

Exploring a Curriculum that is International

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Internationalism as a perspective that pervades all aspects of school life is foundational to the Primary Years Programme and the IBO. Although everyone agrees that international mindedness should characterize the school climate, student body, staff, and curriculum, moving from beliefs into actual practice, particularly in embedding internationalism as a thoughtful perspective throughout the curriculum is a more complex discussion.

Internationalism in the curriculum is sometimes left to chance, based on the assumption that an international perspective will just happen as a result of exposure to the local host culture and of relationships between students and teachers from different national cultures within a school. Other times, it occurs through lessons on human relations and sensitivity training along with units on the cultural elements that are most clearly visible, such as food, fashion, folklore, famous people, and festivals. This lens limits internationalism to adding more content and books about other countries to the existing curriculum. These approaches typically lead to superficial appreciations of cultural differences that can actually reinforce stereotypes, instead of creating new understandings about cultural perspectives and global issues and challenges.

One problem with the term “international curriculum” is that international is used as an adjective, signaling a special kind of curriculum. If internationalism is an attitude of mind that permeates the curriculum, and not just a special unit or activity, then a more appropriate term may be “a curriculum that is international.”

This view of internationalism is based on broad understandings of culture. Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist, defines culture as "the shared patterns that set the tone, character and quality of people's lives" (p. 216). These patterns include language,

religion, gender, relationships, class, ethnicity, race, disability, age, sexual orientation family structures, nationality, and rural/suburban/urban communities. These shared patterns, however, go beyond external characteristics to include the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives held by a group of people. Culture is a way of living and being in the world; it is a design for living that involves ways of acting, believing, and valuing.

Ludwick Fleck, a Polish scientist and philosopher, argues that thought collectives form when groups of people learn to think in similar ways because they share a common interest, exchange ideas, maintain interaction over time, and create a history that affects how they think and live. Since most individuals think and act within several thought collectives at a time, this view captures the dynamic, evolving nature of culture as each person interacts with, and is changed through, transactions with other cultures. These understandings highlight the diverse ways in which culture is reflected in people's lives and within particular social groups.

A Curriculum that is International

Given these perspectives on culture and internationalism, the issue becomes one of exploring models/frameworks for moving from beliefs into practice in classrooms. The following curricular framework reflects one attempt to make explicit the various features of a curriculum that is international and to visually depict the relationships between those features. The four curricular components are all essential and each interrelates to and builds from the others. Surrounding these components is an environment in which readers are encouraged to read the word and the world multiculturally to become aware of how race, class, and gender matter throughout the curriculum. This framework offers a way to evaluate the current curriculum of a classroom or school and to plan instruction that reflects the complexity of internationalism.

Insert Figure 1. A Curriculum that is International.

Personal Cultural Identities

All learners, adults and children, must first explore their own cultures before they can understand why culture matters in the lives of others around them. Internationalism does not begin with the ability to consider other points of view but with the realization that you have a point of view yourself.

At the heart of any curriculum that is international is personal and social knowing--the experiences that learners bring from their personal experiences of living in the world and being part of specific cultural groups and social contexts. Learners need to examine their own histories to understand how those experiences and interactions determine their view of the world and they need to find their lives reflected in classroom materials and experiences in order to value school as personally relevant. When students and teachers recognize the cultures that influence their own lives and thinking, they become more aware of how and why culture is important to others. They no longer see culture as “exotic,” but recognize that it is at the heart of defining who they are as human beings.

These engagements need to encourage students to focus on themselves as cultural beings, not just on self-knowledge and personal interests. Engagements can include having students bring in artifacts reflecting their cultural identities to create museum displays, drawing memory maps of their neighborhoods that identify stories from when they were “little,” and creating cultural memoirs using photographs and stories of people and events in their lives. The sharing of these artifacts, maps and memoirs not only supports personal understandings of culture but also leads to awareness and sensitivity to the experiences of others.

Cross-Cultural Studies

Although internationalism is grounded in awareness of one’s own cultural perspectives, students also need to consider other points of view. Cross-cultural studies have often taken the form of thematic units on ethnicity or countries that focus on

superficial aspects such as food and holidays. However, thoughtful studies of other cultures can provide learners with a way to broaden their perspectives and to realize that other ways of thinking about the world exist. Not only can these studies provide a window on the world to learn about other cultures, but they can also provide deeper insights into the learners' own cultural identities. Fleck points out that when people have no contact with other thought collectives, they may not be aware of the possibility that others think differently. Learners may not fully realize that they have a culture and a perspective until they encounter other possibilities for thinking about the world. Cross-cultural studies can provide both a mirror and a window for learners as they look out on other ways of viewing the world as well as reflect back on themselves in a new light.

While thematic units around particular countries are criticized for their superficiality, these units can be more thoughtful and critical by organizing them across many dimensions of culture--a study of gender, class, race, family structures, or type of community--instead of just nationality. Another possibility is to emphasize the complexities and diversity within any cultural group, recognizing that focusing only on superficial aspects trivializes a culture and reinforces stereotypes, despite good intentions. Studies of a social group or culture should include a wholistic emphasis on the economic, social, political, aesthetic, values/beliefs, historical, and geographic contexts of that group.

Integration of International Experiences and Materials

While an occasional cross-cultural study is appropriate, engagements and materials reflecting a wide range of cultural perspectives should be woven into every classroom study, no matter what the topic or curriculum area. The languages, lifestyles, ways of learning, and stories from many cultures can be integrated into all ongoing units of inquiry, not one or two special units each year. Whether the focus is folklore, family, living at peace with others, or the moon, materials and engagements reflecting a range of international perspectives should be sought.

Inquiries on Global Issues and Problems

The fourth component is classroom inquiries that focus specifically on global issues and problems, many of which highlight difficult issues, such as violence, human rights and social justice, environmental degradation, overpopulation, poverty, language loss, race and ethnicity, and economic imperialism. Students need to occasionally study a global issue in-depth and over time in order to understand the complexity of these issues and to consider ways of taking action in their lives. For example, a group of eleven-year-old students engaged in an inquiry about prejudice, examining both historical contexts and their own community and interpersonal relationships. Seven-year-old students studied language diversity, examining where and when they used particular languages and dialects and the differing attitudes of their community toward these languages. A class of twelve-year-olds examined the influence of popular culture through critiquing the social inequity of race and gender in cartoons and Disney films, while another class of fourteen-year-olds examined discrimination through a focus on white privilege.

Reading the Word and the World Multiculturally

All components of a curriculum that is international should be permeated with reading the word and the world multiculturally. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire used this phrase to indicate the importance of raising issues of power and oppression in everything that is studied. Without a focus on reading the word and world multiculturally, the other four components could easily become a superficial tour of culture where students learn about internationalism as tourists who pick up some information about different cultures. A tourist curriculum is based on the assumption that if we all just learned more about each other, we would like each other and the world's problems would be solved. This approach does not consider difficult issues of social justice and so students are unable to make real changes in how they think about and relate to others.

Reading multiculturally is the stance that race, class, and gender matter in how we interpret and analyze our experiences in the world as well as the texts we encounter.

Freire argues that we want students to wrestle with ideas and words, not just walk on top of them. Reading the word and the world with a "critical eye" provides the opportunity to talk about important social and political questions such as, what it means to be human; the relative worth of people from various racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic communities; the value of particular kinds of actions; and how we relate to one another.

Conclusions

Using a curriculum framework such as the one introduced here can provide a way for educators to evaluate what is currently happening with internationalism in their curriculum. This evaluation involves identifying what is working well along with what is missing or needs to be strengthened. Although all aspects of this framework will not be in place within a classroom at one particular moment in time, they should all be available to students across the school year because it is the interactions across the framework that builds complex and critical understandings of internationalism.

The books and experiences that students engage in at school have the potential to transform their perspectives through encouragement to understand their current lives and to imagine beyond themselves. Students do need to find their own lives reflected in curriculum, but if what they read and do in school only mirrors their own views of the world, they cannot envision other ways of thinking and being. However, these experiences need to be embedded within a curriculum that is international or their potential to challenge students to critically confront issues of culture is diminished or lost. A curriculum that is truly international offers all of us, educators and students, the most potential for enriching and transforming our lives and our views of the world.

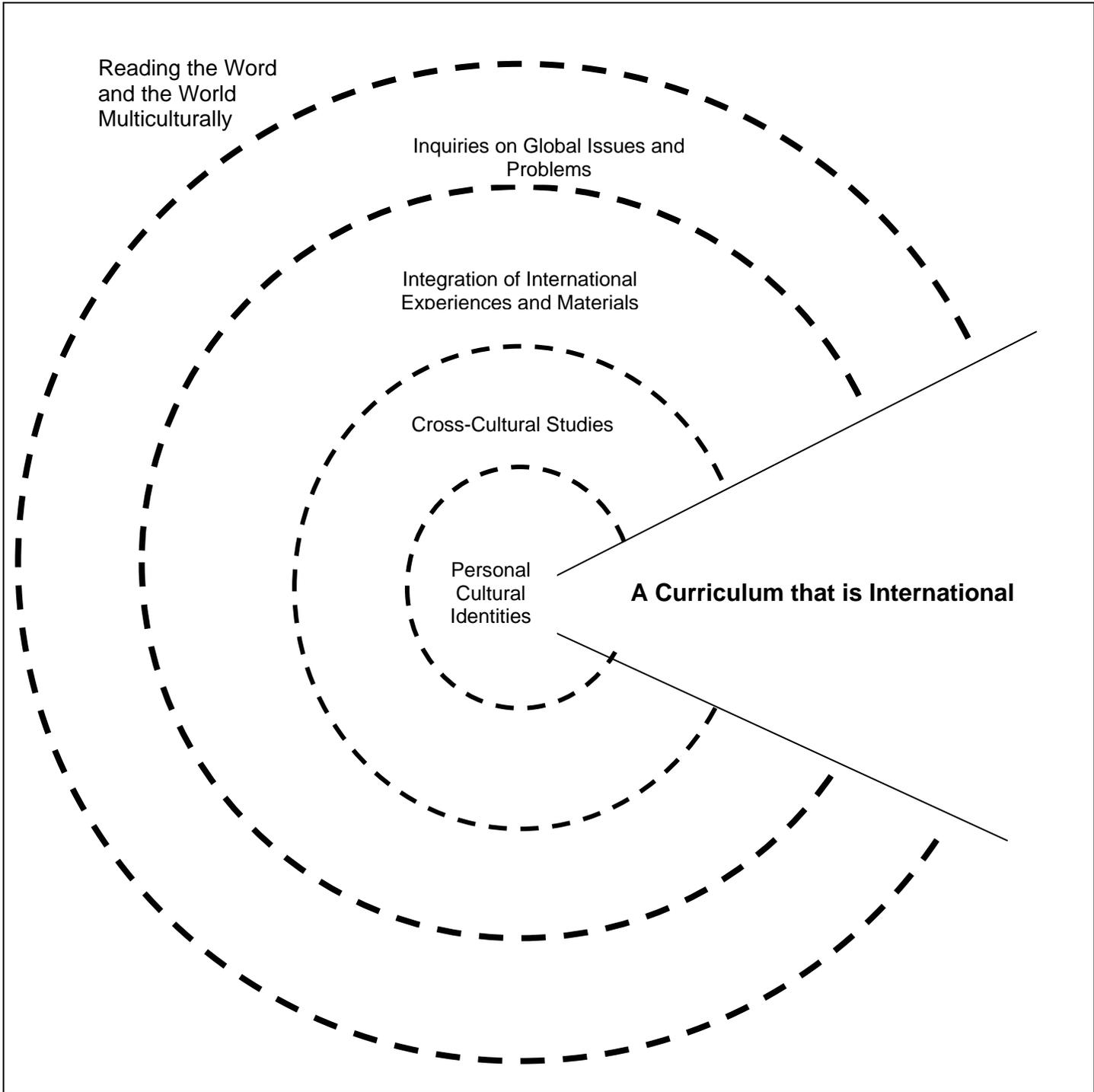
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A Framework for a Curriculum that is International