



Citation for published version:

Bunnell, T 2018, 'Social media comment on leaders in International Schools: The causes of negative comments and the implications for leadership practices', *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 93, no. 5, pp. 551-564.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2018.1515815>

DOI:

[10.1080/0161956X.2018.1515815](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2018.1515815)

Publication date:

2018

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Peabody Journal of Education* on 07/02/2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0161956X.2018.1515815>.

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Social media comment on leaders in International Schools: The causes of negative comments and the implications for leadership practices

Abstract

The diverse body of ‘international schools’ continues to grow and develop. Yet, the realities of being a leader in such a school continues to be neglected by discussion and research. It is acknowledged that international schools are complex organisations to lead and manage, with numerous boundaries, transient stakeholders and opposing priorities. They exist as very difficult and challenging arenas for leadership, ripe for conflict and tension. This paper uses anonymised comment on the social media website *ineternationalschoolreview.com* (ISR.com) to explore how and why teachers might post negative comment on school leaders. The framework of the ‘Toxic Triangle’ is used as an instrument for presenting the comments. The paper then discusses the implications for leadership practices. In particular, the comment on ISR.com reveals how isolated international schools are, with seemingly little options for teachers to release the ‘pressure valve’ if unhappy or unsatisfied by what they might deem to be unethical and immoral leadership behaviour. Further, the comments show how loosely coupled and fragmented the schools are, whilst many of the teachers themselves exist in a precarious state of anxiety. Overall, the comments add substantial weight to the argument that international schools are complex and challenging leadership environments.

Leadership in International Schools: A neglected area

The diverse body of institutions either being classified or labelling themselves as ‘international schools’ stands out as a sociological field of education warranting and deserving closer attention; ‘international schools represent a phenomenon worthy of academic research’ (Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015 p.34). The period since year-2000 in particular has seen a ‘staggering growth’ and the ‘market continues to expand at pace’ (Gaskell, 2016 p.24). Although the issue of ‘what is an international school?’ continues to pose a conceptual hurdle, and aspects of institutional legitimacy of some ‘international schools’ can be questioned (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016) especially in the absence of delivering an international curriculum as the ‘institutional primary task’ (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2017), there is no denying that the field is growing, and will continue to do so, although in forms that are arguably worthy of greater scrutiny.

It now seems incredulous to think that Leach’s (1969 p.162) seminal study had identified a total of 372 ‘International Schools’ worldwide educating approximately 80,000 children. Hayden (1998 p.1) had commented on how the casual observer might deduce that the concept of an international school was an ‘unimportant phenomenon’ playing ‘a minor role in education’. By stark contrast, it is widely forecast that by 2026 the K-12 English-medium international schools market will reach 16,000 schools teaching 8.75 million students (Gaskell, 2016). Much of this activity will be based in China and the Middle East, areas largely absent from Leach’s (1969) lens of inquiry.

Yet, the realities of working in an international school has been little documented or investigated into. In particular, it is well-established that leadership in international schools is under-theorized, yet problematic and is often ‘poor’. It has long been stated how this type of schools are often poorly led. Mayer (1968 p.75) had identified some problems facing these

schools, such as ‘bad accounting practice’ and ‘unwise decisions’. Malpass (1994 p.22) had rather pessimistically noted how ‘Many heads...have either forgotten, or indeed have never learnt, the basic principles of good school management.’

Over 15 years ago, writing as the editors in the only book principally aimed at leadership in international schools, which in itself is quite a damning comment, Blandford and Shaw (2001 p.9) had identified a ‘paucity of documentary evidence concerning leadership in international schools’. This situation has seemingly little changed. More recent comment says that international schools, in terms of research in leadership, exist as ‘an increasingly influential but under-researched domain of education’ (Lee, Hallinger & Walker, 2010 p.666). Walker and Cheng (2009 p.43) note that: ‘Although research has increasingly focused on school leadership, in general it has been conspicuous by its absence in the international schools arena.’ In particular, in spite of enormous growth of international schools in places such as Singapore and Shanghai, it has been noted (Lee, Hallinger & Walker, 2012 p.292) that ‘empirical research exploring leadership in international schools in Asia Pacific is rarely found’, and Asia Pacific is ‘a region of the world that continues to lack research based on empirical description and analysis’ (Lee, Hallinger & Walker, 2010 p.667). Put simply, leadership in international schools (globally) is a neglected area of concern.

There is a long-standing call for educational research to provide a context for understanding the organizational reality of schools (Johnson & Fauske, 2005), whilst it is stated that educational research that aims ‘to make sense’ of schools is as important as ‘showing what works’ (Simkins, 2005). This is the purpose of my paper, *to make sense* of the negative comment about Directors/Principals that appears on the well-established social media site *Internationalschoolsreview.com* (ISR.com). This rich depository of comments, anonymous and perhaps misleading or malicious, stands as a potentially useful yet under-used base for researchers. There has, as far as I am aware, hitherto been no systematic analysis of this data.

It is worth noting that the ISR.com website does not openly define the concept of an ‘international school’. However, there is evidence from the listings of schools that it uses a similarly broad definition as ISC Research (www.iscresearch.com); this is considered to be a school that ‘delivers a curriculum to any combination of pre-school, primary or secondary students, wholly or partly in English outside an English-speaking country, or, if a school is in a country where English is one of the official languages, it offers an English-medium curriculum other than the country’s national curriculum and the school is international in its orientation.’ This means that there are schools listed in areas such as Australia, as well as in non-English-speaking nations, if for example they deliver programmes such as those offered by the International Baccalaureate (IB).

Having set the context for arguing the need for more discussion and research into leadership in international schools, this paper will next explore the complexity of the situation. In particular, international schools have a complex set of boundaries and loosely coupled relationships to navigate, whilst the task of leadership involves numerous dualities of expectations and behaviour, all contained within a largely precarious and isolated environment. It is undeniably a challenging arena for leadership.

Having further set the context of complexity and precarity, this paper will present real-life negative comment on school leaders from the ISR.com website. The reality of leadership in international schools has always defied objective investigation. The researcher is often dependent on anecdotal evidence. Odland and Ruzicka (2009 p.6) had concluded that international schools are independent institutions and ‘this independent quality of International Schools means that collecting comprehensive and accurate data on issues such as teacher turnover has proven very difficult.’ Hayden and Thompson (2001 p.10) had talked of ‘the dearth of written material available within the public domain.’ My article will cite examples from ISR.com to show that there is evidence of substantial tension between teachers and

school-leaders in many schools worldwide. This will be presented using the framework of the ‘Toxic Triangle’ (Padilla et al, 2007), a useful analytical tool for categorizing toxic leadership environments. There are three research questions that will form the basis of the focus. What are the main features of the comments? What are the main issues and incidents that ‘trigger’ negative comment? What do the comments tell us about the nature of leadership in International Schools? This paper will then analyse the main leadership implications of the findings. The paper will end with a short critical discussion about the current situation.

Leadership in international schools: A very complex matter

Part of the reason for the neglect in literature might be the fact that international schools are especially complex organisations. It is said that ‘leadership of schools is different from the leadership of other types of organisations’ (Blandford & Shaw, 2001 p.26), since they are more complex than other types of organisations, dealing with a range of stakeholders including students, parents and the wider community as well as society. However, international schools have ‘another layer of complexity’ (Blandford & Shaw, 2001 p.26), dealing with many different cultures in quite often isolated settings that are not only different but changing.

In this context, international schools pose many leadership challenges and display inherent tensions. Any school acts as a ‘focal point where emotions, views, philosophy, needs, identity and insecurity thrive’ (Caffyn, 2013 p.210). With an international school these issues can multiply and become more complex, and in particular there is much scope for cross-boundary conflict. Some early schools visited by Martin Mayer had a tense, perhaps toxic environment prone to ‘explosive confrontations’ (Mayer, 1968 p.78).

Further, and perhaps because of this, it is clear that leadership in international schools has always been a precarious position. Mayer (1968 p.155) had commented on the ‘fearful lack of continuity in the leadership of most of these schools’. Many schools have a ‘headship

survival' rate of between 2.8 years (Hawley, 1994), and 3.7 years (Benson, 2011). Many of these leaders are fired. Stout (2005 p.20) had remarked upon how it was 'alarming how many of these schools seem to make a practice of hiring and firing the head-teacher without intervention or censure by the accrediting body.' In spite of the regularity of such comment, there has still been little investigation into explaining or 'making sense' of this situation.

Much of the blame has traditionally been placed with the leader and the 'owners' (who often in 'traditional' international schools are the parents); 'problematic relationships between the board and the school make the task of the school leader more complex' (Blandford & Shaw, 2001 p.9). However, equally problematic is arguably the (often loose or poor) relationship between the teachers and the school leader. It is advanced (Fertig & James, 2016) that international schools exist as examples of 'complex, evolving loosely linked systems' (CELLS), and the relationships between stakeholders is often distant, fluid and tenuous. The transient nature of the stakeholders obviously adds to the loosely linked aspect. Blandford and Shaw (2001 pp.14-15) drew up a list of nine criteria which they identified as making leadership in an international school different, and more complex than in other types of school. Three of the criteria involved the leader's relationship with the board, but no direct mention was made of the involvement and relationship with the *teachers*. Of course, this list appeared before the advent of ISR.com.

Further, leaders in international schools often operate in an environment of competing priorities. Keller (2015, in Abstract) had recently said that: 'Leaders of international schools find themselves operating within a loosely defined, yet rapidly growing, specialty niche of education. The leadership context for these schools is often filled with ambiguity and complex tensions between opposing forces.' In particular, Keller (2015) identifies areas of 'duality', where the leader of an international school has to face two opposing options. This all points to a high degree of uncertainty and precarity, which forms the back-drop to my article.

It is worth mentioning that the position of power can be exaggerated by the transient nature of the stakeholders in international schools. Many teachers are constantly dependent on school leaders for references, whilst the ones who are long-established are often vulnerable in terms of over-rely on the school for employment. This is compounded by the fact that some teachers have their own children in the school, and they are especially vulnerable. Research by Zilber (2005 p.6) showed that 5% of teachers in an international school may hold ‘teacher-parent’ status, and ‘they have a special commitment and are less likely to leave the school on a whim.’ This all adds to the conducive environment mentioned of insecurity above. Moreover, it creates a context where some teachers might be vulnerable to ‘buddying’ with the school leader, creating a fragmented situation. Fragmentation can take many different forms (Caffyn, 2015 p.434), and the notion that a school might have teachers within it who are susceptible to following the actions of the leaders is one form. In practice, this can cause tensions and micro-politics as some teachers fall in line behind the school leaders whilst other might rebel against the leadership.

On top of this, this situation creates a context where a school leader might have the power to be able to ‘bully’ some teachers. Many of the reviews on ISR.com comment on what might broadly be deemed as ‘destructive leadership’, with substantial claims of bullying, victimization, favouritism, and other forms of narcissistic behaviour. This analysis combines to theoretically form, in extreme, the ‘Toxic Triangle’ (Padilla et al, 2007), a combination of three inter-connected factors: destructive leadership (Cogan, 2000; Einarsen et al, 2007); susceptible followers; and conducive environment. This framework forms the back-ground to understanding, or at least ‘making sense’, of further real-life comments on individual (named) leaders that will be explored in detail below.

An Introduction to ISR.com

The historical background to ISR.com

It is worth considering the back-ground to ISR.com. The story is told on the website (see ‘Articles about ISR’ on the ‘Articles and Information’ site) where it states that: ‘Some years ago, a series of articles were published in a well-known periodical concerning teachers breaking their contracts with overseas schools... In response to these articles, and our own personal experiences, International Schools Review came into existence.’ The articles in question appeared in 2002 and 2003 in the periodical *The International Educator*. One set of commentators (Trotter & Trotter, 2002 p.18), describing an aspect of their own experience had stated that ‘the positions were misrepresented, as was the character of the school. It was a philosophical mismatch from the beginning’. It was also argued that the problem lies not with teachers but with ‘unscrupulous heads’ (Frembgen, 2003 p.16). In 2004, as a direct result of this discussion, ISR.com appeared. The aim of ISR.com was clearly to inform (and warn) potential educators about what to expect from working in an overseas school, which many will not have the chance to visit prior to signing the contract.

I have closely observed the social website ISR.com since 2004. It was relatively slow to take-off, either due to lack of publicity or maybe a fear of retribution. I observed that it contained in September 2010 comments and reviews on 350 schools in 129 countries. As the average school seemed at that time to have about four postings, we can assume that a total of about 1,500 posting existed within the entire ISR.com site. It is a sign of the enormous growth of international schools, and the growth in the appeal of the website (plus maybe a growth of trust in its anonymity) that the site in February 2017 had over 10,000 postings about schools. Moreover, the site now also has the facility for educators to share their (anonymous) views and

reflections on school Directors and Principals (whose actual name and school is exposed i.e. the leaders of schools can be individually ‘named and shamed’).

The research usefulness of ISR.com

It is worth explaining the nature of the reporting, partly to aid further research. There are two sets of school leadership Reports. The Principal Report card has an opening section asking for a simple ‘tick’ against a list of nine criteria. These include criterion such as ‘Displays effective leadership’. There is a four-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Excellent’ to ‘Poor’. The Director Report has a similar opening format, with eight criteria, judged on a five-star rating. This set of criteria is noticeably more ‘personal’, covering characteristics such as ‘Fair’, ‘Genuine’ and ‘A person of integrity’. There obviously exists, in theory at least, scope for an analysis of this set of criteria, treating it as quantitative data. However, in practice it can be observed that the reports in general involve a bi-polar response i.e. in the main, either all boxes are ticked as ‘Poor’ or ‘Excellent’, which suggests a rather subjective approach and which limits the usefulness of the data.

The Principal Report card has a further section seeking qualitative judgement and comment. This seeks information about ‘management style’, ‘academic and disciplinary support’, the ‘hiring process’ and then ‘additional comments’. The Director Report has a similar second section. This seeks information about the ‘interviewing style’, comments about ‘post-interview process’ and then comments about the characteristics of the Director’. Again, the Director Report seems to be seeking a more personal discussion about the traits and manner of the personality. In spite of the two slightly different approaches, the sets of comments tend to be quite similar, revealing sometimes in quite rich detail the personality of the school leader

within stories and anecdotes of real-life behaviour. This set of qualitative data is obviously the most useful for research purposes and will subsequently be used in the reporting for my paper.

The sampling of the reports

It is important to consider that the reports in my paper should be seen as random i.e. they stand as a relatively 'normal' set of reports. ISR.com freely send out a monthly Newsletter listing the schools and 'leaders' that have been reported during the past four weeks. This Newsletter was received by myself over six months to obtain a 'feel' for the site. On average, there are six or seven reports on either Directors or Principals. In other words, this element of the website is relatively little used compared to the more general 'school reports' and numerous blogs. The reporting of individual school leaders is a relatively rare activity and suggests that it only occurs when a serious issue has arisen. The January 2017 Newsletter, for instance, had only four Reports on either Directors or Principals.

In order to facilitate as random a sampling process as is possible, the website was randomly visited on February 28th 2017. The one-year entry-fee of 29 USD was duly paid, and the latest batch of 'Admin' reports was downloaded. In other words, and this is an important point to make, I had not read the Reports previously. As this latest batch consisted of 48 Reports, one can deduce that it probably made up the reports over the previous five or six months. The Reports were analysed with respect to answering the following questions. What evidence is there of the three elements of the 'Toxic Triangle'? What are the types of issues and incidents that cause negative comment? In particular, is there evidence of a 'boundary' having been crossed? What evidence is there about the circumstances behind the comment? In particular, is there evidence of a 'type' of teacher who posts negative comment?

The research findings from ISR.com

The initial findings

It is worth noting the initial findings. Of the 48, almost half (20) were reports on female leaders. Of the total, 17 were first-time reports. The rest had upwards of a further 12 separate reports. The reports covered at least 20 separate nation-states. Only one report is located in Northern Europe, whilst 11 are in China and seven are in Korea, reflecting growth trends. Of the 48, seven were 'positive' reporting mainly an 'Excellent' report card on the Likert scale, and generally positive comment within the open-comment boxes. In other words, the site does not only generate and report negative comment. It would seem that at least one-in-seven Reports are of a 'positive' nature. This can be visualized within a metaphor framework. Alvesson and Spicer (2010) refer to six key metaphors that leaders in the 'real world' apparently lead by. Leaders sometimes exert moral peak performance (the 'Saints'), make people feel good (the 'Buddies'), show mechanistic superiority (the 'Cyborgs'), and facilitate growth (the 'Gardeners'), or show clear direction (the 'Commanders'). In the main, this set of metaphors appeared within the positive Reports.

A further 10 reports were quite 'mixed' with a variety of comment, largely within the 'Good' or 'Average' boxes. In other words, the site does contain some arguably more objective reporting, and this might be useful for quantitative data analysis. Third, there were 31 reports that definitely fitted within the 'negative' reporting territory. In fact, 27 contained only 'Poor' ratings throughout the reports and contained extremely negative (if not quite slanderous) comment on personal behaviour and performance. This data (totally anonymized) is subsequently used in my paper.

An initial over-view of the comments

The comments in the main are of a very diverse mixture, reflecting the personal nature of their origins. Approximately half of the reports are of an observation nature i.e. involving the reporter saying what they have observed, or heard from others. The other half involve a personal issue that has affected them (negatively) in some way. Many of the reports have stories that fit well with Stout's (2015 p.413) 'conflict model', based on personal experience in international schools, where conflict manifests itself through an act such as breakdown in confidentiality, collusion, gossip, overt anger or the sending of an offensive email. Stout (2015 p.413) lists 13 ways in which conflict might appear, and all of these are evident in the ISR.com reports that I surveyed. The comments can be summarised as four groupings.

The personality traits attack

Some of the comments constitute a very personal attack on character, integrity and professionalism. For example, one school Director is described as 'selfish and self-serving', whilst 'too lazy to teach'. Another person concluded, after writing a long diatribe about contractual promises not having been fulfilled, that: 'he is the most unswerving, shameless, unconscionable liar I have ever met on the International School circuit.' One report describes the Director as a 'mean hypocrite', another says the Director is 'a dark combination of mean and inept.' One Director is described as an 'arrogant charlatan.'

Serious unethical behaviour issues

One comment referred to serious inappropriate and improper behaviour. It said that there are 'unsettling stories of his interactions with new female staff', and remarked how the Director made 'inappropriate jokes'. Two further reports note that the Directors swear at the students. There are a number of instances discussed of improper decision-making regarding miss-use of school monies. For example, one comment says that: 'He is willing to spend school money on big projects and events, but does not believe in spending money on classroom materials.' There

are cases of misuse of information e.g. ‘She uses confidential information and then spreads rumours.’ Three reports mention ‘erratic behaviour’.

Low standards of every-day professionalism issues

Other comments seem less serious, even mundane, and arguably reflect the way that simplistic, every-day expectations of professionalism have not been met. This is especially evident with regard to communication, and low visibility. For instance, one person said that: ‘He rarely replies to emails’ and ‘is almost completely absent from the school’. One other report mentions emails, saying that ‘she prefers communication to be done through emails and the tone is quite combative.’ A third report says how the principal ‘sends emails at the last minute.’ A fourth report mentions ‘a truly vitriolic email.’ One report commented on how: ‘He does not even know the names of many staff members.’ In fact, three reports mentioned that the school leader was not familiar with staff, and students. A further report says of the Principal that ‘I have only seen her present at maybe five staff meetings.’ Another report says that ‘I have never seen him speak to a student.’ One teacher was clearly upset that the Director ‘will say hello one day and the next day he will ignore you.’

Low levels of professional respect issues

Some of the comments reveal an underlying lack of respect for the Director, especially with regard to perceived teaching experiences or leadership qualifications e.g. ‘He has spent very little time in the classroom.’ Three reports comment on how the Director/Principal had been promoted within the school and was not respected i.e. now seen as out of their depth. One report says that the school owners: ‘Like to hire unqualified administrators from the US who are easily manipulated.’ Another report talks about how: ‘The school has hired a number of administrators with no International School experience.’ At the other extreme, one report says

the Principal is a ‘micromanager...who likes to involve himself with as many affairs as possible.’ In fact, the term ‘micromanager’ appeared in three separate reports.

A detailed presentation of the comments

The ‘Toxic Triangle’ framework

The comments, at first glance, seem to lack consensual coherence and can seem quite random in nature as shown above. However, one fundamental framework that can be used to categorise and present the comments is that of the leadership ‘Toxic Triangle’. Indeed, five reports explicitly refer to the ‘toxic environment’ at the school. At least seven schools had evidence of a complete ‘Toxic Triangle’ i.e. they exhibited all three forces joined together, whilst the rest had at least one element evident.

Destructive leadership

In practice, ‘destructive leadership’ often manifests itself in the ISR.com reports as a demotivating force; ‘This Principal has destroyed the motivation of the staff.’ The term ‘demotivate’ appeared in two reports. Several comments regarding destructive leadership are about inconsistency in treating teachers, either before and after the interview, or in public and private; ‘He was very charming during the interview...But, as soon as I signed the contract, the mind games, belittling and humiliation started’. Another comment stated that; ‘He is a wolf in sheep’s clothing...he pretends to be friendly.’ A third comment says that: ‘He will humiliate in public, and apologize in private.’ A fourth says how the Director is ‘abrasive and demeaning in her interactions with teachers.’ A further three reports comment on how the leader conducts classroom observations without warning, causing tension and worry among teachers, who often find it intimidating.

Several commentators openly use the term ‘bully’. In fact, the terms ‘bully’ or ‘bullying’ appeared in eight different reviews e.g. ‘He is a bully and likes calling teachers to his office and shout at them.’ Another comment says that: ‘If you do not agree with his vision, you will be bullied.’ This sometimes comes through encouraging a ‘culture’ of bullying; ‘back stabbing and negativity are encouraged.’ One report explicitly mentions cases of back-stabbing, such as talking about teachers behind their backs or complaining about a teacher to fellow teachers, creating a situation where ‘the feeling at the school is of total mistrust and uncertainty.’ Another report says that the Principal ‘causes a high level of friction and tension.’ The characteristics of a ‘disruptive leader’ are quite diverse. Two reports discussed cases of leaders with ‘severe anger-management problems.’ Three reports commented on how the leader was self-serving to the owners/Board, and one director was openly called a ‘puppet leader who bows to the Board’.

Susceptible followers

A second dimension of the ‘toxic triangle’ is the involvement of ‘susceptible followers’ (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). A number of reports commented on how the school leader had appointed people who might be expected to back him/her e.g. ‘He lost no time in getting his old pal (*named*) appointed so that they can play good cop, bad cop.’ This term, ‘good cop, bad cop’ appeared in three separate reports and is obviously worthy of further investigation as a core theme. One report explicitly used the term ‘follower’; it says that ‘He created a task force/committee and appointed his friends/followers to head it.’ Issues of nepotism emerge in a number of reports. One report says that: ‘He created a third secondary school principal without a hiring process’. A further report says that ‘treatment is based on favouritism’, and another commented about the Principal ‘hiring his best friend to be new High School Principal.’ The term ‘Mafia’ was mentioned in one report, alongside ‘toadies’.

Some reports commented on how this issue works in practice, after followers have been appointed or identified e.g. ‘He will come in the classroom with his VP and two other learning leaders...which only serves to intimidate the teacher.’ Another report says that: ‘He will have his leaders create some irrelevant PD activity so the meetings are not cancelled.’ A third report says that: ‘There is a group of old timers at the school who are very nasty...the Principal encourages this group to provide evidence against teachers.’ A fourth report says how ‘She had people reporting to her and definitely had favourites – those that dare not ask questions.’ One report adds that the students are sometimes used as ‘followers’; it was said that ‘students are asked and encouraged to spy and report back to Mrs. X about how and what a teacher is doing.’ One report says that the Principals’ husband acts as a bully, backing up his wife in meetings.

Conducive environments

The third dimension of the ‘toxic triangle’ is the ‘conducive environment’. Some reports say how the teachers are over-worked and stressed e.g. ‘the current staff to student ratios are not adequate and the pressure on teachers is immense’. Some reports make it clear that the school is undergoing financial difficulties and this impacting on the teachers e.g. ‘The school is making major budgetary cuts, so PD opportunities are fewer.’ Another report talked of ‘decreasing enrolment and foreign companies leaving the area.’ There is evidence that some schools have dealt with falling student enrolments by cutting pay and perks. This creates an environment where resentment from teachers might appear, especially if the school leadership continue to receive their enhancements or are implicated in the cost-cutting decision-making. A further report mentioned how ‘we stopped getting raises and our pensions were cut last year’. The words ‘we’ and ‘our’ here is quite telling, implying that ‘they’ and ‘others’ did not have pay freezes or pension cuts. In other words, a divisive environment seemingly exists in some schools creating resentment and ill-feeling. Of course, it is also possible that the ‘followers’

discussed above also did not get such treatment, and ‘they’ continued to get pay and pension raises. This issue shows how the three elements of the ‘toxic triangle’ can be inter-linked.

Another situation that arises is when the owners of the school are seen to either not care, or notice what is happening i.e. there exists a ‘conducive environment’ centred around neglect (deliberate, as well as unintentional) by authorities that matter and possess the power to intervene. One report states that ‘The school owners are obviously not able or willing to deal with this, closing their eyes to the unethical and poor standards of leadership’. This statement adds weight to the notion that some schools lack an authority to which unhappy teachers can turn to, creating an environment where teachers feel powerless and isolated.

The implications for leadership practices

The complexity of leading isolated ‘islands’

It is clear from the above comments that international schools are ripe for conflict, and the school leader operates in a very fragile arena. In particular, these schools exist as ‘unusual edifices in that they are usually isolated microcosms’ (Caffyn, 2015 p.440), and it is this issue of ‘isolation’ that creates the back-drop to ‘making sense’ of the negative comments on ISR.com. Put simply, international schools operate in a lonely and potentially explosive environment, largely neglected by research and external support agencies. International schools, unlike national schools, have openly been described as ‘islands’ (Blandford and Shaw, 2001 p.9) with little outside interference or reference to authority. Further, little evidence exists of schools having bodies within the school (e.g. parental or ownership organisations) that the teacher can appeal to. This autonomy arguably comes at a price; the unhappy or disgruntled

teacher has little options for complaint or retribution about behaviour or treatment by school leaders.

It was always the case. Four decades ago, Mayer (1968, p.155) had described the body of international schools as having ‘sprung up independently’ and being ‘a law unto themselves’. Matthews (1988 p.4), two decades after Mayer, was talking about ‘thirty years of unregulated and largely autonomous evolution.’ Yet, the comments on ISR.com seem indicative of the way that the field remains a largely de-regulated, un-monitored and decentralized field of educational activity. It has more recently been said that: ‘a central issue of note when considering International Schools remains the lack of control and monitoring of the network overall’ (Hayden & Thompson, 2008 p.77). In the absence of a universal trade union or accreditation agency, there seemingly exists no other ‘pressure valve’ that can be released other than complaining about school leadership on sites such as ISR.com. This was noted by Stout (2015 p.414): ‘Currently, the professional membership organisations to which international schools and staff belong do not have a formal procedure for dealing with such situations.’

The added complexity of teacher precarity in international schools

Inter-connected to the above issue, the comments on ISR.com seem to show that many of the teachers in international schools sense they exist in a very precarious situation. School leaders need to be aware/wary of this context. The field has never constituted any form of ‘system’, even though the call for one can be traced back to Peterson (1972 p.23) when he had noted that: ‘The International Schools do not at present cater for a system in which there is any stability of pay, pensions, or career structures’. Blaney (1991, p.203) had followed-up by saying how the ‘hallmark’ of such a system ‘will be the movement of teaching and administration staff

from school to school within the system’, with a ‘portable pension and medical benefit schemes.’

Such schools are affected by a diverse variety of factors, of which the location is a major one involving its own tensions and politics. International schools as organizations, can be ‘affected both by the macro events of society and micro events within themselves’ (Caffyn, 2015 p.434). The actions of individual teachers on ISR.com thus may be triggered by external environmental pressures relating to safety or job security which is then coupled with internal environmental factors such as changing contracts or falling school enrolment. It is shown (Bunnell, 2015) that teachers in international schools might be termed a white-collar ‘precariat’, where conditions in the school often fit quite neatly with Standing’s (2011) nine-point ‘insecurity framework’. Recent comment (Mizzi & O’Brien-Klewchuk, 2016 p.330) refers to the challenges of becoming a teacher in an international school, where feelings of ‘isolation, stress, deskilling and demotivation’ appear. This creates an environment conducive to insecurity, fear and resentment. It is a toxic combination of factors. This adds weight to the assertion already made that there exists seemingly no other ‘pressure valve’ for teachers to resort to, thus ‘Conflict, sadly, seems to becoming almost a way of life in many international schools’ (Stout, 2015 p.412).

The complexity of managing boundaries in international schools

The reports on ISR.com serve to prove the point that international schools as organisations ‘are intrinsically complex and unique’ and ‘have numerous boundaries’ (Caffyn, 2013 p.206). This poses a challenge for school leaders since ‘most boundaries are invisible or at best blurred’ (Hernes, 2004 p.12). In particular, they involve subsystems where ‘boundaries overlies each other and where boundary rules are frequently violated’ (James et al, 2006 p.51). However, the boundary often only becomes clear once it has been crossed, and by that stage it is too late.

Many boundary models exist, but Hernes (2004) in particular offers a three-fold model that fits well with ‘making sense’ of the ISR.com reports. First, there is the physical boundary, which can ‘be represented by material partitioning, but also by regulations and rules’ (Hernes, 2004 p.14). In this context, a teacher may feel that an email from the school Director had crossed a physical boundary. Second, there is the social boundary ‘reflected in things like loyalty, trust, identity and norms’ (Hernes, 2004 p.14). Many of the comments above reflect that this boundary has been violated, with teachers unhappy at what they see as unethical or unsocial activity, especially evident when the school leader brings in a friend who will act as a ‘susceptible follower’. In a sense, leadership etiquette has been broken. Third, there is a mental boundary, which ‘relate to mechanisms, such as ideas, understanding and beliefs that tend to guide organized actions’ (Hernes, 2004 p.14). Many of the ISR.com comments reveal that the teacher has been upset by the way that others have been treated or been talked about which may conflict with their sense of collegiality or community within the organisation. It needs to be understood by international school leaders that the school for some teachers is more than a place of work. Caffyn’s (2010 p.334) research, for instance, had shown that: ‘For some staff, the school was their social life.’

The complexity of duality in leading international schools

The comments on ISR.com seem to point to a situation in schools where there may sometimes be a big discrepancy between the types of leader the board/owner want, and those that the teachers want. There is research evidence to support this. A study of job advertisements for international school leaders (Roberts and Mancuso, 2014 p.94) showed that the leader type most frequently mentioned by school boards was ‘Managerial leader’. The most frequently mentioned quality was being a good communication. Only about one quarter of the school

boards sought a Child-centered leader. Almost one-fifth (23%) of school boards sought a leader with building project experience, which is clearly a reflection of the expansion plans sought by many schools. Some of the qualities that were least sought after included a ‘kind, gentle, patient leader’ (15%), and someone who is ‘humble’ (14%). This in turn creates what might be conceptualised as a ‘temporal duality’ (Kellar, 2015 p.905): meeting the needs of the board/owner versus meeting the expectations and aspirations of the teachers. The ISR.com reports above do point to some teachers having a very high expectation of ethical and moral behaviour from school leaders.

This point is backed up by further research. A study of 248 teachers, to learn about factors affected their choice found that they would stay if the school leader ‘were supportive, gave them respect, worked with them to develop the school’s vision, encouraged collaboration among teachers, and worked with staff to meet curriculum standards and to solve school or department problems’ (Mancuso, Roberts & White, 2010 p.319). It was concluded that the characteristics that defined teachers’ perceptions of supportive leadership are closely linked with transformational and distributed leadership, not managerial leadership. Here we have another ‘temporal duality’; meeting the managerial demands of the board/owners versus meeting the transformational leadership demands of the teachers.

There is evidence that some comments on ISR.com are made by long-standing teachers at the school who have observed several leaders. They seemingly have a strong sense of ‘ownership’ of the school. One report in my survey explicitly said that the reporter is ‘a long-time member of the school who is truly saddened by the state of things’, adding of the school, that ‘our reputation is gone.’ The word ‘our’ here is quite telling, identifying the school leader as an ‘outsider’. This can be conceptualised as creating a complex ‘spatial duality’ (Kellar, 2015 p.904): the challenge of being a new leader and satisfying the wishes of teachers who have served under previous leaders.

The complexity of loose couplings in international schools

Many of the comments on ISR.com are undeniably damning and deep-felt accusations, coming as they do from professional educators. In one sense, this goes to prove how loosely coupled international schools are. The relationship between the school's leaders and the teachers is often not a strong or amicable one, and can easily be de-coupled; 'International schools are bound together not by rules but by informal and voluntary linkages' (Phillips, 2002 p.173). In particular, it is conceptualised that international schools are held together by a set of forces which generally operates together for the common good (Allan, 2002), to protect and ensure survival of the organisation; they ensure 'collective corporate growth, educational idealism and, ultimately, organisational protectionism' (Caffyn, 2015 p.436).

This offers a valid framework for understanding why a teacher might post negative, often nasty, comment on social media such as ISR.com – they seek to protect the school and perhaps express their opinion regarding what they view as unprofessional behaviour that might destroy the integrity and reputation of school. In this context, the act is one that is perhaps meant to *protect* the school, not necessarily *harm* the Director/Principal. The point to observe here is that the act of retribution by a teacher might not necessarily be a directly personal one, but might originate from a more distanced observation of events.

Final remarks

Much of the negative comment on ISR.com is perhaps not that surprising. Through a postmodernist lens, leadership in international schools should be far from easy, as any complex organisation is prone to uncertainty and instability. As my paper shows, the teachers in international schools now place great pressure on the leaders of the school, both in terms of

standards and behaviour. School leaders are now under greater scrutiny and decision-making is open to greater transparency, and ‘mistakes’ can lead to (immediate) repercussions and ‘outed’ retribution on social media. In other words, the international school leader now has to worry about not only upsetting the board/owners, who are also often parents, but also the teachers. It was probably always the case however the advent of social media makes the situation more prominent, and dangerous.

International schools still exist as an enigma. On the one hand, they continue to grow and attract greater scholarly attention. They can absolutely no longer be viewed as ‘a well-kept secret’ (Hayden & Thompson, 2008 p.15), existing on the rather eccentric fringes of international education. Yet, they continue to portray characteristics that are both startling and worrying. In turn, they remain largely under-researched and under-theorized as institutions. The reality of being a ‘leader’ in an international school stands out as being an especially neglected area of concern. The comments on ISR.com reveal the extent to which international schools have their own set of challenging contexts; it seems very true to state that ‘International schools as unique phenomenon have their own set of challenges with which to contend’ (Caffyn, 2015 p.433).

There is potential scope here for adding to the dearth of material about 'types' of teachers in international schools. Is there a particular 'type' that is prone to making negative, and often quite vitriolic, social media comment? Bailey (2015 p.4) notes how ‘research on the careers and professional identity of teachers in international schools remains little theorised.’ Both Hardman (2001), and Savva (2015) noted the 'maverick' teacher in International Schools. At first glance, this might be deemed a likely ‘suspect’ and the ISR.com website, as we have learned, did emerge from issues around contract-breaking.

However, the finger of blame also leans towards what Hardman (2001 p.130) called the ‘Penelopes’ (based upon Ulysees' wife in Homer's *Odyssey*); they are ‘faithful to the country

they had adopted.’ This character is easily identified in any staffroom - they were once useful and hardworking but now sit out their time doing the regular things. These teachers are a long-established body, whose value decreases as they ‘become more comfortable in their adopted environment’ (Hardman, 2001 p.130). Aside from being against any major change, acting as ‘resisters’ (Hardman, 2001 p.132), they may perceivably alternatively be seen as ‘protectors’ of their adopted school who will faithfully and aggressively resist what they perceive to be hostile action against *their* school. As noted by Caffyn (2013 p.210), ‘the school can become surrogate family, community and centre’ for many individuals and groups. In other words, some teachers may become (over-)emotionally attached to the school, viewing themselves as inherent protectors of its integrity and reputation. The point to observe here is that certain types of teacher probably pose a bigger ‘danger’ to school leaders than others.

A final comment worth making is that the comments on ISR.com exist as an indicator of how amateurish and under-developed the field of international schools remains. This field of education clearly still needs a ‘pressure valve’ that can be released by teachers without turning to comment on school leaders on social media, much of which only adds further fuel to the unpredictability, tensions and precarity of working in an international school. This issue clearly (still) needs attention.

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