

Navigating the tensions between international schooling and national goals of education: Expatriate teachers and local students in international schools in Vietnam

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The past decade has witnessed substantial growth in the international school market, driven by the demand from host-country or "local" families for Western education, English-medium instruction, and expatriate teachers. This growth raises critical questions about the alignment between national education goals and the objectives of international schooling in countries where international schools are positioned as an alternative to national education systems. This article contributes to the research on international schooling by examining these tensions. Focusing on the case of Vietnam, it explores how expatriate teachers in international or internationalised schools perceive their roles in relation to the education of Vietnamese students. Utilising the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism and drawing on an analysis of interviews with expatriate teachers and principals in three schools, the findings reveal that teachers are aware of their role in influencing students' cultural perspectives and often view their work as an induction into Western culture, despite some ambivalence about "Westernizing" Vietnamese students. The paper argues that this tension has broader implications for the development of citizenship and national identity in countries where local students attend international schools, highlighting the need for further research into the implications of international schooling for host country students and the development of strategies that address the tensions between international schooling and national education goals.

Keywords: international schools; internationalised schools; teachers; internationalisation, Vietnam

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Introduction

International schools, defined as "schools with a global outlook located mainly outside an English-speaking country delivering a non-national curriculum at least partly in English" (Bunnell, 2019, p. 1), play an increasingly significant role in the education systems of many nations. Traditionally, international schools have existed outside the national systems of state

schooling in host countries, typically emerging from within expatriate communities who desire a form of schooling different from the local system (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). However, today's growth -- with over 10,000 English-medium instruction international schools now established around the world (Bunnell, 2020; Bunnell et al., 2017; Machin, 2019; Speck, 2019) -- reflects not only the transnational mobility of English-speaking expatriate families in a globalised world, but also an increasing demand for English-medium international schooling from local elite and middle-class families (Brown & Lauder, 2010; Bunnell, 2008, 2020; Resnick, 2012a). This demand is linked to the perceived competitive advantage obtained through an English-medium international education that provides access to universities and jobs in both the local and global marketplace through internationally-validated qualifications and "cosmopolitan capital" (Hayden & Thompson, 2008; Machin, 2017; Tarc, 2019; Weenink, 2008; Wright et al., 2024; Wu & Tarc, 2021), and has resulted in the emergence of a new type of international school that is built primarily for the local student market, often at a large scale, and frequently run for profit (Bunnell & Fertig, 2016).

Machin (2017) argues that globalisation has driven this desire for international education, while the global liberalisation of education policy has created the conditions for the acceptance of deregulation, denationalisation, and the development of education markets (see Ball, 2013) as a pragmatic response to the demands of a growing middle class. Lee et al. (2021) also argue for deregulation to be understood as the primary driver of growth in international schools in the International Baccalaureate context, suggesting that the relaxing of policies to prevent citizens from enrolling in the sector and restrict the establishment of international schools was directly linked to current growth, placing international schools at the forefront of the privatisation and marketisation of education particularly in the Asia Pacific region (see also Mok, 2008). Resnik (2012b) suggests that international school growth has been encouraged by neoliberal education policies "including competition between

schools, parent choice, accountability and budget reductions, promoted by international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank” (p. 295). Both Bunnell (2019) and Hayden and Thompson (2008) point to the example of Thailand which, since allowing Thai nationals to attend international schools, has seen a rapid increase in the number of international schools in the country, including several British school “brands” that cater almost exclusively to Thai students and are marketed to aspirational Thai families who perceive an overseas education to be superior to that offered by the national education system.

A similar phenomenon has been seen in Mainland China, which has seen substantial growth in what Poole (2020a; 2020b) has described as “internationalised schools”, characterised by a dual national and international (or cosmopolitan) orientation that attempts to integrate national and international curricula. However, emerging research (e.g., Clark, 2024; Deng et al., 2023) points to tensions between these national and cosmopolitan aspects, with the cosmopolitan (i.e., IB curricular and foreign teachers) becoming increasingly marginal due to the growing professionalisation of Chinese teachers (Poole, 2024), and the impact of government regulation in response to fears that internationalised schools might undermine national sovereignty and exacerbate educational inequity (Wright et al., 2024). Hence, while traditional international schools represent a form of de-nationalised schooling that can be seen to reduce (though not eliminate) the role of the state in education (Hallgarten et al., 2015; Resnik, 2012b), non-traditional and internationalised schools occupy a liminal space between international and national educational paradigms where these two are often in tension. These tensions, which are receiving growing attention, include issues related to socialisation, citizenship and identity, language, and culture. There is now recognition that students in international and internationalised programmes may experience an education that differs significantly from that of their peers in mainstream education, with international

programmes emphasising global citizenship and pathways to global higher education and employment unlike national education systems, which traditionally socialise students within a national context through local narratives of belonging, language, rituals and histories (Wright & Lee, 2020; Wright et al., 2024; Yemini et al., 2021).

General education and international schools in Vietnam

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is home to almost one hundred million people of whom 17,042,306 were school students in 2019 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2020).

Students in Vietnam are schooled in a system of what is called “general education” comprising primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school, which is characterised by the 2005 Education Law as “a socialist education with popular, national, scientific, and modern characteristics, based on Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts” and directly linked to the development of Vietnamese national identity:

The goals of education are to educate the Vietnamese into comprehensively developed persons who possess ethics, knowledge, physical health, aesthetic sense and profession, loyal to the ideology of national independence and socialism; to shape and cultivate one’s dignity, civil qualifications and competence, satisfying the demands of the construction and defense of the Fatherland. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2005)

Although general education occurs predominantly through a system of state-run schools, an increasing number of non-public institutions operate at each level, including both “people-founded” and private educational establishments. Mok (2008) demonstrates that Vietnam, like China, has moved away from a centralised socialist model of education, shifting the costs of education from the state onto households to meet the developing educational requirements of the country that the state alone cannot satisfy. These policies have encouraged the development of non-public schools by incorporating them into the national education system and affording them incentives, resulting in the establishment of a non-public school system at

all levels of general education (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2010/11).

International schools and internationalised schools have assumed an increasingly significant role in this non-public education sector, with local enrolments rising from 46 percent to 72 percent of the Vietnamese international school population between 2015 and 2018 (Morrison, 2019). These are schools that thus exist within the national system of general education to educate Vietnamese students but that draw their desirability from their distinction from state schools (Bunnell, 2019).

Like China, Vietnam has also revised regulations on international schools several times in recent years. In 2018, the Ministry of Education's Decree No. 86/2018/ND-CP came into effect, raising caps on the number of Vietnamese nationals permitted to enrol in foreign-invested schools from 10% (primary and middle school) and 20% (high school) to 50% at all levels (Kim & Mobernd, 2019). However, Decree 86 also outlines minimum requirements for all Vietnamese children in international schools to study the Vietnamese language and Vietnamese curriculum taught by Vietnamese teachers, leading to the growth of 'internationalised' schools that cater for Vietnamese students with both national and international orientations, curricula, and teachers. Kim and Mobernd (2019) suggest that the motivation for Decree 86 was to encourage Vietnamese students not to move overseas to attend school by allowing affluent citizens access to a distinct private schooling system that still contains elements of national education linked to socialisation, citizenship, and national identity, with the state "caught between priorities of developing education as a sector, retaining students, and maintaining the integrity of the national school system" (p. 319). Such a position reflects a compromise that allows families to opt out of mainstream national schooling, while still exposing children to a socialist and socialising Vietnamese education that is intended to foster "well-rounded" people who are committed to the Marxist-Leninist ideals and 'steeped [in] national cultural identity'" (Pham & Duong, 2020, p. 3). Yet such a

compromise also reveals the tensions between the national goals of education and the international/cosmopolitan aspirations of international schooling, given that internationalised schools are distinguished by the provision of a non-national curriculum, in English, largely taught by non-Vietnamese teachers. This raises significant questions about how host nation and internationalised school cultures can be integrated (Brown & Lauder, 2010). As Kim and Mobrand (2019, p. 321) note:

The cultural, social, and political implications are tremendous. Will, for example, the Vietnamese elite of the near future read and speak Vietnamese? Will they be closer to Vietnamese culture or to a 'global' elite consumer culture? Will they move abroad, or will they become an elite within Vietnam that is culturally and socially remote from the rest of society?

Theoretical framework: Cosmopolitan nationalism

Cosmopolitan nationalism offers a valuable framework for exploring these questions of how increasingly global perspectives are integrated into national education systems. Drawing on Beck's (2007) problematisation of the ways "methodological nationalism" in sociology subsumes society under the nation state, Yemini et al. (2021) propose cosmopolitan nationalism as a way of understanding the:

concurrent and at times conflicting pressures within national education structures to promote internationalisation and a global gaze, while also seeking to remain locally relevant and a primary contributor to national projects of economic development, social cohesion and creating the 'right kinds' of citizens. Sometimes these pressures work in concert (educating future flexible workers able to compete in a global economy, who are directly involved in sustaining the development of a country), while at other times they seem to contradict one another (for instance, the possibility that creating global citizens may undercut the primary loyalties citizens have towards their own countries). (p. 846)

Cosmopolitan nationalism thus recognises the inherent tensions and possible contradictions between promoting cosmopolitan values, such as embracing international perspectives and

global citizenship, while simultaneously addressing the enduring importance of nationalistic education goals, such as a commitment to socialism based on Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thoughts in the development of a Vietnamese national identity. In essence, cosmopolitan nationalism highlights (and provides a tool for understanding) how the "global turn" in education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009) is taken up in national-local contexts, and intricately intertwined with, and driven by, national agendas (Wright et al., 2024; Yemini et al., 2020). Nationalism, as Yemini et al. (2020, p.229) argue, "remains central to the making of education policies." Understanding this enables us to critically examine the motivations behind internationalisation efforts and to explore the diverse and complex ways individuals and institutions navigate the intersection of local, national, and global forces.

This framework is particularly relevant in the context of this study in acknowledging the coexistence of global and nationalistic ideologies within internationalised schooling and even within the perspectives of individuals such as expatriate Western teachers. In this context, the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism illuminates how such teachers navigate the cultural, social, and political tensions inherent in internationalised schooling in Vietnam. Furthermore, the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism helps us to position internationalised schools as distinct from traditional international schools. Rather than being incomplete or inauthentic international schools, the concept compels us to accept internationalised schools on their own terms as complete internationalised schools where nation and global elements intersect (Poole, 2020a).

The cultural implications of international and internationalised schooling for local students

The primary task of an international school, as noted by Bunnell et al. (2017), is to deliver an international curriculum. However, Rizvi (2007) argues that within broader discussions of the

internationalisation of education, “suggestions for curriculum reform are located, in a largely celebratory fashion, within a neo-liberal imaginary of global processes” (p. 338). Similarly, Hallgarten et al. (2015, p. 8) observe that while international curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) do not explicitly undermine the commitment of international schools to interculturalism and bilingualism, they nonetheless “imply a sustained Western cultural model in the face of countervailing global forces.” Kopsick (2017) further critiques the Western-centrism nature of curricula such as the IB and Cambridge International Examinations, citing a former general director of the International Baccalaureate who acknowledges this bias. Consequently, there is a risk that what is termed an “international curriculum” may, in at least in practice, be a Western curriculum.

Similarly, Hayden and Thompson (2008) point out that pedagogy in international schools also typically reflects the “child-centred, western liberal philosophy” of the education that Western-trained international school teachers have experienced, which “raises questions about the meaning of ‘internationalism’ and whether it can be a synonym for ‘western liberalism’” (p. 40). Hallgarten et al. (2015) agree, observing that the global international school teaching workforce “is ‘Western’ in outlook and approach” (p. 8), while Allan (2013) notes that although the predominance of native-English speaking teachers from the UK, the US, Canada and Australia in international schools results in a “multiplicity of didactic approaches,” all are nonetheless “within the Western tradition” (p. 159).

This study aims to explore questions of the concurrent and at potentially conflicting pressures in Vietnamese internationalised schools to realise national and cosmopolitan goals. We do so by exploring the complexities and tensions present in how expatriate Western (i.e. non-Vietnamese) teachers in non-traditional internationalised schools in Vietnam understand themselves and their work in the context of teaching Vietnamese students, focusing on the research question: *How do expatriate teachers in internationalised schools in Vietnam*

perceive their roles in relation to the cultural education of local students, and what tensions arise from this dynamic?

The study is relevant to the broader international and internationalised school context in Vietnam and beyond, speaking more generally to the implications of international schooling for host-country students as a viable alternative to national education systems linked to the development of citizenship and national identity that serve “as a central means of socialisation into the nation” (Kim & Mobernd, 2019, p. 318).

Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of semi-structured individual and group interviews conducted with expatriate Western teachers at three internationalised schools in Vietnam. The three schools were purposively sampled as non-public, for-profit internationalised schools that catered primarily to Vietnamese children. Each school offered an “integrated programme” that combined Vietnamese and international curriculums (including Cambridge International and foreign national curriculum), Vietnamese and English languages of instruction, with both Vietnamese and expatriate teachers.

Two of the schools were predominantly “Vietnamese”, internationalised schools with a smaller international programme staffed by a minority of expatriate Western teachers. Both of these schools were managed by a Vietnamese administration and catered solely for Vietnamese students. Vietnamese teachers made up the majority of staff. One of the schools was positioned as an international school, offering an English-only fully-international programme for expatriate and government-approved Vietnamese students, while also offering an integrated programme to Vietnamese students staffed by Vietnamese teachers. This school was operated primarily by a Western administration team, with a large expatriate teacher cohort and a smaller Vietnamese management and teaching team.

It is important to note, however, that while expatriate teachers made up the school leadership and majority of teachers, the student cohort was dominated by Vietnamese students in the integrated programme, making it primarily a school for Vietnamese children. All three schools positioned themselves as providing an international education for Vietnamese families. Gatekeeper permission was firstly obtained from the principals, with all teachers in each of the three schools then invited to participate in the project. All participants provided written informed consent before interviews or observations were conducted. The authors are an Australian and British researcher, not of Vietnamese heritage, who have experience teaching and researching in non-traditional internationalised schools in Vietnam and China.

Participants

This analysis reports on data generated with twelve expatriate teachers and one expatriate principal across the three schools. Seven of the twelve teachers (Brad, Claire, Don, Eric, Henry, Nick, and Phil) were from the United States, one was from the United Kingdom (Tom), while the other four teachers (Andrew, Bruce, Scott, and Troy) and the principal (Richard) were Australian. All were native English speakers who had been in Vietnam for between one and four years. All were white, except Phil, and male, apart from Claire. None spoke Vietnamese. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

The interviews explored participants' perceptions of international schooling, focusing on how they understood themselves, their students, and their role as expatriate teachers of host-country students in international schools. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were analysed using an iterative process of thematic

coding to identify patterns and themes in the participants' accounts about their experiences in internationalised schools (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Key themes within the literature on international schooling provided a theoretical starting point from which to analyse teachers' accounts, which were subsequently analysed according to three themes: child-centred teachers, teachers as agents of cultural change, and ambivalence to Westernisation.

The resulting analysis contributes to the literature on international schooling by exploring the tensions present in the role of expatriate teachers in the emerging market of for-profit internationalised schools aimed at host-country families, arguing that while the teachers recognise the complexities of their work, in defining themselves as agents of cultural change, contradictions remain between the cosmopolitan role of the international school and the national educational goals for host-country students.

Findings

This section discusses three themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews with teachers: (1) a conventional liberal child-centred conception of teachers' roles, (2) teachers as agents of cultural change, and (3) ambivalence towards "Westernisation". Overall, these themes point to the complexity of expatriate teachers' roles in international schools and their contradictions with the national goals of education for host-nation students in Vietnam.

Child-centred Teachers

The teachers' perception of their roles in Vietnam illustrated the contradictions of an internationalised form of schooling that aspired to be cosmopolitan in a nationalistic context. The role of the Western expatriate teacher was conventionally focused by teachers on notions such as student engagement, motivation, and learning, reflecting the typical "child-centred,

western liberal philosophy” of the Western-trained teacher (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). For example, Bruce, an Australian secondary ICT teacher, described his role in terms of motivating and engaging students with interesting lessons that would stimulate their desire to learn:

My role, I see, is pretty clear. I mean I've got a fair bit of knowledge and ... I see my job as teaching the students to learn. I could sprout all I like about everything I know in front of the class but if I haven't given them something interesting and the desire to learn, they are going to be bored.

Key to engaging and motivating students were the perceived differences between Vietnamese and other students. As Tom, a secondary English and ESL teacher from the UK, put it:

I put a lot of pride in what I do. Um ... I want the students to achieve and if I don't think they are achieving I get angry at myself. It's like I'm doing something wrong. They're typical teenagers: want to talk, want to play, want to have fun. But trying to engage them in a way that they actually do something within, that they actually learn something within the English has been a little bit of a struggle.

Tom's quote reveals that Vietnamese students are implicitly seen as both “typical teenagers” and also somehow different, resulting in a struggle to connect with students that underscores the complexities of teaching within a different cultural context where Western pedagogical approaches may not always align well with local educational practices. For Don, this resulted in a more detached view of student motivation and learning:

Well as far as teaching I still ... you know, I just feel like I'm a facilitator. The material is there, I present as best I can, and ... if they take it, they take it, you know? ... And then as far as motivation ... you know I'll just go right out and- I'll admit it. You know ... I don't believe that the teacher supplies motivation to the students I know every, I know *everybody* will tell you you're supposed to motivate the kids ... you know? But I try to present an interesting lesson ... and if that doesn't work, you know, I'm not going to say "Hey, this is really important, you should learn this, you're going to use it in the future." You know, I'm not, I feel that's the parents' responsibility so ...

While the earlier quotes reflect a proactive approach to student engagement and motivation, Don's "facilitator" perspective suggest a more hands-off practice and a disengagement from his students. On the other hand, Andrew, an Australian teaching secondary Business Studies, defined his role as a mediator between the Australian curriculum used at his school and the Vietnamese students he taught, particularly about topics with which he felt the students had no direct experience: "my role here is, as I always try to do, is put it in the perspective of this country and explain how it's happened when we discuss theories in a developed country and how they're different". Andrew's quote reflects his commitment to contextualizing the curriculum for Vietnamese students, highlighting his awareness of the local context and his desire to navigate the complexities of promoting internationalism in a nationalist Vietnamese educational context.

Scott, a newly graduated Australian teacher also teaching secondary Business Studies, similarly described how his main task was "to converse with [students] in English about subjects they normally wouldn't have a chance to". For Scott, however, part of this role was addressing the cultural differences he perceived in learning and teaching with Vietnamese students:

There is no individual thought behind anything. It's always just skimming the surface and doing the least amount of work that they can without getting into trouble From what I can gather--although this is all just personal opinion because I haven't talked about it--the cultural upbringing is very different. So, teachers, they know all and they're implanting knowledge into you.

Although Scott acknowledges that his critique of Vietnamese learning practices is "just personal opinion", it meant that it was important for Scott to "push them to try and form their own opinions" and:

Awaken them to an idea where you can speak your own mind without fear and prejudice - it's good to maybe introduce it to them, but anyone with the idea that they're going to

come in here and change the world one classroom at a time is really wide and hopeful. I don't want to seem negative or anything, but it's not even if they're in Grade 11, it's not even 11 years prior. It's their parents before that and their teachers before that. It's just been engrained in the system for so long. To try and change it within one year, it's awesome. So, the best you can hope for is just maybe within your class getting them to think about something different.

Scott conceives of his role in terms of helping Vietnamese students to think differently, reflecting a cosmopolitan perspective which sees value in the ability to “think beyond the national perspective” (Wright et al., 2024): to think about, talk about, and speak freely about topics they may not have thought or talked about previously, and that students may not have been free to talk about “without fear and prejudice”. Integral to Scott’s conception is that his role comprises teaching Vietnamese students to think (and speak) differently from the culturally bound – Vietnamese – social, cultural, and political norms that he sees as determining the behaviour of students and teachers, reflecting the tensions between global and local identities in internationalised schooling. On the one hand, Scott’s perception of his role can be read as a cosmopolitan approach that values individual agency and critical engagement. However, this cosmopolitanism is predicated on a critique of Vietnamese education and culture that implicitly essentialises and dismisses the complexities of the local context, reducing Vietnamese to colonialist stereotypes of Asian learners unable to think individually and exercise individual agency.

Henry, an American secondary science teacher in his forties, had taught for five years before coming to Vietnam. When discussing his role, Henry also described the cultural differences that he perceived between Vietnamese and American students:

It seems very narrow compared to the US. So, for me, opening- Part of my role is to open that up so that they are exposed to more things ... It's primarily teacher-centered, teacher driven, teacher controlled ... the teacher at the front lecturing the students... It's teacher everything, it's like they don't get the choice of "I don't want to do

this section, I want to do this section," They don't have a lot of that and they don't seem to have ... a ... relationship, a strong relationship.

Like Scott, Henry perceives his role as being to “open up” and “expose” students to things they have not previously been exposed to in what he sees as the highly controlled teacher-centred culture of Vietnamese education. Henry’s response to this critique of local practices was, like Scott, to implement learner-centred pedagogies for the benefit of Vietnamese students:

They see and they know--the Vietnamese staff anyways, and probably most of the International staff--know what a teacher-centred learning is, because I see that and observe that a lot here. What does that mean? And that's- And I found what it produces- Here's what teacher centred learning does: It produces very unmotivated students who want to be spoon fed answers. I was like *WOW!* Now it really makes me *more* motivated to have student centred learning.

Scott and Henry’s comments acknowledge the deeply ingrained nature of cultural and educational practices, suggesting a recognition of the complexities involved in cultural change and tensions between cosmopolitan aspirations and local realities. These comments suggest the ‘Western tradition’ within which teachers’ didactic approaches are situated, with the teachers concerned, to various levels, with engaging students in learning, typically through liberal child-centred approaches to education focused on student engagement, motivation, and achievement. Henry, for example, sees his role in terms of changing students through exposing them to schooling that is different from what he perceives to be “Vietnamese” practices of teacher-centred education.

However, while this may be read conventionally in terms of advancing a conventional liberal Western view of the benefits of learner-centred pedagogies, it also implicitly essentialises and critiques a Vietnamese teacher-centred culture, similar to Bailey’s (2015) findings in the Malaysian context that, “despite a rhetoric of respecting cultural differences,

expatriate teachers retained a belief that Western teaching methods were more effective” (p. 95). Such beliefs position Western teachers as agents of cultural imperialism (even if from their perspective they view their actions as cultural change), demonstrating a reappropriation of cosmopolitan nationalism by Western teachers, where the promotion of global values may dismiss or devalue local knowledges and practices, as explored further in the next section. This finding adds nuance to our understanding of cosmopolitan nationalism by suggesting that its configuration is mediated by the values and beliefs of international school actors who will emphasise one aspect more than another.

Teachers as Agents of Cultural Change

Ultimately, Henry saw his role in motivating and teaching students as part of a movement that would influence and change the broader culture of Vietnamese society through the education of Vietnamese students in internationalised schools. In this way, Henry’s role as a science teacher was to expose students to new ideas— “what *we* think is important”— delivered by English-speaking expatriate teachers:

I strongly feel that it does influence the culture of the society. So, when they learn English, from native speakers, they’re learning the language and the culture. So, they’re widening their understanding of the world, especially the English-speaking world, and especially the Western- like America. So, they understand more about who we are as a people and what the language, and the power of the words, and what the words mean, and what we think is important ... But whatever the motivation, it will change the culture. Whether the leaders want it or not, it will change the culture, because you can see them, if you speak to someone, you know, thirties, forties, fifties, who is Vietnamese, and then you speak to our kids on whatever topic, their perspective is different.

Henry sees his role as a teacher influencing Vietnamese culture. He sees advantages in exposing Vietnamese students to Western ideas, reflecting a cosmopolitan perspective that sees the integration of “global” ideas as beneficial for national development through

changing, but retaining, a connection to local culture. This idea, that the role of the expatriate teacher is to teach Vietnamese students (about) Western culture, was expressed by several of the teachers in different forms. For example, Phil, an African-American primary English teacher, explained how he felt that teaching Vietnamese children Western culture was his primary role because that was what the school and parents desired, saying “When it comes to us being here and teaching them a different culture, I think it’s accepted because that’s the only reason you’re here.” For Phil, teaching Vietnamese students Western culture meant teaching them to think critically, which was, in his words, “the English” culture as differentiated from Asian cultures that were, at the very least, less critical:

Well critical thinking to me is the English culture. It is the English culture. It is different than Asian cultures where you’re more- I’m not saying this in a negative sense but I’m saying, you’re told what to do--your reaction--or you’re waiting for instructions to be passed from the top down. In English culture the critical thinking has- You think about what’s been said. Why is it being said? Things of that nature.

Similarly, Brad, a secondary English teacher from the US, expressed his role in terms of “not just” teaching the subject, but also of teaching what he describes as “social skills” or “ethics”:

I think that a teacher in any subject is not just teaching the subject they are teaching, like ... basic ... I mean ... I don't know how to say it, basic social skills? I mean they are learning how to communicate with other people like ... It's an international school so they are going to learn ... you know ... different ... for lack of a better word I'd say ethics.

These conceptions of role point to the complexity and nuance of teachers’ work in a cosmopolitan nationalist context, balancing seemingly contradictory urges to promote national development through cultural change that may undermine local educational practices and values. These teachers’ conception of their role as agents of cultural change at times tends towards essentialised and ethnocentric views of Vietnamese learners, such as in the case of deficit views of the ability of “Asian cultures” to engage in critical thinking (Song &

McCarthy, 2018), alongside an assumed universality of Western values such as critical thinking, “basic” social skills, and ethics.

In another example, Nick, Henry, and Claire, three American teachers, discussed if Vietnam, as a nation, had to become more Westernised to become more developed:

Nick: Yeah, pretty much. If you look at all the Southeast Asian or Asian countries that are developed – Korea and Japan come to mind – they still retain their culture but they have developed an economic philosophy similar to that in the West. If Vietnam does not adopt that economic model then it's going to continue to be a- ... Third-World-.

Henry: I don't know too much about the other countries, but, Indonesia is very successful and definitely not that Western. And Malaysia is very successful and-

Nick: The culture and ways of doing business here is-

Henry: -the economic stuff, I don't know, I would think, I would guess that they're more Western-

Nick: You don't need to be Westernised, No one wants the whole world to turn into a little Britain or a little America or whatever-

Claire: Yeah.

Nick: You want to retain elements of your culture. But in order to do business in a global marketplace, where all the successful companies, or countries, are adopting Westernised ways to do business, if you cannot do that-?

Claire: Especially when the world is growing, right? I mean everyone wants to have their own culture and be this special place but at the same time we're pretty much just one world now. You can go anywhere you want, and to not have some similarities in the entire world, it would be kind of crazy not to expect that to happen. I mean-

Henry: Yeah, there's one thing for sure. They have to evolve one way or another!

There is nuance and complexity in how the teachers discuss the development of Vietnam: the teachers are ambivalent about Western cultural hegemony and recognise the Western-dominated global economy. However, Henry's ultimate claim that Vietnamese people need to evolve clearly invokes colonialist and orientalist discourse of an inferior Asian Other and superior West (Said, 1978). What is clear from the excerpts above is that while the teachers remain aware of and conflicted about the complexities of promoting cosmopolitanism within

a nationalist educational context, and the possible negative outcomes of their influence on their students (as discussed further below), they do conceive of their roles in terms of being a Western influence that will change Vietnamese culture for the better, in alignment with a cosmopolitan nationalist approach that sees value in promoting internationalisation to advance national goals, but is grounded in problematic comparisons between East and West.

Ambivalence to Westernisation

Despite seeing themselves as agents of influence, the teachers are critical and cautious of the dangers of Westernising Vietnamese students, again reflecting the complexities and contradictions of promoting internationalisation within a nationalistic educational structure. For example, Richard, an Australian principal, in recognising the school's role in influencing students' culture, was ambivalent about Vietnamese students becoming "Westernised":

You can see at times our students getting that Western attitude. And that comes across, you know? Just that attitude, at times. And you just think, that comes from Western society. How Westerners operate. And it's really, really, sometimes, disappointing and I worry about that a little bit. Part of what we do here is meant to be Eastern values- Western education, or keeping those Eastern values. But by the kids' experience in the Western education they're also picking up Western values as well and not necessarily holding onto their Eastern. So, I do see some negatives with that.

Claire also grappled with the dilemma of being "ethnocentric" as a Western teacher who experienced challenges with Vietnamese culture, admitting that she sometimes did tell her students that Western cultural practices were superior to Vietnamese cultural practices:

I mean, I guess there's always a ... You know, like, "our culture's the only way". Like, ethnocentric like "ours is the best!" And I try to not do that, but I could see that as being a dilemma, I guess. Like telling them, "No this is the right way" when ... it's not always the right way. I don't ... Western culture hasn't figured it out either, always. It's not always the right way, but ... I guess because the Vietnamese culture is so shocking sometimes I'll be like "No, this is the right way to do it!" And sometimes I guess that ...

would be ... wrong, in a way, because it's telling them, like, your culture and your way is bad and my way is good.

Eric, an American teacher who was married to a Vietnamese woman and spoke Vietnamese, suggested that:

I think there might be some teachers who are not culturally sensitive to the students. I think it's important that if you come and work in a school like this in any country that you at least understand the way the culture is. At the same time, teach them about the Western culture because that's why they're coming here. You have to be able to find a good medium.

While Eric echoed Brad's view that the lure of learning about Western culture was the reason students came to the school, he felt that it was important to be culturally aware and culturally sensitive to host-nation students. Henry, too, advocated for a sensitive or, in his words, "respectful" approach, while maintaining his values:

'I think a lot of it is done respectfully,' the teacher answered. 'I think a lot of it is done with communication, non-verbal and verbal. Just being honest and respectful. Saying, "I don't agree with that. Here's why I don't agree with that." That's it. And just that simple- That easy- But without all this, "I'm right, I'm wrong". That ... that puts a "we" and a "they" so trying not to set up a "we" and a "they". Trying to set up an "us".

Bruce, on the other hand, while acknowledging that cultural change was occurring, was less concerned about the outcomes due to the strength and agency of Vietnamese people, most clearly aligning with a cosmopolitan nationalist approach:

The culture here in Vietnam is *a thousand years old and strong*. And ... while a lot of the young people want to change it, a lot of the old people are hanging on, particularly in the rural areas. And I ... I can only see a nice blend coming out of it that ... Vietnam will learn the goods parts of the West and hopefully they'll keep the decadence out.

The teachers' comments above demonstrate that while these teachers may understand their

roles in international schools in terms of influencing host-country students they are also ambivalent about the outcomes of “Westernisation”. The possibility remains that local knowledges, values, and cultures can be recognised and respected by expatriate teachers even as they promote internationalisation within a cosmopolitan nationalist educational context. Nevertheless, the question raised by this study is whether the ways expatriate teachers conceive of their roles contradict, at least at times, the goals and character of an education system that aims to serve as a central means of socialisation, citizenship, and development of national identity, particularly when these roles are grounded in problematic discourses of Western superiority. Troy saw an explicit conflict between a Western and “uniquely Vietnamese education”, but rationalised this in terms of the benefits and the choice of parents to send their children to an international school:

I guess you could argue that there are negative cultural impacts in terms of Vietnamese culture. It's a very Western-styled school and whether you're taking away from the uniquely Vietnamese education. But Vietnam is coming through as an international country now and with that is going to come expats and things like that and so it's also building part of the community. I think the benefits far outweigh the negatives because parents have a decision to make about how they want their kids to be educated and what they want their future to be.

Troy's views touch on Kim and Moberg's (2019) concerns that international education for host country students has potentially significant cultural, social, and political implications for host nations, but he ultimately dismisses this, concluding that Vietnam is an “international country” now. The question remains, however, what it means to be “international”, whether as a country or a school, in contemporary times, and whether internationalised schooling promotes a cosmopolitan identity that strengthens their national identity (Wright et al., 2024), or represents the danger of becoming a “homogenizing induction into Western global culture” (Allan, 2013, p. 160).

Conclusion

Internationalised schools in Vietnam can be understood as sites of cosmopolitan nationalism, complementing the government's vision for a distinct private schooling system that balances national education goals linked to socialisation, citizenship, and national identity with a globalising and internationalising outlook that can develop the education sector and retain students of a growing middle-class who may otherwise look to educate their children overseas. While the pressures to promote and internationalisation and nationalism can be in tension (Maxwell et al., 2020), the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism allows us explore how these demands interact to produce both complementary and contradictory outcomes. In this paper we have applied the lens of cosmopolitan nationalism to Western expatriate teachers' perceptions of their roles in internationalised schools to draw out these complementary and contradictory elements.

Bates (2010) argues that "the emergence of international schools in significant numbers across the globe demands analysis of their purposes, practices and outcomes and an examination of their connections to global economic, social and cultural movements" (p. 17). Hayden and Thompson (2008) remind us of the danger of internationalism being synonymous with Western liberalism. What seems clear from this study is that the tensions between the purposes, practices, and outcomes in international and national education for host-country children are significant and should inform how internationalised schools and expatriate teachers educate the increasing numbers of host-country children in international and internationalised schools.

Expatriate teachers in international schools work in a complex and transitory space where the education of host-country students takes place outside national systems of state schooling, and where teachers themselves may have little insight into local culture, in part due to the short-term nature of the profession (e.g., teachers typically being hired on short-

term contracts of two years) and the prevalence of expatriate enclaves. In internationalised schools, this complexity is intensified by the coexistence of national and international orientations. While presented in terms of a fusion, cosmopolitan nationalism is a reminder that national and international orientations are rarely integrated in equal ways, with national priorities more often than not taking priority and forming the foundation on to which a subordinate international perspective is grafted (Poole, 2020a). Allan (2013) suggests that given the predominately Western, native English-speaking expatriate teaching workforce in international schools, and alongside the explicit marketing of international schools as offering a “Western education”, it may well be the case that rather than being internationalising, international education can be potentially homogenising and Westernising. This, as Kim and Mobrand (2019) point out, has significant cultural, social, and political implications for host nations.

This study demonstrates that, while complex, expatriate teachers’ conceptions of their roles in international schools incorporate an idea of cultural change that may, at least at times, be incompatible with a nation’s goals for the education of their young people, particularly as this education relates to socialisation, citizenship and the construction of national identity, and where Western teachers’ perspectives of cultural change are grounded in discourses of Western superiority. This phenomenon reflects emerging evidence from the Chinese context, where the regulation of international schools for Chinese citizens can be seen as “backgrounding” international aspects and foregrounding “national” ones (Wu & Koh, 2023). Emerging evidence suggests that discourses of Chinese superiority are also present, intermingling with, and in some cases undermining, those of Western superiority. For example, Poole’s (2024) study of teachers’ changing roles in internationalised schools amidst reform found that Chinese teachers are starting to position foreign teachers as marginal and redundant. Significantly, foreign teachers appear to have internalised these positionings,

suggesting that notions of cultural superiority are constantly changing and can be impacted by policy change.

The intent here is not to suggest that cultural change only occurs through schooling, that Vietnamese culture remains static, or that Vietnamese students should not have access to international schools in an attempt to maintain a static and romanticised Vietnamese culture. Rather, this study suggests that the participants – expatriate native-English-speaking teachers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia – understood their roles in terms of teaching Vietnamese students about Western culture or more problematically, at times, in terms of influencing and ultimately Westernising Vietnamese students, in ways that can be at odds with the national goals of educating young Vietnamese people.

In saying this, it is also necessary to problematise the notion of Westernisation and Western culture as a homogenous construct. Although the findings to this study suggest that the participants shared similar understandings of their work in terms of cultural change and “Westernisation”, there exists cultural diversity between and within Western countries problematising the notion of a Western culture. Furthermore, future research could explore how expatriate teachers are influenced by the cultures of their host nations, particularly those teachers who have spent many years abroad and whose cultural allegiance to Western norms may have become more blended. Identifying and examining the experiences of such ‘hybrid’ teachers and understanding their interactions with local students would enhance and extend the findings presented in this study.

Finally, a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between expatriate teachers and their practices and the local contexts of schooling could also be employed, particularly in the case of non-traditional and internationalised schools for local students. The notion of cosmopolitan nationalism might have a role to play here, and could be used to foreground the hybrid dynamics of the internationalised school space. A “middle way” that recognises the

benefits of both Western and local traditions, and emphasises the importance of dialogue and collaboration could be beneficial in ensuring that the educational experience offered to local students by international and internationalised schools reflects both the desires for internationalisation and the need to maintain the unique identity and aspirations of local culture.

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