



EMERALD POINTS

**PRECARITY  
AND  
INSECURITY IN  
INTERNATIONAL  
SCHOOLING**

New Realities and New Visions

**TRISTAN BUNNELL  
ADAM POOLE**



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New Realities and New Visions

BY

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# THE CONTINUOUS GROWTH: THE EMERGENT NATURAL STAGE OF ANOMIE

## THE CONTEXT

### The Core Thesis of This Book: A 'Growth Paradox'

Our book is concerned with the lived experience of teaching and working in a substantially growing area of 'International Education' activity that might best be termed loosely as 'International Schooling'. Dugonjic-Rodwin (2021, p. 6) identifies 'international education' as a 'global field – based on the specific institutions and categories of perception that have shaped it.' Within this broad 'global field' of schooling, there exists a continuously growing domain of 'private, K-12, English-immersion' (Tarc, Mishra Tarc, & Wu, 2019, p. 666) educational institutions termed loosely as 'international schools'. Such schools defy consensus definition, but one perspective (Bunnell, 2019a, p. 10) views this area of schooling as involving:

*Schools delivering a curriculum either solely or partly through the medium of English but largely outside an English-speaking nation, unless the school also offers an international curriculum.*

Much data exists about the growth of these institutions globally. The England-based market-intelligence agency 'ISC Research' is mapping growth worldwide, as they have been since 1995, using a definition closely aligned with the one above (which can be contested academically, and is anyway constantly being tweaked). From that well-established data-source we know that the global body of international schools has grown enormously over the past few decades, after many decades of slow growth, and is expected to

further expand in the future. This issue, of phenomenal continuous growth, forms the bedrock of our book.

From a stable base of about 500–1,000 international schools until 1990, the number reached 2,500 at the turn of The Millennium, involving 90,000 ‘international school teachers’ (now often termed simply ‘ISTs’, so we will use this term) and 1 million children. The number of international schools hit the 6,000-mark in January 2012 (Bunnell, 2014), and it was reported (Stacey, 2020) that in July 2020 there were 6 million children attending 11,600 schools globally being taught by 560,000 teachers. The total value of the arena (based solely on fee revenue), which was USD 47 billion in 2018, is expected to hit USD 67 billion by 2022 (Morrison, 2019a), revealing the extent to which this has become ‘big-business’.

The degree of continuous growth is quite staggering. The 12,000-mark was hit in January 2021, therefore revealing a growth rate between 2012 and 2021 of almost exactly *two schools per day*, and a compound growth rate of 8% per annum.

Subsequently, this is now truly an ‘international’ arena of schooling, covering 239 nations (Holmes, 2019). Overall, 31 countries by 2019 had over 100 international schools; there were 306 in Dubai, 169 in Shanghai, and 142 in Beijing. Enrolment in The Middle East rose 21% between 2015 and 2019, reaching a total of 1.7 m in July 2019 (Stacey, 2020). Saudi Arabia alone has plans for another 700 schools by 2030 (Holmes, 2019). Consequently, by 2019 the United Arab Emirates had the most students, and China had the most schools. Over half (3.7 million) of the students are in schools in Asia (including the Middle East), revealing a new geo-political epicentre of activity centred around Vietnam. Understandably, one scholar has remarked upon the ‘Great Asian Gold-Rush’ (Machin, 2017).

Our book is concerned with ‘making sense’ of the continuous growth of the teaching cadre. We can observe from the figures presented above, that the number of teachers had increased between 2000 and 2020 by an *extra* 24,000 per year. The past two decades had seen an increase in total number of teachers of 516% (Merriman, 2020). We know that about 14,000 of those extra teachers each year came from Britain, although reports were even saying this figure had risen to 18,000, after 2015. It is true to say that in recent years the overall growth of the teaching body has been even higher than the two-decade average (Speck, 2019); the total body of teachers rose by one quarter between 2015 and 2019 alone, equal to an annual compound growth of 6%, or 27,500. It is predicted that by 2030, the total number of teachers will be one million, working in 20,000 international schools. Within this context of

enormous continuous growth, the lived experience and social reality of working in the arena as an expatriate teacher becomes of importance.

Our book is especially concerned with the paradoxical fact that the arena continues to be successful at both attracting and retaining teachers (even though they are continuously coming from the same Anglo-Saxon nations: we will use this term, as others have also e.g. Rey, Bolay, & Gez, 2020), whilst at the same time it continues to become more precarious and insecure. This ‘growth paradox’ was first presented by Bunnell (2019a), in a previous *Emerald Points* book.

The geo-political shifts described above point to enormous growth in recent years in areas of the world that are both historically foreign and potentially fragile with regards to an elite model of private English-speaking schooling. The huge growth of international schools in the Middle east and mainland China in particular involves a complex set of increased social, economic, and spatial insecurities (see the paper about stealth marketisation in Asia by Kim & Mobrand, 2019, for a more detailed discussion of that thesis).

A strong thesis emerges here that the continuously growing teaching force encounters much insecurity and precarity yet is content to move from school-to-school, staying within the arena, and has developed strategies that allow it to cope and survive. Moreover, we posit that ISTs are gaining from their transitional experiences a wealth of social and symbolic capital that can develop and benefit the accumulation of resilience. We call this ‘resilience capital’. In this regard, the insecurity and precarity of working in the continuously growing arena of international schooling requires a fresh, more nuanced interpretation of the lived social reality (viewing it as precarious yet a positive experience, not just a negative one) and new visions (viewing the experiences as building stamina, confidence, and resilience, helping to aid further transitions). This fresh perspective is important, as it allows us to make sense of the continuous growth, despite the emergent increasing sense of insecurity and precarity.

Further, it is the continuous growth of teachers from a few English-speaking nations that adds a twist to our thesis. Major shifts have occurred since the 1990s and will be described later in this chapter. However, one should be careful not to over-exaggerate the changes, and one constant theme remains i.e. there is still one assumption to be made, even though most have broken down, to be replaced instead by presumptions of guarantees that may or not be secure (Bunnell, 2019a). The arena continues, in spite of enormous change and geographical spread, to be dominated by educators born-and-trained in Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking nations in spite of the huge movement towards schooling ‘local’ children. Put more simply, the arena remains dominated by educators who have left either Britain or America. At the same

time, we know little about their reality in terms of motives, aspirations, and concerns. This gap in knowledge is at the core of our book's attention. Moreover, we feel that we need to get this from the mouths (voices) of the teachers themselves, in the interests of epistemic justice. Therefore, our book will make use of data collected from five expatriate Anglo-Saxon teachers working in China, so we can hear and learn what the IST is coping with.

It has to be noted, however, that in some schools the host-country national teachers are actually in the majority, proving that we can no longer make strong assumptions about this arena of schooling. This is what we see as being a 'new reality'. Our book will explore the new, lived reality of working as an overseas expatriate in what Adam Poole (2018) coined the 'Chinese Internationalised School' (CIS), a growing sub-arena where Anglo-Saxon teachers represent a minority (see also Wright, Ma, & Auld, 2021 for a discussion of this type of school, in China, which is beginning to attract research attention). The relative minor status of Anglo-Saxon teachers in the 'CIS', which we will cover in more detail in Chapter 2, is in itself a factor that leads to increased precarity. Yet at the same time, these teachers also occupy something of a privileged position, receiving better salaries and benefits than their host-country colleagues. Rey et al. (2020) have referred to this contradiction, based upon studies in five locations around the world, in terms of what they call 'precarious privilege' and our new book builds upon this nuanced proposition that the arena, for the expatriate educators at least, is both precarious, and privileged, at the same time. This is what we see as being a 'new vision'.

We ought to point out here and now that we are aware that the voice of the lesser-privileged non-expatriate teacher (which is also perhaps non-White and non-English native language-speaking) is becoming increasingly valid yet remains squeezed out by the research discussion. Whilst Poole's works, since 2019, have consistently presented the voices of Chinese, South African and French teachers in a CIS, the literature tends to involve Anglo-Saxon educators (of which Bunnell and Poole are two) reporting on the lives of other Anglo-Saxon educators. In Chapter 6, we will begin to address this need for the decolonisation of the literature by reporting on the precarity experienced by a female Chinese teacher (Sandy) in a school in China. We believe this vital if the literature is to truly move towards a *Sociology of International Schooling*. However, for the present, our book is concerned with the lived reality of being an expatriate Anglo-Saxon (White) teacher working and transitioning overseas/abroad in the arena.

The growing contradictions and tensions of the arena arguably add to the precarity, placing the expatriate teachers who both enter it and transition within it in a complex moral maze of activity. Teacher turnover is very high, as

it always was. Yet, at the same time, surprisingly few leave the arena (in other words, the attrition rate seems low) and that fact points to a fascinating paradox regarding continuous growth; how can we make sense of the continuous growth of an arena of schooling that is increasingly precarious and insecure? This essential question lies at the heart of our new book, which seeks to identify and explain the strategies that educators are using to both navigate and cope with the changing landscape. Put simply, the arena of ‘English-speaking international schooling’ (there also exists, for example, a well-established global body of ‘French-speaking international schooling’, worthy of its own study as a workplace, and which would further help to decolonise the literature: See Chapter 1 in Bunnell, 2019a) paradoxically continues to grow and prosper whilst attracting new entrants and retaining those already within, yet on the surface looks increasingly less appealing and more unsettling. This important ‘growth paradox’ requires investigation, and some theorisation, and our book is part of that journey towards discovery.

### The Concept of the ‘International School’

We do not intend to spend time here defining the ‘international school’. This contentious concept is well covered by previous books (see Bunnell, 2014; Bunnell, 2019a). The key point to observe from the previous section is that ‘international schools’ in general can be broadly identified as ‘private schools outside an English-speaking nation delivering a non-local curriculum largely in English’, and emerging stories from around the world (e.g. Wright et al., 2021, in China) now use this definition. Wu and Koh (2021, p. 1) discuss how:

*There has been a notable growth of international schools over the past two decades, fueled by a widening appeal of global-oriented, English-medium education among middle-class families in several fast-developing Asian economies.*

It is now observed critically that such transnational spaces of schooling are ‘cosmopolitan enclaves’ (Rey & Bolay, 2020). Moreover, it is a constantly morphing ‘enclave’, a fact which underpins any discussion about the lived reality of the arena as a workplace and career-option. It is traditionally modelled on the 1924-established International School of Geneva, alongside the 1962-established United World College of The Atlantic. Both these institutions had pioneered the 1968 Geneva-registered International Baccalaureate (IB), and along with the 1958-established United Nations International School in New York have acted as role-models of activity and form.

However, as we will later discuss, this ‘ideal’ model, representative of a by-gone ‘ideal epoch’ (Bunnell, 2014) with its ‘Geneva Distortion’ (Bunnell, 2019a), is now a rapidly diminishing species. This is arguably adding to insecurity about entering an arena where assumptions about purpose, mission, and outcomes were previously strong. This current situation was summarised (Bunnell, 2019a, p. 7) as follows: ‘We can now make few assumptions about identity, or purpose and task, and this fact epitomises the “New Era”’. For example, research among Israeli children attending international schools overseas has begun to question (Flesh, Lee, & Yemini, 2021) the degree to which such a schooling experience can promote a cosmopolitan (global citizenship) identity. Such a sceptical dimension is arguably a new, critical discourse.

This story, of post-War innovation and collaboration, immediately reveals the nineteenth century, Northern European roots and the emphasis on pre-university level schooling within an English-speaking teaching and learning context that has historically and traditionally catered for an exclusive transient global elite that seeks both repatriation and reproduction at a pragmatic level, and a new world order at an ideological and idealistic level (this historical development is well told in Bunnell, 2014, and therefore will not be developed further in this book). In this sense, a fundamental dichotomy of educational approach has always been identified, forming in practice a dilemma of approach between the pragmatic (market-led/globalist) and the ideological (internationalist). It is the dominant shift in approach towards the former approach that best epitomises the current scene and is causing seismic shifts in the way the arena is both conceptualised and experienced.

Traditionally, the curriculum offered by the independent, private international school tends to be a non-local one and is increasingly a bilingual one or British-based one, but still delivered in the main by native English-speaking teachers derived largely from North America and Britain. Inter-connected, the curriculum aims to deliver the experiences, rituals, attributes, skills, and knowledge that are deemed useful and valuable within a global context. In other words, the school are all somehow ‘global in outlook’.

This is what holds the sector together. In practice, this means the schools seek to facilitate, largely in English and via both the formal and informal curriculum, the delivery of ‘international mindedness’ or ‘global competency’. It is this dimension of schooling activity that gives it the ‘International’ aspect, and the rather clumsy term ‘International School’ is a well-used and well-entrenched umbrella term for identifying the plethora of institutions that operate in the diverse, and hugely growing landscape.

Thus, the 1972-established International School of London (in England), a pioneer of the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) which it introduced in 1976, is

included in the lens and scope of inquiry, as is the International School of London's overseas branch in Doha (ISLQ), which emerged in 2008 as a result of Qatar's 2002 *Education for a New Era* policy, which advocated introducing into Qatar's educational market 'outstanding' examples of international schooling. This arena is now an incredibly complex mixture of schooling institutions offering an uncertain and precarious sets of pathways for the IST. We believe it is time that it was greater understood and theorised. Moreover, the reality of working within it warrants greater attention.

### The Radically Changing Landscape

We have seen already how the arena of English-speaking international schooling has grown quite suddenly but it needs to also be considered that it has at the same time changed quite significantly. It is important to fully grasp the enormity of the changes that have occurred, often quite unexpectedly, in recent decades as this changing landscape adds significantly to the sense of insecurity and precarity.

It is the demographic shift that has been the most apparent and extensive, towards serving a more localised, national clientele; in fact, it is now oft-said that 80% of children are so-called 'locals' (a term that still defies theorisation, and 'regionals' might often be more apt). There has been a further, fundamental, shift in ownership and governance, with much of the current growth being among networks of schools mainly operated for-profit (such as GEMS Education, Cognita and Nord Anglia), and the field overall is much less reliant on the Western-based accreditation agencies that previously served it. This changing landscape is significant, as it presents a very unpredictable base for transition between schools.

Five key global trends became very noticeable by 2020 (Holmes, 2019); Asia and Middle East is driving growth: the entry of locals is driving a broadening of the market; accreditation is dwindling and characterising the premium-sector; a bilingual offering and fusion of curriculum is driving supply; and branding is becoming increasingly important for differentiation in the crowded market. All of these trends seem characteristic of a growing, maturing, and increasingly diversified market where there is increasingly depth, as well as breadth. Indeed, ISC Research by 2020 was classifying the market as having three sectors; these are based upon price, not quality, and classified as 'premium', 'mid-market', and 'low' (noticeably, very similar to the GEMS Education 'airline model': see Bunnell, 2014). Moreover, it is the 'mid-market' arena of 'affordable fees' where the most growth is occurring globally,

attracting a new, local clientele, in areas such as mainland China. It is perhaps within this arena that one might expect to see a growing sense of insecurity and precarity.

To get a closer feel for the changing activity at a micro-level, consider the following facts. One-third of the 12,000 schools in 2020 are bilingual, and only 14% are accredited (offering a useful demarcation line for potentially identifying a ‘Premium-sector/Tier-1’ mode of activity). Just over half (52%) offer a British-based curriculum (17% offer A-Levels), 21% offer a North American one, and 20% offer IB programmes (15% offer IBDP). Most are still day-schools, and only 13% offer boarding. The growth of for-profit branded networks such as has been very profound, yet surprisingly only 1.15% are affiliated to a sister-organisation.

We can observe that international schooling is no longer closely associated (synonymous) with the delivery of the four programmes of the Geneva-registered International Baccalaureate, especially its Diploma Programme, which the ‘Elite Traditional International Schools: ETISs’ (Bunnell, Donnelly, Lauder, & Whewall, 2020) helped to develop and test in the 1960s. Based upon studying Ecolint and UNIS, Dugonjic-Rodwin (2021, p. 16) identifies the ETIS as being the ‘guardians of international education’; it was found from the studies into the IB-pioneers that the ‘established schools view themselves as guardians of a highly internalized ethos’.

Subsequently, most schools in the field arguably lack legitimacy and credibility as an ‘International’ institution since the delivery of an international curriculum that facilitates the values, attributes, and skills of ‘International Mindedness’ (IM) can be considered central to the ‘institutional primary task’ of an institution that claims to be an ‘International School’ (Bunnell, Fertig, & James, 2017). In this respect, many educators entering the field are finding themselves in a setting that might seem quite unsettling, both physically and emotionally.

Most schools are now non-accredited, meaning no external agency reinforces standards or procedures. Only about 500 schools are accredited by the major agency, the Council of International Schools (CoIS). Moreover, according to ISC Research data, only about 20% of all schools are accredited by any agency at all, giving rise to perceptions that a ‘premium-sector’ or ‘Tier-1 domain’ of activity exists. At the same time, some schools undergo ‘internal’ accreditation and inspection. Schools in China, for example, may not be inspected by an ‘international’ accreditation agency, yet they are inspected by the local education bureau. This has the effect of emphasising the national aspects of the school – such as ideological education, symbolic education – and negating the more international aspects – offering a tense