

A personal view by Andrew Wigford

Building Capacity for International Teacher Recruitment

International schools have been around for over a hundred years, but misconceptions about them abound. Many teachers in many countries still do not know what international schools actually are and what they can offer the career professional. Having been involved in international education for 17 years, it still amazes me that in countries like the UK the vast majority of state school teachers that I meet seem to know precious little about international schools. In fact a popular myth is still that they are places where you teach English as a foreign language.

Over the past four years I have presented workshops on international curricula and international teaching to hundreds of state school teachers in the UK. There has always been a common response from participants, usually associated with absolute amazement. The teachers I have talked to cannot believe that such teaching opportunities are open to them in almost any country in the world. No-one had told them about international schools before. They did not know that they could use their teaching skills, travel the world and develop their career.

‘The vast majority of teachers know nothing about international schools’

Those that have been involved in teaching in international schools for some time often describe the initial discovery of the existence of such schools as almost accidental. But they seem to benefit enormously from the experience. In June and July 2006 Teachers International Consultancy (TIC) carried out some exploratory research with international school teachers and asked a cohort of 66 what benefits they thought they had gained

through their international school experience. A staggering 100% described how their experience had enriched them as a person. Even more impressive were the 89% who said that working in international schools had been good for their career. A third of these teachers said that they would not return to their homelands in the near future, but instead were planning a career within international schools. My question is this: If international schools are that good, why don't more people know about them?



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So why is this an important question to ask right now? According to International Schools Consultancy Research Ltd (www.iscresearch.com) the current number of over 3,700 international schools is set to rise to well over 5,000 by the year 2012. If this assessment is correct, then the impact on recruitment of teachers for international schools could be felt by everyone involved, especially if the number of teachers entering into international

education does not rise at the same rate. Is it sensationalist to say that international schools could be heading towards a crisis in recruitment? Is the pool of candidates dwindling now that experienced international school teachers are being shared by so many more schools?

I have lost count of the number of international school Heads who have told me recently that recruitment seems to be getting harder. Many say that there are just not as many good quality applicants for vacant positions as there used to be. Some Heads say they are now attending job fairs where it seems the recruiters outnumber the candidates. Even some of the well-established international schools are feeling the pinch, with fewer applicants per vacancy than in previous years.

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Job adverts are running for longer and recruitment costs are increasing. The Academy of International School Heads (AISH) recently made a recommendation to set up a recruitment 'task force' to tackle some of the recruitment issues members in their organisation now face, and they are certainly not alone. Similar discussions are taking place around the world and recruitment is becoming more of a 'hot topic' at conferences.

'There are not as many good quality applicants as there used to be'

If this is true, then what can we do about it? How should we act? I believe a collective effort is needed in the international schools community to raise the profile of our schools and to reveal the great opportunities available to teachers. We need to encourage more teachers from countries all over the world to consider international education as a career choice, and we need to start soon if we are to be successful in building the capacity needed.

In the past few months we at TIC have held a number of seminars in different regions of the UK to tell teachers about the opportunities in international schools. The seminars are advertised in the local and national press, and reinforced with editorials and radio show interviews. Getting the word out has been relatively easy in some regions. We had a good reaction from our appearances on BBC Radio (it's a good story after all local teacher spends three years teaching in Colombia). In November 2006 we were featured - with a leading article on the benefits of working in international schools - on the newly re-launched TES jobsite. The response has been incredible, and teachers have been flocking to register on our website ever since. Our seminars have been very well attended and we have plans for more in other UK regions and in Ireland in the new year. We have also held seminars in universities and targeted trainee teachers with the aim of planting the seeds of an idea that can be called upon following a few years teaching experience.

But all this is a drop in the ocean. More needs to be done, and in other countries around the world. If the

number of international schools continues to rise, some predict we may need to attract more than 5,000 new teachers into international education over the next five years. We may need to look further afield to find these teachers than we have done historically. Teachers from English-speaking developing countries such as India may take a more prominent role. Initiatives such as the one being piloted at the Overseas School of Colombo, which encourages its local Sri Lankan teachers to take leave of absence to gain more international experience at other international schools, could be adopted elsewhere. Imagine how many more experienced teachers would be released onto the circuit if this happened on a wider scale.

Our schools may have to change their recruitment policies to accept more teachers who do not have previous international school experience. Recruitment agencies may have to take on more responsibility alongside schools to provide more pre-departure orientation in international teaching. Universities could be encouraged to be more proactive in describing the benefits of teaching overseas to trainee teachers, and include courses on international education in their programmes. Governments could be lobbied to allow longer

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sabbaticals for state school teachers to gain international experience, and persuaded that this could have a positive influence on the career development and international understanding of returning teachers.

We need to get the word out to the world's best teachers that working in an international school is not only a great way to see the world and find adventure; it can also be very good for their career and a tremendously rewarding personal experience. Spreading the word may involve a lot of work, but if we do it together it may well create the impact needed to build capacity for the future.