It forces organisations to think about their position in a specific social situation: what are the most appropriate actions to take? By confirming these social obligations and behaving appropriately, organisations gain legitimacy.

In our study, the normative pillar is manifested in the behaviour and actions taken by international schools to align with norms and values that incorporate social expectations. It may include adopting popular pedagogies, providing individualised services, or facilitating students' civic engagement. For example, international schools may adopt several popular pedagogies, such as project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and the flipped classroom, because these pedagogies are regarded as 'appropriate' for an international school in the international school industry.

Pillar three: cultural-cognitive pillar

The cultural cognitive pillar of institutionalisation refers to the influence arising from shared beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions. In the cultural-cognitive system, ‘compliance occurs in many circumstances because other types of behavior are inconceivable; routines are followed because they are taken for granted as ‘the way we do these things’’ (Scott 2014, 68). Compared to the legal enforcement of the regulative pillar and the social obligation of the normative pillar, the cultural-cognitive pillar operates at a deeper, unconscious level, reflecting the power of taken-for-granted common beliefs and logics of actions in legitimising institutional behaviour. Scott suggests that the primary reason for organisations’ conformities lies in orthodoxy, meaning the perceived correctness and soundness of an idea’s underlying behaviour. Thus, organisations gain legitimacy by acting according to common beliefs and a shared logic of actions that are comprehensible, recognisable, and culturally supported.

In our study, the cultural-cognitive pillar is reflected in the common beliefs and logics of actions embedded in the international school industry. It includes the elements that make the school an international school in the international school industry, such as diversity among students and teachers, the provision of international curricula, and bilingual education. The identification of these elements was fully guided by prior research. When they consistently recognise specific elements as common beliefs in the international school industry, we classify them into this pillar. For example, the diverse environment that an international school can provide (directly reflected in the multicultural background or nationalities among students and teachers) is usually seen as a taken-for-granted element because it could effectively help international schools legitimize their education, which aims to help students develop diverse perspectives and become global citizens in the future.

Methodology

The study aims to identify the common strategies used by international schools in the institutionalised international school industry, as well as understand how they address the legitimacy dilemma by using these strategies. To this end, we have selected thirty international schools from Shanghai, Geneva, and New York as our cases. These cities were chosen because the international school industry is booming and prosperous in these locations, yet they have very different socioeconomic contexts. The data for this study were collected from the official websites of thirty international schools in three cities. Ten international schools were selected from each city (see Appendix A for the full list). The selection of thirty international schools was based on the consideration of representativeness and data availability. We refer to the comprehensive ranking of international schools in three cities given by three organisations, International Schools Database, International School Search, and Expat Arrives. We believe that thirty international schools in three sociocultural distinct cities can ensure the global international school industry is represented and that the common strategies identified in this study can reflect the common behaviours and practices in the whole industry.

Moreover, we selected these international schools with careful consideration of data availability. We excluded some international schools that lacked relevant content or had minimal content available on their websites. Specifically, this study collected data from the ‘about’ section on the official websites of these international schools, including their history, mission, vision, values, philosophy, welcome letters from the head of the school, etc. There are two reasons we chose schools’ websites as the data source. First, the ‘about’ section, usually the first page appearing on a school website, is intentionally written and strategically presented. Drawing on neo-institutionalism, we argue that textual data from international websites can be seen as visible symbols that show how they would like to be perceived, the values they would like to demonstrate, and the identity they hope to establish, ultimately helping them gain legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Second, when considering the competition in the international school industry,

the website can effectively demonstrate how international schools differentiate themselves and show their competitive advantage. Thus, we argue that the information on the official website is the most direct and important channel for international schools to attract potential customers, through which customers can decide whether to consider this school for their children.

Content analysis is adopted in this study. According to Holsti (1969), content analysis is 'any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of messages' (18). Similarly, Krippendorff (1980) defines content analysis as 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use' (21). By using this method, this study systematically analyzes the empirical data collected from the thirty international schools and identifies the common strategies they use to promote themselves. It also allows us to interpret the meaning behind these promotion strategies in the context of the international school industry.

Both inductive and deductive approaches were utilised in the coding process. To guide the coding process, this study developed a codebook based on the existing literature and the conceptual framework of this study. For example, based on existing literature, we classified all taken-for-granted common beliefs (e.g. international schools should offer bilingual education) identified by existing literature under the cultural-cognitive pillar. To enhance the reliability and validity, we gave each code an operational definition to minimise potential different interpretations of each code in the following coding process. Moreover, the codebook was pilot tested by two researchers to make sure each code could be consistently applied independently. Some codes were corrected based on the comparison. We then used the code book to code thirty international schools separately. Meanwhile, during the coding process, we also allowed the emergence of new codes and themes that were not included in the code book. After finishing coding, we discussed the new codes and themes, as well as some disagreements during the coding process. Based on the consensus derived from the discussion, we updated the codebook and corrected some codes accordingly.

Ultimately, this study identified 15 themes, with a total of 1274 codes assigned. In other words, we identified 15 common strategies used by the thirty international schools to promote themselves and their education. Among the 15 themes, 0 themes fell under the regulative pillar, 8 themes fell under the normative pillar, with a total of 832 codes assigned; 6 themes fell under the cultural cognitive pillar, with a total of 431 codes assigned; and 1 theme, with 11 codes assigned, cannot be categorised into a single pillar, as it embodied characteristics of all three pillars. In the following findings section, we will interpret these themes in the context of the international school industry and explain how international schools use them to deal with their legitimacy dilemma.

Findings

Common strategies used by international schools to promote themselves

Regulative pillar

Regulative pillar refers to the situation that international schools are subject to rules, laws, and regulations usually established by the governments of the land to gain legitimacy. This study did not identify any themes used by international schools in three social contexts. Although few international schools mentioned their compliance with national or local policies, obedience to coercive constraints was barely emphasised by international schools. One possible explanation is that the data we gathered pertains to international schools engaging in external communication with potential customers. Information regarding compliance with national or local policies, on the other hand, is typically used for internal purposes.

Normative pillar

Normative systems include both values and norms, requiring international schools to fulfil their social obligations and moral responsibilities by informing them of the preferred and appropriate

behaviours. Out of 15 themes, as shown in Table 1, 8 themes can be classified as ‘normative’. Based on the 8 themes, our analysis reveals that international schools generally adhere to two values: (1) the education they provide should be well-rounded to facilitate students’ cognitive and social development and respond to parental expectations of good education; (2) the education they provide should be high-quality to satisfy the needs of their potential customers in the local market.

The first four themes are related to the first value. The first theme with highest frequency is ‘character growth and values formation’. We discovered that various characters and values are emphasised, such as responsibility, empathy, compassion, confidence, independence, honesty, respect, gratitude, etc. By promoting their preparation for students’ moral and ethical development, international schools demonstrate their commitment to the moral sphere of society. As the second theme, social skill cultivation aim to facilitate students’ collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. The third theme is ‘cognitive development’. In this regard, international schools advertise that they care not only about how much academic knowledge students acquire, but also about the process and quality of their learning. The fourth theme is ‘civic engagement’. We found that students in international schools are not only expected to develop a civic attitude, but also be able to take positive and sustainability actions.

What’s worth mentioning here is that the four themes above are all intangible. It is uncertain whether international schools can achieve these goals. To convince parents, we found that international schools frequently use phrases like ‘Your child will ...’ to project future-oriented outcomes and benefits.

Compared to the first value, the second value is more tangible, which is to high-quality education to meet the needs of their potential customers in the local markets. Our result generated 4 themes as follows.

The first theme identified is experienced and committed teachers. We found that international schools advertise their teacher’s teaching experience and qualifications (primarily indicating teachers’ degree level). Meanwhile, international schools construct an image of teachers who are passionate and enthusiastic about teaching. The second theme is adopting innovative pedagogy, such as Montessori pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, and collaborative learning. The third theme is advanced equipment, which refers to the learning space equipped with modern technologies such as modern computer rooms, labs, libraries and sports room. Finally, we noted that international schools promote their provision of highly customised education, which is based on the idea that each student is unique so that the customised education can help students to reach their full potential and succeed in the future.

Cultural-cognitive pillar

The cultural-cognitive pillar focuses more on embedded cultural forms that require less maintenance and ritual reinforcement as they are part of a shared understanding of ‘how things are done’ in an institution. In this study, it is reflected in the unconscious common beliefs and logic of actions embedded in the international school industry. As shown in Table 2, out of 15 themes, 6 themes can be classified as ‘cultural-cognitive’.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of normative themes.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Character growth and values formation	375	29.4%
Social skill cultivation	201	15.7%
Cognitive development	61	4.8%
Civic engagement	53	4.16%
Experienced and committed teachers	38	2.9%
Innovative pedagogy	19	1.5%
Advanced equipment	21	1.6%
Customised education	64	5.0%

The first theme that is identified is ‘diversity’ where international schools tend to emphasise the most direct manifestation of diversity – the quantity of nationalities of students and teachers as a way to legitimize themselves as ‘international’.

The second theme is students’ academic performance. Our analysis reveals that international schools commonly promote their students’ performance in two ways: highlighting the passing rate of their students in international curricula and highlighting their high school graduates’ enrolment in prestigious western universities. The latter is emphasised more in our coding results. We noted that some international schools list prestigious universities in which their students were successfully admitted, such as Harvard University, Stanford University, and Cambridge University. We argue that this theme relates closely to the eliteness, a taken-for-granted nature of international schools, which was outlined in the literature review. The unquestioned eliteness unconsciously pushes international schools to produce high-achieving students who will become future elites. Further discussion on this will be provided in the second part of this section.

The third theme is bilingual education. International schools emphasise that being fluent in two languages can enhance students’ cognitive abilities beyond language learning, particularly in mathematics learning, problem-solving, and communication ability. Moreover, they emphasise that learning another prevailing language, such as English, Spanish, and Mandarin can endow students with the ability to mobilise globally and facilitate multicultural understanding among students.

Furthermore, adopting international curricula is also a shared belief in the international school industry about what are fundamental aspects of an international school. In our study, all thirty international schools highlight their adoption of international curricula, as indicated in theme four. We found that the most popular international curriculum is the International Baccalaureate. Other than that, some international schools also adopt more than one international curriculum, such as Advanced Placement, and French Baccalaureate.

Finally, international schools always promote that student’s international mindset can be effectively nurtured through the education provided by international schools (theme five). International schools encourage students to think and behave beyond their local contexts and to engage with global issues from diverse perspectives. We also found that international schools borrow many ideologies (e.g. sustainability and lifelong learning) from leading international institutions, particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), on how to cultivate international mindsets. Additionally, we identified the theme ‘global citizen’ (theme six) often occurred alongside the theme ‘the cultivation of international mindset’. We discovered that ‘global citizen’ always served as the ultimate goal of ‘the cultivation of international mindset’ in international schools. Another finding about the theme ‘global citizen’ is that rather than providing details on how to help students become global citizens, international schools are more concerned about how ‘global citizenship’ prepares students for future global mobility.

One critical theme that is hard to classify into a pillar is seeking accreditation from external accrediting bodies, which contains characteristics of all three pillars. First, since international schools don’t belong to the national public education systems and there is no global regulatory body to enforce their actions, external accrediting bodies have become de facto regulators, albeit with limited regulative powers. When an international school’s behaviour does not conform to

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of cultural-cognitive themes.

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Diversity	197	15.5%
Student academic performance	17	1.3%
Bilingual education	86	6.7%
International curriculum	35	2.7%
International mindset cultivation	66	5.1%
Global citizen	30	2.3%

its regulations, the school may lose its accreditation, thereby losing an important source of legitimacy. Second, aspiring to be accredited can also be classified as a normative pillar because external accreditation is not mandatory or required for the survival of international schools. Rather, getting external accreditation is more about responding to the expectations from their external environment and thus legitimising themselves as good international schools. Third, obtaining external accreditations has become trendy in the international school industry, as it can eliminate concerns about its international nature. Thus, we can also classify external recognition as a cultural-cognitive element.

Two approaches to address the legitimacy dilemma

In this section, we endeavour to understand how international schools use 15 strategies to address the legitimacy dilemma – localising to target local customer bases while maintaining their international identity. We found that two approaches were employed to tackle both sides of the legitimacy dilemma.

Approach one: portraying themselves as elite institutions offering desirable and scarce education

The first approach we identified is promoting themselves as elite schools with the aim of addressing the local side of the legitimacy dilemma. Specifically, we found that international schools proactively respond to the educational needs from local customers by promoting themselves as elite schools providing desirable and scarce education.

Our findings indicate that international schools show their eliteness mainly in two ways. First and foremost, they focus on practical success in the highly competitive international school market. They advertise the tangible, visible, and utilitarian factors to prove their success, such as the well-recognized international curricula they can offer, their numerous external accreditations, students' high academic performance, and experienced teachers. These factors collectively convey a message to the outside world, mainly to potential consumers, that international schools can help students achieve worldly success, such as getting into a prestigious university or landing a high-paying job in the future.

Meanwhile, international schools also advertise symbolic, invisible, and non-utilitarian factors, demonstrating their ability to assist students in acquiring cultural capital (Bourdieu [(1979) 1984] and cosmopolitan capital. In the first place, we found that cultural capital was developed through two ways. First, by offering students higher (perceived) qualifications, international schools provide an unparalleled advantage to students when they apply to prestigious universities because these qualifications are highly valued by prestigious universities. Thus, these qualifications align with the needs of their targeted local customers on social reproduction (Gardner-McTaggart 2016). Second, by cultivating specific social characters and moral values, students in international schools acquire the mindset and taste associated with middle- and upper-class status, ensuring their class maintenance or upper mobility within existing social hierarchies. In addition to culture capital, we suggested that international schools also respond to the demands from their local customers for cosmopolitan capital, a capital that enables individuals to navigate the globalised environment and achieve success (Weenink 2008), by promoting the ability to prepare students for unrestricted global mobility and exploration.

We argue that to win the local customers, international schools also aspire to portray themselves as offering a desirable and scarce education to help students succeed. Previous studies have identified that international schools make education a scarce commodity by charging high tuition fees (Ingersoll 2018). By analyzing the content used by international schools to promote themselves, our study supplements current scholarship on the approaches international schools use to make their education a desirable educational commodity. We found that international schools display their teachers' qualifications, innovative pedagogy, advanced technology and facilities, and the

personalised services they offer to indicate the education they provide that other schools can't. In our study, some schools directly compare them to their competitors in the same market, while others express their scarcity in more nuanced terms. For instance, we found that some international schools frequently use 'the most respected', 'the most progressive', 'first class', 'world-class', 'excellent', and 'leading' to describe their education and service, but they do not specify what they are compared with. In this way, the international schools position themselves in a relatively higher position within a choice hierarchy.

Approach two: portraying themselves as legitimate international schools by underscoring their international and global characters

The second approach is emphasising their 'international' or 'global' characters to address the international side of the legitimate dilemma. Specifically, we found that international schools attain this objective mainly through three ways.

The first way is their provision of qualifications valued by prestigious universities worldwide and the global society. As we discussed in the previous approach, providing these qualifications with scarcity, international schools meet the parental needs of social reproduction and upper mobility. In addition, we believe that this is also a manifestation of the international school's compliance with global credentialism, referring to a global trend that formal education qualifications and credentials have become the key indicator of an individual's ability and social status on a global scale (Collins 1979). In this way, international schools not only help students move globally, but also demonstrate their global character.

Second, our study confirms the results of previous studies that international schools also emphasise their global disposition by claiming their attention to international mindset cultivation (Hayden, Rancic, and Thompson 2000; Tamatea 2008). We found that international schools promote their alignment with the ideologies from several international organisations, such as UNESCO and OECD. We believe that by emphasising their links with international organisations (not affiliated with any country), international schools firmly affirm their international and global character.

Moreover, as discussed in the first portion of the findings section, global citizenship, closely related to the international mindset cultivation, is always advertised by international schools. However, we found that although it is frequently promoted by international schools, the critical aspect of global citizenship is seldom mentioned. International schools seldom explicitly suggest that they facilitate students' examination of power relations in mainstream discourse, nor do they encourage students to take individual or collective actions to drive change (UNESCO 2014, 16). Global citizenship is simplified by international schools as an international mindset and instrumentalized into a more consumable citizenship tailored for the local middle class. The global citizenship presented by the international schools, therefore, meets the local middle class's imagination of a global elite – individuals who are multilingual, possess global credentials, are culturally adept, and, crucially, are equipped to compete in the global economy. The global citizenship that international schools try to promote might have a cultural camouflage, yet its essence remains neoliberal. This aligns with the results of approach one, where international schools position themselves as elite institutions offering desirable, scarce education. We can conclude that, rather than promoting social justice, international schools play a critical role in reinforcing existing social structures and facilitating social reproduction.

Conclusion

By utilising the three pillars of institutionalisation (Scott 2014), this study found that international schools, as an institution, promote themselves primarily from normative and cultural-cognitive perspectives. Normatively, international schools portray themselves as supporting the holistic development of students and as high-quality education providers to meet the expectations from

the local market, especially potential middle-class customers. Cultural-cognitively, we found that international schools demonstrate their international identity by highlighting their diversity, students' academic performance, bilingual education, international curricula, and the cultivation of international mindset.

This study also found two approaches international schools used to address their legitimacy dilemma – localising to attract local customers and keeping their international nature. First, to address the local side of the legitimacy dilemma, international schools portray themselves as elite institutions offering desirable and scarce education. In this way, they satisfy their local customers' expectations for education in social reproduction and upward class mobility. Second, to address the international side of the legitimacy dilemma, they portray themselves as legitimate international schools by highlighting their international and global characters. In this way, international schools prove themselves worthy of being named 'international schools' and are also able to distinguish themselves significantly from other schools.

By analyzing how international schools legitimize themselves and promote their education, we can't help but think about why do international schools use normative and cultural-cognitive strategies to advertise rather than emphasising their adherence to formal regulations? One possible explanation is that although they cater to the local market, they differentiate themselves from other local competitors by positioning themselves internationally or globally. Promoting their compliance with local or national government's regulations may lower their ability to distinguish from other local schools and weaken their international identity. By doing so, they may also find it hard to balance between local and international and address the already existing legitimacy dilemma. We suggest that future studies further investigate the underlying reasons for this phenomenon.

In the end, it is worthwhile to reconsider the role of international schools in shaping social status in our current society. Due to the popularisation of education, ordinary education can no longer provide students with higher socioeconomic status with a comparative advantage. Under the influence of consumerism, middle-class parents seek an education that can give their children a comparative advantage and thus maintain or improve their social class status. From our previous discussion, it is not hard to find that the education provided by international schools is exactly to meet such needs. International schools exclude the vast majority of students and embrace students who are already advantaged, further empowering them with the economic, social, cultural, and cosmopolitan capital. In this regard, international schools and the education they provide further reinforce the existing class divisions and widen the societal gap between the rich and poor.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Richard Desjardins and Dr. Ozan Jaquette for the feedback on the earlier draft of this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Altbach, P. G., and J. Knight. 2007. "The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11 (3): 290–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542>.
- Babu, S. S., and A. Mahajan. 2021. "Branding an 'Inter'national School: Fusing 'Indian Values' with a Global Diploma." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 30 (3): 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1853589>.
- Bailey, L., and L. Cooker. 2019. "Exploring Teacher Identity in International Schools: Key Concepts for Research." *Journal of Research in International Education* 18 (2): 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240919865035>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Brummitt, N., and A. Keeling. 2013. "Charting the Growth of International Schools." In *International Education and Schools: Moving beyond the First 40 Years*, edited by R. Pearce, 25–36. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bunnell, T. 2005. "Strategic Marketing Planning in International Schools." *International Journal of Educational Management* 19 (1): 59–66. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540510574957>.
- Bunnell, T. 2008. "The Global Growth of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme over the First 40 Years: A Critical Assessment." *Comparative Education* 44 (4): 409–424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305060802481439>.
- Bunnell, T. 2014. *The Changing Landscape of International Schooling: Implications for Theory and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bunnell, T. 2015. "The 'Yew Chung Model' of International Education: The Scope for Investigation and Research." *Journal of Research in International Education* 14 (3): 258–270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240915615785>.
- Bunnell, T. 2016. "International Schooling: Implications of the Changing Growth Pattern." In *International Schools: Current Issues and Future Prospects*, edited by M. Hayden and J. Thompson, 215–235. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bunnell, T. 2019. "Developing and Institutionalising the 'Internationally-minded School': The Role of the 'Numerous Fs'." *Journal of Research in International Education* 18 (2): 186–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240919865792>.
- Bunnell, T. 2022. "The Crypto-growth of 'International Schooling': Emergent Issues and Implications." *Educational Review* 74 (1): 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1907316>.
- Bunnell, T., M. Fertig, and C. James. 2016. "What Is International about International Schools? An Institutional Legitimacy Perspective." *Oxford Review of Education* 42 (4): 408–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1195735>.
- Cambridge, J. 2002. "Global Product Branding and International Education." *Journal of Research in International Education* 1 (2): 227–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147524002764248158>.
- Cambridge, J., and J. Thompson. 2004. "Internationalism and Globalization as Contexts for International Education." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 34 (2): 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305792042000213994>.
- Collins, R. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. New York: Academic Press.
- DiMaggio, P. J., and W. W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48 (2): 147–160.
- Dvir, Y., M. Yemini, Y. Bronshtein, and N. Natur. 2017. "International Education as a Novel Entity in a Public Education System: The Establishment of a New Public International School in Israel." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 48 (6): 935–953. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2017.1369865>.
- Gardner-McTaggart, A. 2016. "International Elite, or Global Citizens? Equity, Distinction and Power: The International Baccalaureate and the Rise of the South." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14 (1): 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2014.959475>.
- Hayden, M., and J. Thompson. 1995. "International Schools and International Education: A Relationship Reviewed." *Oxford Review of Education* 21 (3): 327–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498950210306>.
- Hayden, M., and J. Thompson. 2013. "International Schools: Antecedents, Current Issues and Metaphors for the Future." In *International Education and Schools: Moving beyond the First 40 Years*, edited by R. Pearce, 3–20. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hayden, M., and J. Thompson. 2016. "International Schools: The Developing Agenda." In *International Schools: Current Issues and Future Prospects*, edited by M. Hayden and J. Thompson, 9–16. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hayden, M. C., B. A. Rancic, and J. J. Thompson. 2000. "Being International: Student and Teacher Perceptions from International Schools." *Oxford Review of Education* 26 (1): 107–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030549800103890>.
- Hayden, M. C., and J. J. Thompson. 1997. "Student Perspectives on International Education: A European Dimension." *Oxford Review of Education* 23 (4): 459–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498970230403>.
- Heyward, M. 2002. "From International to Intercultural: Redefining the International School for a Globalized World." *Journal of Research in International Education* 1 (1): 9–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240902001001266>.
- Hill, I. 2001. "Early Stirrings of International Education." *International Schools Journal* 20 (2): 11–22.
- Hollis, S. 2023. "Education as an International Export: Marketing Elite, English Schools as Franchises Overseas." *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 25 (1): 51–72.
- Holsti, O. R. 1969. *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hughes, C. 2021. *Education and Elitism: Challenges and Opportunities*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ingersoll, M. 2018. "Uncommon Knowledge: International Schools as Elite Educational Enclosures." In *The Wiley Handbook of Global Educational Reform*, edited by A. Means and K. Saltman, 259–281. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- ISC Research. 2024. *International Schools Global Market Overview 2024*. Accessed September 5, 2024. <https://iscresearch.com/reports/global-market-review-2024/>.

- ISC Research. 2025. *Independent Schools Consultancy: Online Database for Schools*. Retrieved January 31, 2025, from <https://iscresearch.com/data/>.
- Krippendorff, K. 1980. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Leach, R. J. 1969. *International Schools and Their Role in the Field of International Education*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- MacDonald, J. 2006. "The International School Industry: Examining International Schools through an Economic Lens." *Journal of Research in International Education* 5 (2): 191–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065618>.
- Machin, D. 2017. "The Great Asian International School Gold Rush: An Economic Analysis." *Journal of Research in International Education* 16 (2): 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240917722276>.
- Matthews, M. 1988. "The Ethos of International Schools." In *International Education: Principles and Practice*, edited by M. Hayden and J. Thompson, 35–45. Abingdon: Kogan Page.
- Meyer, J. W., and B. Rowan. 1977. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (2): 340–363. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>.
- Parsons, T. 1956. "Suggestions for a Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations-II." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1 (2): 225–239. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2390988>.
- Poole, A. 2018. "We Are a Chinese School': Constructing School Identity from the Lived Experiences of Expatriate and Chinese Teaching Faculty in a Type C International School in Shanghai, China." *International Journal of Progressive Education* 14 (1): 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2018.129.8>.
- Poonoosamy, M. 2016. "Aspirations and Tensions in Developing International Mindedness: Case Study of Two Students in an IB School in an Indian Ocean Island Nation." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 36 (4): 583–598. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2015.1064354>.
- Resnik, J. 2012. "The Denationalization of Education and the Expansion of the International Baccalaureate." *Comparative Education Review* 56 (2): 248–269. <https://doi.org/10.1086/661770>.
- Robertson, S. L. 2008. "'Remaking the World' Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Education and Teachers' Labor." In *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions Stories for Resistance*, edited by M. Compton and L. Weiner, 11–27. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Sanderson, J. 1981. "International Schooling: The 'Mobile' Pupil and His Educational Needs." Master's thesis, University of Oxford.
- Scott, W. R. 2014. *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sunyl, A. 2019. "Multilingualism, Elitism and Ideologies of Globalism in International Schools in Catalonia: An Ethnographic Study." Doctoral dissertation, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
- Tamatea, L. 2008. "Paradoxical Inscriptions of Global Subjects: Critical Discourse Analysis of International Schools' Websites in the Asia – Pacific Region." *Critical Studies in Education* 49 (2): 207–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480802040241>.
- UNESCO. 2014. *Global Citizenship Education: Preparing Learners for the Challenges of the 21st Century*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000227729>.
- Walker, G. 2000. "International Education: Connecting the National to the Global." In *International Schools and International Education: Improving Teaching, Management, and Quality*, edited by M. Hayden and J. Thompson, 193–204. London: Kogan Page.
- Weenink, D. 2008. "Cosmopolitanism as a Form of Capital: Parents Preparing Their Children for a Globalizing World." *Sociology* 42 (6): 1089–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508096935>.
- Wright, E., and M. Lee. 2019. "Re/Producing the Global Middle Class: International Baccalaureate Alumni at 'World-Class' Universities in Hong Kong." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 40 (5): 682–696. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1573880>.

Appendix A

Table A1. List of 30 international schools included in the study.

City	Name
Shanghai, China	YK PAO School
Shanghai, China	Shanghai American School
Shanghai, China	Willington College International School Shanghai
Shanghai, China	Harrow International School Shanghai
Shanghai, China	Yew Chung International School of Shanghai
Shanghai, China	Shanghai Pinhe School
Shanghai, China	Shanghai SMIC Private School
Shanghai, China	Western International School of Shanghai
Shanghai, China	North Cross School Shanghai

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

City	Name
Shanghai, China	Shanghai Hongrun Boyuan School
New York, US	Maryel School
New York, US	United Nations International School
New York, US	Green Ivy International School
New York, US	Lyceum Kennedy French Academy
New York, US	Avenues New York
New York, US	La Scuola d'Italia
New York, US	EF Academy New York
New York, US	Dwight School New York
New York, US	International Academy of New York
New York, US	Nord Anglia International School
Geneva, Switzerland	International school of Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland	College du Lemman – International School
Geneva, Switzerland	British School of Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland	Institut International de Lancy
Geneva, Switzerland	Ecole Mosaic – Bilingual School
Geneva, Switzerland	Swedish International School of Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland	Ecole Moser Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland	La Découverte School
Geneva, Switzerland	Geneva English School
Geneva, Switzerland	Ecole des Nations