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# FOSTERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF «RESPONSIBLE WORLD LEADERS»

## The Learning of Corporate Social Responsibility in Swiss International Schools

**Text:** Elisabeth Schubiger, Jeanne Rey, Matthieu Bolay

**Keywords:** *international schools, service learning, performance, elite, corporate social responsibility*

### Introduction

«Well, it is not about being rich or not, all students have similar problems and challenges. It is just that, the students in this school, wherever they are going to, the chance is very high, that one day, they will have a voice.» This is how a teacher explains why she thinks it is important to teach students in international schools human rights and social responsibility. Assuming that international schools contribute to the reproduction of privilege among certain social groups, our aim is to question on which subjects international students are trained to make their «voice» heard and, subsequently, what it means practically to act responsibly. In this article, we relate the pedagogical insistence on «service learning» – a mandatory subject in most international schools – to the broader context of how these schools perform an «international corporate identity». Thus, we suggest that international schools' discourse and practices resonate with the corporate world, training students to become «responsible world leaders» by teaching them codes, standards, and norms similar to those that support the foundational principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR).<sup>1</sup>

We will concentrate on international day schools,<sup>2</sup> which first emerged in response to the needs of employees of international organizations and, more recently, of transnational corporations. While schools catering to a clientele of international students have long existed in Switzerland, since the turn of the millennium, a new generation of schools explicitly branded as «international schools» have started cropping up all over the country. These private schools are often set up as non-profit corporates or as part of a profit-focused education group (for example, Pansophic Learning, Nord Anglia Education, and GEMS Education), or as a private company with shares owned, for instance, by Swiss-based multinational companies. These schools are supported by companies whose expatriate employees' packages usually cover their high tuition fees – one reason why international schools are often considered to be elitist (Dugonjić 2014, Wagner 1998). These schools often follow the International Baccalaureate (IB)<sup>3</sup> programme, instead of a Swiss cantonal curriculum, and share some common criteria such as a multinational body of students, the use of English as a common language, shared values and mission statements, and accreditation by specific organizations.<sup>4</sup> (see next page)

<sup>1</sup> Though initially proposed as a solution to the negative side-effects of various globalized industries, the CSR movement locates ethics and social imperatives within the market rather than the politico-judicial or religious domains. After a fast and prolific career within the world of transnational corporations, the concept is now also used in other international arenas like development and international relations, replacing «aid» and other politics of development with market-based concepts such as entrepreneurialism, self-empowerment, and self-responsibility (Dolan and Rajak 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The schools discussed in this article are urban day schools, in contrast to alpine boarding schools (Rey et al. 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See the International Baccalaureate website for more information: <http://www.ibo.org>. About the decisive role of the IB curriculum in the reproduction of specific international elites, see Dugonjić's PhD thesis (2014).

## The Corporate Performance of International Schools

The international school referred to in this article<sup>5</sup> is located close to the highrise offices of globally renowned companies. It is located 20 minutes from the center of a big city, and yet, it is surrounded by agricultural land. In this town, the landscape is one of villas with expensive cars in their driveways and swimming pools in their backyards.

The huge, modern school describes itself as an «international school». Green hills surround the preschool's playground, creating a picturesque landscape of wild fields with large stone blocks scattered over the grass. A pupil calls out in English, while others sit on the long concrete benches chatting about which sweets from their home country they miss the most. It is 3:30 p.m., cars are waiting in line in the drop-off parking area in front of the building. At the entrance of the school, a friendly receptionist receives visitors, while her colleagues behind the desk continue working busily.

Parents stand in the corridor, speaking to their children in Russian, Indonesian, German, and other languages, or studying pieces of art made by the students, some of which are for sale. A sign next to the pictures states that the earnings will be donated to a partner school in Africa, and that the proceeds will go toward the purchase of books and other school material. Paintings are exhibited in front of the classrooms. Last week's theme had been «human rights», so the paintings show children in war zones or holding hands next to the UNICEF logo. Next to a large world map hangs the school's framed mission statement: «Nurturing and developing the personal and academic skills of each child to shape the global citizens of tomorrow».

This school environment, its buildings, and its surroundings can be considered part of the performance of a transnational business world, or, as Goffman would say, as a theater scene to perform «internationalism» (Goffman et al. 1956). It is no coincidence that such schools are mainly located in smaller towns with low tax rates. Municipalities in peri-urban settings not only offer desirable building sites, but they

also tend to attract taxpayers who settle in these neighborhoods because of the proximity to these educational infrastructures. This infrastructure includes security measures, exemplified by the fences<sup>6</sup> around the perimeter, but also by the hilly playgrounds and erratically placed stone blocks and concrete benches designed to stop any vehicular attack, and the large fire-safe and bulletproof windows. In many such schools, visitors and parents must ring a doorbell and sign in upon arrival. Reception areas not only serve to disseminate information and welcome parents and potential newcomers, as in any other client-oriented business, but also act as a security checkpoint. Thus, the location of international schools are determined by the same factors as a corporate office: the tax rate, security, and commuting options.

Furthermore, the international school's self-portrayal resembles that of a company building with fully functional technical equipment, a type of presentation that is extended to teaching practices (Bolay and Rey 2019). This seemingly businesslike presentation is meant to demonstrate social value, and is thereby a source of social distinction (Bourdieu 1976). Additionally, the charity art projects and the hand-painted posters of the UNESCO declaration evoke the images and slogans commonly associated with CSR strategies. The school's mission statement is prominently displayed in its classrooms, offices, and website, reiterating the message that international education serves to educate «global citizens». This illustrates the school's ambition to cultivate a specific habitus – that is, the actions, dispositions, and tastes of an international community that are reproduced by their daily practical use.

## Service Learning: Incorporating the Donor's Stance

As part of its mission to teach «future global citizens», the IB curriculum offers the subject of Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) and the Service & Action (S&A) programme. These mandatory subjects are considered the core of the IB program, in line with long-standing practices of elite education, notably among English boarding schools (for example, United World College) and American boarding schools (Gaztambide-

<sup>4</sup> These include International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), the European Council of International Schools (ECIS), or organizations such as the International Schools Association (ISA).

<sup>5</sup> In total, 20 international schools were visited between December 2015 and June 2018, five of which were selected for longer periods of immersion in various cities. While each school had a unique history and specificities, the school environment and teaching practices described here are quite similar to several other international day schools that we visited.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast, most public schools in Switzerland do not have fences around their perimeter.

Fernández 2009). Diploma Programme students (16–19 years of age) must show creativity, partake in athletics and physical activities, and must practice social services such as organizing a charity event or visiting people in retirement homes. Students (10–16 years of age) who are in the Middle Years Programme (MYP) are only required to engage in a service project.

In the following example – a CAS lesson being conducted in a graduating class in September 2017 – the CAS coordinator sought to motivate students who had not yet engaged in any service actions by showing them former successful CAS projects: students in one of the well-equipped school rooms are asked by their coordinator to browse KIVA, a website through which people can give loans to others in need all over the world. As there is little reaction, the coordinator tries to wake them up with the story of a former student who had just written him asking for his final CAS report. He needed it because it is necessary to apply to a US university. «Be aware that US universities most often request service hours», the coordinator says.

The students look up the website on their laptops and chat about some of the projects. A group is laughing. When the coordinator passes, he asks them the reason for their amusement. A student points to a project on the website and asks critically, «Why does this man need a car for his business?» In the picture, a man from Slovakia is in front of a hairdresser shop. «I don't know who would invest in that.» A group of girls consider supporting a woman in Peru. When the teacher asks them why they chose that particular woman, the girls answer that they would prefer helping a woman rather than a man, and that other people are asking for too much. A student raises his hand and asks whether spending 25 dollars on one of these projects would count as service. The teacher sarcastically says, «Of course, that is an amazing effort, asking your parents for 25 dollars and investing it through a virtual website! No, of course it needs a little bit more than that!». The teacher then addresses the whole class and explains that previously, a group of students had crafted friendship bracelets, sold them at the yearly bingo night at school, and had earned 80 dollars. They invested it twice in two different projects on KIVA. «That was a project where I could see planning, creativity, and managing being counted as service.»

While volunteering has long been considered an important factor in the recruitment processes of Anglo-Saxon universities, the Service Programme of the IB, on the one hand, seeks to establish an «institutionalized route» (Van Zanten 2009) between school and university and, on the other, reshapes it in two ways. First, it locates community service in a global landscape rather than a local one. Secondly, the perceived value of the community service rests mostly in the students' capacity to

be planners and managers, rather than being determined by the nature of the project chosen (its meaningfulness or transformative potential). A service learning coordinator, while explaining the IB guidelines to a group of parents during a meeting, stated that students are expected to plan, organize, and manage a service on their own, and will thereby learn skills that would be useful for their future lives. Students are asked to write regular reports that are required to track their efforts and also serve to reflect, on an on-going basis, students' activities in accordance with the learning outcomes. In the weekly advisory lessons, the report itself is often a central discussion topic in the lesson. As a CAS coordinator said, «It is not that the reports are not good, but we have to work on them. Don't forget, we are all lifelong learners and need to challenge ourselves. We want to have a plan, not just an idea, but a date, a name of a supervisor, a list of material required, we need evidence of your activities.» This emphasis on competencies, such as planning and managing a project, frames the service programme as a learning arena for leadership skills modeled on corporate reporting practices. In other words, the programme focuses on the student's professional management skills within the frame of educating a «responsible leader», in the sense promoted by CSR discourse.

While the IB curriculum aims among other objectives to raise students' awareness of global inequalities, our observation of the practice of CAS highlights that students are not taught to reflect on the *causes* of these inequalities, which remain unproblematic; instead, they are trained to arrive at *answers* which mirror current ideas in CSR – such as helping people to help themselves through corporate gifts – and which support an ethics of detachment (Cross 2011). The teacher's emphasis on «investing in a social project» where the initial capital will be repaid can be understood as a social and financial investment at the so-called «bottom-of-the-pyramid» (Schwittay 2011). This practice is rooted in philanthrocapitalism (Edwards 2008) wherein charity – as traditionally promoted in elite schooling – has been replaced by (social) investment with expected and measurable returns. Several authors argue that students' practice of service in schools reinforces the status quo rather than challenging it (Koh and Kenway 2016). Engaging in «social investing» by organizing charity events allows students to turn a blind eye to the causes of injustice and prevents them from developing mutual relationships with individuals from underprivileged milieus. These processes victimize the receivers and give rise to a culture of powerful donors and powerless beneficiaries (Bertron 2015, Howard and Gaztambide-Fernández 2010), who are yet seen as potential micro-entrepreneurs. Thus, service learning does not challenge a worldview that proposes to tackle poverty through market improvements, but rather directs these teenagers to become economic agents of «giving»: they manage the project, they make the decision.

## Conclusion: Learning Responsibility or Fostering Power Relations?

Studying the international school environment as a performance of an international corporate identity allows us to understand these schools as a platform where students are taught how to act in an international business environment. Thus, private schools are often not just private companies in themselves, but this business ethos also shapes the kind of education provided, the language of instruction, the school premises, and security measures. International expats and influential corporations constitute the majority of their clientele, and the product they offer is meant to give students an advantage in accessing prestigious Anglo-Saxon universities worldwide. Service learning and project management are some of the «extras» that international students are expected to bring to university classrooms, and therefore international schools are encouraged to offer a service programme as part of their curriculum.

These «global citizens» differentiate themselves from the «outside» local, farming and labor communities by their material school environment, language, codes, and cosmopolitan ethos. Here lies one of the paradoxes of being educated in an international school: it implies the cultivation of global-mindedness while keeping the local educational and social environment at bay (Rey et al. 2019, Wagner 1998). Service learning is part of the boundary-making process, which is central

to the constitution of a distinctive educational space – a space that is conceived as global yet is highly unequal in nature. In some international schools, teachers and students rarely have the opportunity to undertake local projects for their mandatory service programme. Instead, they reproduce the image of a poor Global South. Overcoming «underprivilege» and «poverty» thus becomes a basis for developing projects and acquiring skills within the service programme, such as designing posters, devising action plans, and making speeches. It also teaches them to assume the position of the «giver», to exercise both decision-making and responsibility toward the «receiver».

Students learn to operate within a global arena of corporate citizenship in line with the development industry's conception of a poor Global South whose development depends on transnational networks of corporate governance and ethical standards. Like Bertron (2015), we conclude that service as a mandatory subject is the means for learning about the obligations of the dominant class – and a strategy that is often adopted by international schools. Rather than learning charitable giving, as is traditional among elites (Lambelet 2014), international students are socialized to adopt a market-based rationality of profitable giving in their provision of service, as promoted in neoliberal conceptions of international development and CSR. The competencies learned in international schools contribute to the legitimization of future international leaders in the business, governmental, and non-governmental sectors.

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