

## COMPARATIVE EDUCATION IN A MICROCOSM: METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS SECTOR IN HONG KONG

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**Abstract** – Many studies in the field of comparative education take national education systems as the basic unit of analysis. The present paper has been conceived within this tradition, but has a different angle of approach. It focuses on 47 international schools in a small territory. Some of the international schools were grouped into larger systems but others were free-standing institutions. The focus of the paper thus lies at an intersection between cross-national and intra-national comparisons. It makes methodological observations on the nature of comparisons that are possible within such a microcosm, and on the conceptual lessons that can be derived from such analysis.

**Zusammenfassung** – Viele Studien im Bereich der vergleichenden Bildung nehmen nationale Bildungssysteme als Basiseinheit von Analysen. Der vorliegende Artikel wurde im Rahmen dieser Tradition erstellt, hat aber einen unterschiedlichen Ansatzwinkel. Er konzentriert sich auf 47 internationale Schulen in einem kleinen Gebiet. Einige der internationalen Schulen wurden in größere Systeme zusammengefasst, andere waren freistehende Institutionen. Schwerpunkt dieses Artikels ist somit eine Mischung aus internationalen und nationalen Vergleichen. Es wurden methodologische Beobachtungen über die Art von innerhalb eines solchen Mikrokosmos möglichen Vergleichen durchgeführt, sowie über konzeptuelle Lehren, die von einer solchen Analyse abgeleitet werden können.

**Résumé** – De nombreuses études sur l'éducation comparée prennent comme unité de base de leur analyse les systèmes éducatifs nationaux. La présente contribution a été élaborée selon cette tradition, mais sous un angle d'approche différent. Elle se concentre sur 47 écoles internationales situées sur un périmètre limité. Certaines d'entre elles appartiennent à des systèmes plus vastes, d'autres sont des institutions autonomes. L'accent de cet article porte donc sur l'intersection entre les comparaisons transnationales et nationales. Les auteurs émettent des observations méthodologiques sur la nature des comparaisons possibles à l'intérieur d'un tel microcosme, et sur les enseignements conceptuels pouvant être tirés de cette analyse.

**Resumen** – Muchos de los estudios que se realizan sobre la educación comparativa toman el sistema de educación nacional como unidad básica del análisis. El presente trabajo se ha concebido dentro de esta tradición, pero desde una óptica diferente al enfocarse en 47 escuelas internacionales en un territorio limitado. Algunas de las escuelas internacionales se han agrupado en sistemas mayores, pero otras se han considerado instituciones independientes. Así, este estudio vendría a presentar una intersección entre las comparaciones internacionales e intranacionales. Realiza observaciones metodológicas sobre la naturaleza de las comparaciones posibles dentro de un microcosmo de esa clase y sobre las lecciones conceptuales que se pueden deducir de ese análisis.



**Резюме** – Во многих исследованиях в области сравнительного образования национальная образовательная система принимается за основу в проведении анализа. Данная статья была задумана согласно такой традиции, хотя в ней присутствует и другой подход. В статье ставится акцент на 47 международных школах, расположенных на небольшой территории. Некоторые международные школы были сгруппированы в более крупные системы, а другие оставались автономными учреждениями. Таким образом, акцент в данной статье ставится на пересечении межнациональных и внутринациональных сравнений. Приводятся методологические наблюдения относительно природы сравнений, которые являются возможными внутри такого микрокосма, и относительно концептуальных уроков, которые можно извлечь из проведения такого анализа.

The field of comparative education is strongly dominated by cross-national perspectives. Most comparative textbooks reflect this emphasis, and some textbooks do not even mention the value of comparing patterns within a single country.

One cause of this separation is the common use in comparative education of the system as the focus for analysis. Rust (2001: iii) remarked that most comparative educators “would likely feel comfortable with the notion that comparative education deals mainly with the analysis of educational systems and problems in two or more national contexts”. Education systems in different countries are an explicit unit of analysis in many comparative education studies (e.g. Ignas and Corsini 1981; Postlethwaite 1988; Le Métais 2001).

In some respects this paper is framed within this tradition, but it takes a rather different approach from the mainstream literature. The paper lies at an intersection of cross-national and intra-national studies. It focuses on systems of education, but some of these systems are single institutions or even parts of institutions. The paper does make some cross-national comparison of education systems, but only through consideration of institutions which are geographically detached from their parent systems in other countries.

The arena on which this paper focuses is the international schools sector in Hong Kong. In 2000/2001 the sector had 47 institutions which could be grouped into 36 systems. Hong Kong has an area of just 1,097 square kilometres, and the paper shows wide diversity among the systems operating within this small area. Thus, the paper takes Hong Kong as a microcosm, and explores the nature of the systems which operate within it. The paper shows how the tools of comparative education can be used to enhance understanding of the existence, operation and evolution of the large number of education systems in this small space.

In some ways, the focus of the paper resembles that by Raffe et al. (1999), who compared the education systems of the United Kingdom (UK) and, using a metaphor from football, made a case for study of “home internationals” in comparative research. As the authors explained (p. 9):

The UK is represented by four “national” football teams, those of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Matches between these teams were once called “home internationals”. Each home country of the UK has its own education and training system; this paper presents the case for “home international” comparisons of these systems.

The authors added (p. 10) that the differences among the UK systems

are not just a nuisance and a problem to be coped with. They are also an opportunity for research . . . [and] a source of empirical and theoretical challenges and of lessons for policy and practice.

Similar observations might be made about the international schools sector in Hong Kong.

### **Definitions**

Two terms require definition in order to set the framework for this paper. The first is “system”, and the second is “international school”.

Allport (1955: 469) defined a system as:

any recognizably delimited aggregate of dynamic elements that are in some way interconnected and interdependent and that continue to operate together according to certain laws and in such a way as to produce some characteristic total effect. A system, in other words, is something that is concerned with some kind of activity and preserves a kind of integration and unity; and a particular system can be recognised as distinct from other systems to which, however, it may be dynamically related.

This area of scholarship is complex, and has been debated extensively in the decades since Allport wrote the definition (see e.g. Lockett and Spear 1980). Nevertheless, the definition is adequate for present purposes. Specifically in the domain of education, Archer (1984: 74) noted that education systems are created when the component parts cease to be disparate and unrelated sets of establishments or independent networks and instead become interrelated to form a unified whole.

On this definition, Hong Kong has a territory-wide education system which primarily serves the local Chinese population, is supervised by the government’s Education and Manpower Bureau, and is distinct from education systems elsewhere. For many years, official publications (e.g. Hong Kong 1981; Education Commission 2000) have explicitly referred to it as a system; and comparative analyses would readily expose differences between the Hong Kong education system and those of neighbouring jurisdictions such as Macau and mainland China (Bray and Koo 1999; Law 2000). The international schools on which this paper focuses operate within the territory of Hong Kong but are outside the Hong Kong education system. In 2000/2001, the international schools comprised approximately 4 per cent of the total number of

schools in Hong Kong. This might seem a low percentage; but the paper will show that the small group contains much of interest.

The second term to be defined is “international school”. In some settings, international schools are defined according to their curriculum, which might be oriented, for example, towards the International Baccalaureate (IB) (Jonietz and Harris 1991). In other settings, international schools are defined by their student intakes (Preston 2001: 70). In Hong Kong the term is defined loosely to embrace all schools outside the local education system. One government publication (Education Department 1995: 4–5) has defined international schools as:

schools which follow a non-local curriculum and whose students do not sit for the local examinations (e.g. Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination). They are operated with curricula designed for the needs of a particular cultural, racial or linguistic group or for students wishing to pursue their studies overseas.

Some of Hong Kong’s so-called international schools are in fact national schools based on systems in foreign countries and almost exclusively serving nationals of those countries. The Japanese and Korean schools are in this category. Others schools adopt the curricula of particular foreign countries but accept many students from Hong Kong and from other parts of the world. In 2000/2001, only seven schools were international in the sense of being oriented towards the International Baccalaureate or comparable objectives.

## **The international schools sector in Hong Kong**

### *Factors underlying growth*

The international schools sector has deep roots, but was small until the 1980s. The history of the sector appears to date from the opening in 1855 of a school financed from public subscriptions which catered for over 100 children of 10 nationalities (Sweeting 1990: 148). This school only lasted for five years; but it was replaced in due course by other institutions. One successor institution was the Kowloon British School, which was established by the government in 1902. It was later renamed the Central British School, and then King George V School. Other schools for non-local children were opened as the 20th century progressed; but in the early 1970s they numbered only about a dozen.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the sector expanded dramatically. Although almost 98 per cent of the population were of Chinese ethnicity, economic prosperity both in Hong Kong and mainland China led to employment of many foreign nationals. Kwong (1993: 147) observed that economic boom in the early 1990s “attracted thousands of foreign companies to set up beachhead operations in Hong Kong”. Still larger in number were existing operations that extended their reach into China; and, as Kwong added (1993: 147), “along

with these movements of companies came thousands of professionals and entrepreneurs from all over the world”.

Table 1 shows statistics on foreign residents in the years 1992 to 2000. Some of the residents, particularly the nationals of Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, were domestic helpers whose contracts prohibited dependents from residing in Hong Kong; but most other categories included considerable numbers of children who sought education in international schools. The statistics should be interpreted with caution since some categories included people who had been Hong Kong residents, had migrated to foreign countries, had acquired passports from those countries, and had then returned. However, most of these people retained Hong Kong identity cards, and few registered with the government’s Immigration Department.

The migration of Hong Kong citizens during the 1980s and 1990s was fuelled by the prospect of Hong Kong’s reversion of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to mainland China in 1997. Fearing the implications of communist rule, many families emigrated to Australia, Canada and the USA. Some families which planned to emigrate placed their children in international schools in order to prepare the children for anticipated lifestyles in the destination countries. At a later stage, many families returned to Hong Kong and sought international schools because their children needed continuity with the types of education that they had received abroad. As 1997 grew closer, the number of schools serving local families who intended to migrate diminished, but an increase in the number of returning families maintained demand for international schools. Decisions to return were encouraged first by awareness that Hong Kong was remaining politically stable, and second by the buoyancy of Hong Kong’s economy compared with the economies of the countries to which the families had migrated.

*Table 1.* Foreign residents in Hong Kong (top 10 countries) 1992–2000.

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000
Philippines	83,800	115,500	128,800	137,500	144,800
Indonesia	11,000	19,700	31,600	44,700	63,800
USA	23,500	29,900	34,700	35,500	34,300
Canada	17,500	24,700	30,600	33,200	32,800
Thailand	19,500	23,800	24,800	26,400	28,400
India	18,000	19,500	22,000	22,400	22,100
UK	18,400	23,700	25,500	*22,700	*21,200
Australia	14,800	18,700	21,200	22,200	21,800
Japan	12,300	17,600	21,800	18,600	15,800
Malaysia	12,600	13,800	14,300	–	–
Nepal	–	–	–	17,400	17,200

\* UK includes the nationalities of British Citizen, British Dependent Territory Citizen, British Overseas Citizen, British Protected Person, and British Subject.

*Source:* Immigration Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

In parallel, many parents who had remained in Hong Kong became increasingly dissatisfied with the local education system, which was widely considered rather rigid and insufficiently child-centred. Reform initiatives endeavoured to tackle these concerns, but ironically increased the misgivings of some parents who felt that the sector was being subjected to a constant stream of changes. Also, shortly after the 1997 change of sovereignty, the government introduced new policies on the medium of instruction. Many secondary schools which had previously taught in English were instead required to teach in Chinese (Adamson and Li 1999: 53). This decision was ostensibly made on pedagogical grounds, but was widely interpreted as a political move. Some parents, aware that it had become more difficult to secure places in English-medium schools in the local system, took a stronger interest in international schools as an alternative route.

A final significant factor was the growing prosperity of Hong Kong families. Between 1965 and 1988 per capita Gross National Product grew at an annual average of 8.1 per cent, and, as observed by Wan (1991: 423), Hong Kong became “one of the world’s high-income economies”. Economic growth continued during the 1990s, albeit with some faltering towards the end of the decade. Within the society, inequalities increased (Bowring 2000); but growing prosperity in the higher-income groups permitted larger numbers of parents to consider sending their children to international schools, most of which charged high fees (Bray and Jeong 1996; Yamato 2003).

#### *Classifying contemporary patterns*

Table 2 lists the 47 international schools operating in 2000/2001. It names each institution, and groups them into several categories. The task of preparing Table 2 required the authors to confront three methodological challenges. Two challenges, which had been anticipated, were to decide which institutions should be defined as international schools, and how to group the schools in terms of systems. The third challenge, which had not been anticipated, was to decide what should and should not be considered a school. These matters deserve some elaboration.

The Hong Kong government produces statistics which identify international schools as a specific category. Thus, in 2000/2001 Hong Kong was said to have 1,302 primary and secondary schools (Education Department 2001), of which 47 were described as international schools and 14 were described as primary and secondary schools operated by the English Schools Foundation (ESF). A separate ESF school catered for children with special needs and served both primary and secondary children.

The distinction in the government statistics between international and ESF schools reflected historical factors. The ESF had been set up in 1967 to provide education for expatriate children on a model which dovetailed with that in England. At that time the ESF institutions were not called international schools, presumably because they were mainly seen as national schools

following the system in one particular country and primarily catering for nationals of that country. Over the next two decades the characteristics of the ESF schools changed. In 2000/2001 their curricula was still mainly based on that in England, and at secondary level included focus on the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) for students in Year 11 and on Advanced (A) levels for students in Year 13. However, the student body had become very multinational compared with its characteristics in 1967. Moreover, one of the five ESF secondary schools was oriented towards the International Baccalaureate as well as towards A levels. As noted above, a 1995 government publication (Education Department 1995: 4–5) had defined international schools as ones which “follow a non-local curriculum and whose students do not sit for the local examinations”. The ESF schools clearly fitted this definition, which added force to the question why they were not simply included in the category of international schools. The answer seems to lie chiefly in the historical precedent. This point underlines the importance of historical understanding for the field of comparative education – an observation which has been made by such scholars as Bereday (1964: 28) Thomas (1998: 191) and Alexander (2001: 508) for the field in general, and with specific reference to Hong Kong by Sweeting (1999).

For the rest of this paper, and disregarding the government’s classification, the ESF schools will be grouped with other international schools. On this basis, the government statistics showed 37 primary schools and 24 secondary schools in the international sector. The problem with these numbers, however, was that the distinction between primary and secondary was derived from the local education system and did not necessarily fit the international schools. Several international schools used the classification of elementary and secondary/middle rather than primary and secondary, and had entry and transition ages that differed from those in the local education system. The problem became even greater when enrolments rather than institutions were concerned, since, for example, Year 1 in the ESF system was equivalent to the upper year of kindergarten in the local system, and the first year of secondary school in the ESF system was equivalent to the last year of primary school in the local system. Three international schools were divided into three sections labelled elementary, middle and high; and several schools which catered for children at both primary and secondary grades considered themselves to be single, unified institutions rather than separate institutions for primary and secondary pupils. This problem of classifying systems is commonly encountered – though also commonly ignored – in cross-national comparisons of education (Johnstone 1981: 50–54). Perhaps it is less expected in intra-national comparisons. The Hong Kong government’s practice of glossing over differences makes it difficult even to answer the simple question of how many international schools exist in the territory. The figures presented in this paper are based on the authors’ understanding of how the institutions would classify themselves rather than on the government’s statistics.

Classifying the international schools by system presented a different type



Table 2. International schools in Hong Kong, by system, 2000/2001.

Category	Name of School	System/Curriculum	Level
English Schools Foundation: 15 schools in one system	Glenealy	England	primary
	Bradbury	England	primary
	Quarry Bay	England	primary
	Kennedy	England	primary
	Peak	England	primary
	Clearwater Bay	England	primary
	Kowloon Junior	England	primary
	Beacon Hill	England	primary
	Shatin Junior	England	primary
	King George V	England	secondary
	Island	England	secondary
	Shatin College	England with IB	secondary
	South Island	England	secondary
	West Island	England	secondary
	Jockey Club Sarah Roe (special needs)	England	primary & secondary
One school, one system (local system)	Sir Ellis Kadoorie Primary	local, but internat. pupils	primary
	Sir Ellis Kadoorie Secondary	local, but internat. pupils	secondary
	HKMA David Li Kwok Po	local + IB	secondary
	Umah International*	local + internat. element	primary
	Hong Kong Poinsettia	local, but Nepalese pupils	primary
Global focus	Li Po Chun United World College	IB	upper secondary
Govt. sponsored; part of foreign systems	Japanese School	Japan	elem. & junior high
	Singapore International	Singapore	primary



Self-affiliation with foreign systems	Australian International School	NSW (Australia)	primary & secondary
	Canadian International School	Ontario (Canada)	elementary & secondary
One school, two systems; official affiliation with foreign systems	Hong Kong International School	"United States"	lower primary, upper primary, middle & high elementary & secondary
	Norwegian International	"North America"	elem., middle & high
	Carmel*	"US-style"	elem., middle & high secondary
	American International	California (USA)	elem., middle & high
	St. Paul's Convent (Australian International)	NSW (Australia)	elem., middle & high
	International Christian	"North America"	elem., middle & high
	Delia School of Canada	Ontario (Canada)	elem., middle & high
	Canadian Overseas International	Ontario (Canada)	elem., middle & high
	Christian Alliance CP Lau Memorial International	Ontario (Canada)	elem., middle & high
	Discovery Bay International	Saskatchewan (Canada)	elem., middle & high
	Kellett	England	elem., middle & high
	Lantau International	England	elem., middle & high
	Kiangsu & Chekiang International Section	England	elem., middle & high
	Chinese International	England	elem., middle & high
	Concordia International	IGCSE + IB	elem., middle & high
	Yew Chung International	North America/Canada	elem., middle & high
	Hong Kong Academy	Mixed, based on England	elem., middle & high
	Sear Rogers	Based on IBPYP	elem., middle & high
	German-Swiss International	IGCSE + England	elem., middle & high
	Japanese International School	Germany	elem., middle & high
	French International	England	elem., middle & high
	Korean International	Japan	elem., middle & high
		Canada/England	elem., middle & high
		France	elem., middle & high
		IGCSE + IB	elem., middle & high
		Korea	elem., middle & high
		England	elem., middle & high

HKMA = Hong Kong Management Association; IB = International Baccalaureate; IGCSE = International General Certificate of Secondary Education; NSW = New South Wales; IBPYP = International Baccalaureate Primary Year Programme.

\* Umah International and Carmel were one-school-one-system institutions, but each had two streams according to pupils' religious affiliation. The main stream in Umah International was for Muslim children, and the main stream in Carmel was for Jewish children.

of challenge. The easiest grouping was that of the ESF schools, which are shown first in Table 2. These schools were administered by a single body and operated as a system with common policies for all institutions and with transfer of teachers and students within the system. Other elements in the classification were more complex.

One complexity is evident in the second group of schools in Table 2, which again raises the question of definition of international school. Some of the schools in this category were run by the Hong Kong government as part of the local system, while others were officially classified as international schools. The first two, the Sir Ellis Kadoorie primary school and its counterpart secondary school, were operated by the Hong Kong government but were international in their student bodies. In 2000/2001, 43 per cent of the primary school pupils were Pakistanis, 29 per cent were Filipinos, 21 per cent were Indians, and 1 per cent were Chinese. In the secondary school, 35 per cent were Pakistanis, 26 per cent Indians, 19 per cent Filipinos, 10 per cent Chinese, and 7 per cent Nepalese. Even at the primary level, unlike the majority of local-system schools, English was the medium of instruction; and whereas most local-system schools were required to recruit the majority of their pupils from the vicinities in which the institutions were located, the pair of Sir Ellis Kadoorie schools had a territory-wide catchment area. However, the curriculum of the secondary school was oriented to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, and in this respect it did not fit the government's previously-quoted definition of international schools (Education Department 1995: 4-5).

The other schools in this category were non-government institutions which again had a combination of local and international features. The main part of the Hong Kong Management Association (HKMA) David Li Kwok Po College was a local secondary school comparable to other local schools and oriented to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, but its upper classes aimed at the International Baccalaureate credentials. The Umah International Primary School had a religious focus as an Islamic institution. It was local in orientation, but used English as the medium of instruction and taught Chinese (Cantonese) and Urdu as subjects and Arabic as an option. Among the 140 pupils in 2000/2001, 40 per cent were non-Muslims of a variety of nationalities, including Hong Kong Chinese, who were not required to follow Islamic studies or attend religious gatherings. The Hong Kong Poinsettia Primary School was a community school opened by a consortium of Nepalese organisations. Again it was local in orientation, but all its 62 pupils in 2000/2001 were Nepalese even though the school was also open to other ethnic groups. The school used English as the medium of instruction, with Nepalese and Chinese (Cantonese) as subjects.

The next category had only one institution, which was in some respects the most international of the international schools. This was the Li Po Chun United World College (UWC). The UWCs, of which in 2000/2001 there were 10 worldwide, aim to recruit students on a global basis. They set maximum

quotas for pupils of different nationalities, and are governed by the regulations of the UWC system. The system aims to foster an international identity among youth by mixing nationalities and following a syllabus leading to the International Baccalaureate. In 2000/2001, 40 per cent of the 250 students in the Li Po Chun UWC were Hong Kong citizens and the remainder came from over 50 countries. Whereas the other international schools in Hong Kong mainly served families who were already resident in Hong Kong, most of the non-local students in the Li Po Chun UWC came to the school from foreign countries as boarding students.

The following category contained two schools, both of which were self-contained bodies in Hong Kong but were part of national systems of education in other countries. The Japanese school was run by a specialist organisation operating under the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology. All teaching of core subjects was in Japanese, and the school therefore catered almost exclusively for Japanese nationals. The Singapore International School was operated by the Singapore government and followed the syllabuses of that country. However, because the Singaporean system operates in English, the school was attractive to non-Singaporeans. In 2000/2001, about three quarters of the pupils in the Singapore International School were Singaporean nationals or permanent residents, and the remaining quarter comprised 16 nationalities including Hong Kong Chinese.

The institutions in the next category were private and community bodies which were oriented towards the education systems of foreign countries but which were not sponsored by the governments of those countries. In many cases, the orientations were defined in a somewhat unfocused way. Thus, three schools claimed to be following “North American” curricula without explaining what that meant. Geographically, North America embraces Mexico, the USA and Canada. Mexico was not part of these schools’ orientations, so in practice the schools meant some combination of approaches from the USA and Canada. Yet even in Canada, different provinces have different systems. This was recognised by four schools, which specified the provinces in which their qualifications were accredited. Some other schools claimed to follow the UK National Curriculum, even though there is no such entity. Closer examination indicated that the schools were oriented towards the curriculum of England rather than Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. This observation emphasises the need in many comparative studies to dig below the surface rather than merely take labels at face value.

The final category was of four schools, each of which had two systems. The German-Swiss International School had a German-language section oriented towards the dominant system in Germany, and an English-medium section which drew heavily on the national curriculum of England. The Japanese International School similarly had a Japanese-medium section which matched the standard model in Japan, and an international section which operated in English. Comparable bifurcation existed in the Korean

International and French International Schools. In the Japanese International, Korean International and French International Schools, pupils in the international streams paid higher fees than did pupils in the national streams.

## **Comparing education systems**

### *Contexts and mobility*

Cross-national comparisons of education systems usually place considerable emphasis on the social, economic and political contexts. This is a key element in Bereday's (1964: 28) classic model, for example. More recently, Crossley and Jarvis (2001) have stressed that "context matters . . . at all levels and in many forms". Similarly, Le Métais (2001: 197) has observed that "context . . . goes a long way to explain the success or failure of specific teaching and learning approaches". Consideration of context is of course as necessary for intra-national as for cross-national comparisons.

In some respects, school systems in a microcosm may have more contextual factors in common than school systems in different countries. Thus all school systems in Hong Kong operate within the territory's legal, political and economic framework; all the school premises are constrained by high land prices; and all pupils' residences are urban or at least semi-urban. Further, most (though not all) international schools serve the top income-groups in the society; and almost all families have international orientations and close relatives abroad. When two systems exist within a single institution, the extent of commonality is greater still.

Despite these commonalities, however, differences in the communities served by the institutions may make the contextual diversity almost as great as in cross-national comparisons. Thus the Japanese schools, for example, serve a very different community from the French-speaking part of the French International School, the German-speaking part of the German-Swiss International School, and the Korean-speaking part of the Korean International School. Their media of instruction, curricula and internal modes of operation are very different. The cultural norms of the families which the schools serve may not be quite so different as they would be in Japan, Germany, France and Korea; but the cultural norms do tend to be quite distinctive.

Nevertheless other parts of the international schools sector, and particularly the systems which operate in English, may have more in common. Despite the fact that some systems are oriented to the national curriculum of England while others are oriented to Australian, Canadian, US or Singaporean curricula, the target clienteles of the schools overlap. Indeed considerable mobility of pupils may be identified between the school systems. This mobility is partly stimulated by differences in fee levels, but also reflects parental views on the prestige hierarchy and on the types of teaching approaches which best fit their children's needs. All international schools also have considerable

mobility of pupils and teachers from and to systems outside Hong Kong. This mobility is much greater than would normally be found between education systems in cross-national studies. The internal mobility partly reflects geographic proximity and the fact that pupils and teachers who wish to transfer from one system to another do not have to negotiate national borders or other obstacles. Both the internal and the external mobility also reflect the philosophies of the institutions. International schools, by their nature, welcome diversity and are able to cope with it. By contrast, the local Hong Kong system is much less welcoming of diversity, and is much less adequately prepared to cope with it. Thus, there is also considerable mobility from the local Hong Kong system to the international schools sector, but very little mobility in the opposite direction.

#### *Comparisons of achievement*

Many cross-national studies, particularly those conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), have compared the academic achievements of pupils in different national systems of education (Postlethwaite 1998; Broadfoot 1999). These comparisons have endeavoured to identify the impact of different inputs, in part through investigation of the “natural laboratory” presented by the diversity of national settings. Thus, the IEA second study of science, for example, collected data from 24 education systems in 23 countries within which average pupil-teacher ratios for 10-year-old pupils varied from 51.8 in the Republic of Korea to 11.8 in Hungary. The number of years of post-secondary education received by teachers ranged from 0.9 in Italy to 4.5 in Philippines; and the proportion of teachers who were male ranged from 58.3 per cent in the Republic of Korea to 7.0 per cent in Israel (Postlethwaite and Wiley 1992: 19, 22).

Similar sorts of diversity could be accessed within the microcosm of Hong Kong; but the natural laboratory would have the added advantage of holding some contextual variables more firmly constant than would be possible in cross-national comparisons. This highlights the potential of a research agenda which has not yet been embarked upon. The research would be much less costly in a microcosm than in cross-national settings, because it could be conducted by an individual or a small team and would not require international travel. Analysis would have to confront the different structures and orientations of the curricula in the different systems of Hong Kong’s international schools, but such differences would be no greater than those encountered in cross-national studies.

Yet while to date no systematic comparisons of pupil achievement have been undertaken across the school systems in Hong Kong, the institutions and sponsoring bodies do make their own comparisons with counterparts in the national systems with which they are affiliated. The ESF, for example, compares its students’ scores in the GCSE and A Level examinations with the

UK average and with the scores of the UK independent schools. Similarly, performance in the Hong Kong International School is benchmarked against comparable institutions in the USA; and the Canadian International School compares its pupils' achievements with the results of achievement tests administered in Canada. Such assessments are thus a form of cross-national comparison.

### *Systems of different sizes*

Comparison of the different systems in Hong Kong's international schools sector is made more complex by the wide variations in the size of systems. At the top end of the scale is the ESF with 15 schools, and at the bottom end are systems which have only half a school. Between these extremes are systems which have only single schools and which themselves have considerable variation in size. Thus Concordia, for example, operated at only the secondary level with as few as 60 students in 2000/2001. By contrast, the Chinese International School operated from Reception to Year 13 and had 1,200 students.

Yet while from a methodological perspective this variation in size could indeed be problematic, it is no more problematic than the common practice of taking the country as the unit of analysis. Thus UNESCO publications, for example (e.g. UNESCO 2000: 121–171), commonly present tables which allocate large and small countries the same amount of space – usually a single line. A similar practice is found in many IEA publications which rank the achievement scores identified by researchers in different countries (e.g. Postlethwaite and Wiley 1992: 48–81; Elley 1993: 19–22). The same practice is followed in some publications of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (e.g. OECD 2001a).

At the same time, size of system could itself be a worthwhile dimension for analysis. In this respect, researchers might focus on the implications of size of systems within microcosms just as they have focussed on the size of national systems of education. As in the literature on education in small countries (e.g. Bray and Packer 1993; Crossley and Holmes 1999), analysis of small systems would show both strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths would be flexibility, and therefore ability to adjust rapidly to changing market needs; but among the weaknesses would be vulnerability arising from lack of supporting infrastructure. In 2001 the vulnerability of single-system schools was demonstrated by the abrupt collapse of the Canadian Overseas International School (*South China Morning Post*, 28 October 2001). By contrast, the schools which were part of larger systems, either as part of foreign school systems or through groupings such as the ESF, had stronger support structures.

*Costs and financing*

Cost analysis in education is a complex task, first because government budgets are rarely divided according to the types of categories which interest educational researchers, and second because detailed, consistent and reliable data on non-government expenditures are very difficult to collect. Cross-national comparisons are especially complex because tabulation of data by country requires adoption of a common currency.

In most international comparisons, the US dollar is chosen as the common currency. Thus Mingat and Tan, for example (1992: 31), presented data on unit costs of higher education expressed in US dollars in 11 Asian countries. Yet even assuming (which is a very major assumption) that within individual countries the data can be collected in complete, accurate and comparable ways, conversion of cost figures from national currencies to US dollars encounters two major methodological problems. The first concerns the exchange rate, which can fluctuate even from day to day, let alone from month to month or year to year. The second concerns the purchasing power, i.e. the amount that the equivalent of US\$100 can purchase in different economies. Thus in Philippines, for example, the cost of living is generally much lower than in the Republic of Korea, meaning that the equivalent of US\$100 could purchase a larger basket of goods and services in Philippines than in the Republic of Korea.

One solution to the problem of different prices is to express such tables in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) dollars rather than in real dollars. This is the practice commonly followed by the OECD, for example (e.g. OECD 2001b: 67). This method does at least address the matter; but it nevertheless relies on survey data and underlying assumptions about what elements should be included in the calculation which may not be fully valid.

For internal comparisons, these methodological issues are much less problematic. First, the question about exchange rates does not arise, because everything is already in a common currency. Second, while one might find different purchasing powers within different regions of a single country, the range of disparities is usually much less than the range across different countries. In Hong Kong, being a compact territory with excellent communications, regional differences in purchasing power may be considered so minor that, for present purposes, they can be ignored.

Systematic and complete data on unit costs in Hong Kong's international schools have not yet been collected. However, in some schools the levels of fees and related charges provide a reasonable proxy for unit costs. This is not the case in all schools, because some institutions receive government subsidies. Thus, the two Sir Ellis Kadoorie schools are operated by the government, and at the primary and junior secondary level are free of charge. The ESF schools are subsidised by the same amount as aided schools in the local education system; and six schools receive government aid through a Direct Subsidy Scheme, namely the Chinese International School, German-Swiss



International School, Hong Kong International School, French International School, Li Po Chun UWC, and HKMA David Li Kwok Po College. The schools operated by agencies of foreign governments are also subsidised; and some schools, including the Australian International, Canadian International, Christian International, Carmel and Umah International Schools do not receive recurrent subsidies but do operate on government land for which they pay only a nominal rent. Other schools, however, are entirely private enterprises, and it may be assumed that their fees are set at a level which covers the unit costs as defined by the owners (i.e. in some cases including a profit element).

Table 3 presents data on the fees and related charges in Hong Kong's international schools in 2001/2002. It shows separately the schools which received recurrent government subsidies and those which did not, thereby grouping the schools in a rather different way from Table 2. Some schools, in addition to the fees, required parents to purchase debentures and imposed other charges.

Among the most striking features of the table is the range in charges. Thus, even among the schools which did not receive recurrent subsidies from the government, at the primary level the fees ranged from HK\$4,800 in Umah International School to HK\$128,535 in Yew Chung International School. Umah International School aimed to educate children, particularly ones in low-income Islamic families, who could not be adequately educated in local Chinese-medium schools. It operated in a building which had been abandoned by a government school, and for which it had to pay only a nominal rent. Renovation of the building and clearing of the grounds had been undertaken voluntarily by the Islamic community. Yew Chung, by contrast, was a very luxurious institution catering for high-income families. Its teachers were paid at much higher levels, and the pupils studied in very comfortable surroundings.

Also striking in Table 3 are the high fees among some schools receiving government subsidies. Thus although the ESF schools for example received the same level of subsidy as aided schools in the local system, which permitted (and require) the local schools to be free of charge, the ESF schools charged HK\$47,200 per primary pupil and HK\$78,600 per secondary pupil per annum. The ESF used the income not only to improve facilities but also to employ expatriate teachers on higher salaries than their counterparts in the local education system. In 2000, households in Hong Kong with monthly incomes of HK\$60,000 and over comprised only 10.4 per cent of the total number of households (Bowring 2000). The largest group, 17.0 per cent, had household incomes of only HK\$12,500, followed by 13.5 per cent with HK\$17,500. The ESF schools attracted a significant proportion of children from local families, and the figures on fees reflected the role the ESF, and also other international schools, in stratification of Hong Kong society.

The figures in Table 3 also show the problems that can arise from aggregating data. From a methodological perspective, were researchers in Hong Kong to produce average figures on unit costs per primary or secondary pupil, huge disparities would have been hidden. A similar remark applies to the inter-

national schools sector itself. Common perceptions in Hong Kong are that the sector caters only for the very wealthy; but Umah International School is clearly an exception, and even within the higher-cost schools there exists a considerable range.

One obvious question arising from the figures on unit costs concerns the correlation with learning outcomes. The cross-national study of unit costs conducted by the OECD (2000b: 56) observed that comparison of expenditure per student with academic achievement “shows that lower unit expenditure cannot automatically be equated with lower student performance”. By corollary, a higher unit expenditure cannot automatically be equated with higher student performance. A similar observation would probably be valid in Hong Kong. However, many local parents who send their children to the high-cost international schools do so in order to obtain other qualities in the education system, including an international outlook on life, a less pressurised curriculum, and peers of privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

## Conclusions

Crossley (2001: 57) has pointed out that in the field of comparative education, “much can be learned from alternative units of analysis”. The traditional dominance of the nation state as the favoured unit of analysis has to some extent been challenged in recent years (Bray and Thomas 1995; Alexander 1999; Watson 2001). This particular article has been presented within the context of a tradition in comparative education which takes the system as the unit of analysis, but makes comparisons within a microcosm rather than on a larger scale. Many of the systems in the microcosm are free-standing, but some are affiliated to systems in other parts of the world. As such, the focus of the paper lies at an intersection between cross-national and intra-national comparisons.

One inspiration for the article was the paper by Raffe et al. (1999) about “home internationals” in the United Kingdom. As noted at the outset, Raffe et al. argued (p. 10) that intra-national comparisons can stimulate conceptual insights. This is certainly the case in Hong Kong. Comparison of the systems in which Hong Kong’s international schools are grouped raises questions about the local and more distant forces which shape these systems. Locally, such forces include the dynamics of Hong Kong’s multiracial society, dissatisfaction among many local families with the Hong Kong education system, growing economic prosperity which has permitted many families to consider sending their children to fee-charging schools outside the Hong Kong education system, the labour market which continues to attract overseas professionals and their families to Hong Kong, and the political environment which tolerates plurality in educational provision. Wider forces include the growing mobility of labour which is associated with globalisation, and the international trend towards decentralisation and diversification in educational provision.

Table 3. Annual fees and other charges in international schools, Hong Kong, 2001/2002 (HK\$).

Schools	Annual fee	Other charges
<i>Receiving Recurrent Govt. Subsidies (either Hong Kong or foreign)</i>		
Chinese International	Y1-6 \$83,300; Y7-11 \$98,100; Y12-13 \$99,500	\$75,000 PD or \$7,500 ACL
ESF schools	primary \$47,200; secondary \$78,600	
French International	French stream: pri \$52,020; sec 1st cycle \$60,360, 2nd cycle \$73,860. Internat. stream: pri \$65,130; sec 1-5 \$83,970; IB \$105,000	\$53,000 PD; \$97,000 CD; \$500 application; \$3,600 registration
German-Swiss International	primary \$67,800; secondary \$83,300-\$88,100	\$90,000 debenture
HKMA David Li Kwok Po	secondary 1-3 \$9,000; 4-5 \$13,330; 6 \$23,500; 7 \$29,380	
Hong Kong International School	Grades 6-8 \$113,100; Grades 9-11 \$125,700; Grade 12 \$126,250	\$12,000 ACL; \$15,000 entry; \$1,500 application
Japanese International School	international stream: primary \$70,000	\$45,000 deb. or \$11,500 ACL
Japanese School	elementary \$19,800; junior high \$21,000	\$4,800 ACL
Korean International	international stream: pri \$69,800; sec \$76,800	
Li Po Chun United World College	residential sixth form: \$164,000	
Singapore International	preparatory 1 \$54,000; preparatory 2 \$50,000; primary 1 \$64,000; primary 2-6 \$69,000	\$100,000 CD; \$60,000 PD \$4,000 ACL
Sir Ellis Kadoorie	pri 1-sec 3 no charge; sec 4-5 \$5,050; sec 6-7 \$8,750	
<i>Not Receiving Rec. Govt. Subsidies</i>		
American International	up to G3 \$62,800; G4-6 \$66,400; G7-9 \$72,500; G10-12 \$78,500	
Australian International School*	primary \$71,000; Y7-10 \$81,000; Y7-10 \$85,000	\$75,000 CD; \$50,000 PD

Canadian Overseas International	G1-3 \$58,400; G4-6 \$61,400; G7-9 \$65,400; G10-12 \$8,200 per course	application \$500; insurance \$400
Carmel	kindergarten-G7 Jewish \$87,150; G6-7 internat. \$102,400	application \$200
Christian Alliance CP Lau Mem. Int.	primary \$50,452; G6-9 \$65,856; G10-12 \$72,024	miscellaneous \$1,800-\$3,500; \$500 registration
Concordia International	secondary \$80,000	\$30,000 PD; \$50,000 CD; \$500 registration
Delia School of Canada	G1-8 \$58,000; G9-10: \$64,000; G11-12/OAC \$72,000	\$10,000 ACL; \$2,500 scholarship fee
Discovery Bay International	reception \$51,070; Primary \$68,160	
Hong Kong Academy	kindergarten/primary 1 and above \$83,250	
Hong Kong Poinsettia International Christian Kellett	primary 1 \$5,950; primary 6 \$10,950 primary \$52,000; secondary \$73,000 reception-primary 6 \$79,700	
Kiangsu & Chekiang International	pre-primary \$45,900; primary \$55,000	application \$300; reg. \$300
Lantau International	primary 1 \$43,000; primary 2-6 \$45,000	debuture: \$5,000 (1 child); \$10,000 (>1 child)
Norwegian International	kindergarten I \$37,500; kindergarten - Grade 4 \$55,000; Grades 5-6 \$58,000	application \$600
Sear Rogers	primary \$39,930; Years 7-9 \$45,000; Year 10 \$47,770; Year 11 \$53,010; Years 12-13 \$43,550	miscellaneous \$2,100
St. Paul's Convent (Australian Int.)	secondary \$61,248	
Umah International	primary \$4,800	
Yew Chung International	primary \$128,535; secondary \$131,780	

ACL = Annual Capital Levy; CD = Corporate Debuture; PD = Private Debuture; G = Grade; OAC = Ontario Academic Courses; Pri = Primary; Sec = Secondary; Y = Year

\* for school year 2001

All costs in Hong Kong dollars. HK\$1 = US\$0.128.

Source: Individual Schools.

Raffe et al. also observed (p. 10) that intra-national comparisons can generate lessons for policy and practice. This observation is applicable to Hong Kong as well as to the United Kingdom. This particular paper has not focused in detail on these lessons, but they are numerous and multifaceted. The paper has presented data on differences in fees, which raise questions about the appropriate levels for fees and the ways in which the schools use their revenue. The international schools can also learn much from each other about curricula, methods of teaching, media of instruction, approaches to recruitment of teachers, etc. Lessons can also no doubt be learned from comparing practices in the international schools sector with those in the Hong Kong education system.

So far, the potential of these insights remains rather underutilised. Few academic studies have been made of international schools in Hong Kong, in part because the sector is widely seen as diverse and outside the mainstream. The argument of this paper is that the sector deserves more attention precisely *because* it is diverse and outside the mainstream. More detailed comparison of the different components of the international schools sector in Hong Kong could yield further conceptual as well as practical lessons, and could show the way for related studies in other parts of the world.

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