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# Navigating the blurred lines between principalship and governance in international schools: leadership and the locus of ownership control

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## ABSTRACT

The number of international schools has increased significantly this century, with new schools predominately situated in Asia and the Middle East. This growth has also seen a shift from not-for-profit to for-profit education, and from such schools being primarily for children of expatriates to being mainly for host nation children. New actors, such as global chains of international schools, have also entered the arena. This article explores the impact of the contemporary landscape on the professional relationship between international school principals and their governors/owners, by drawing on a study of 12 international school principals in Malaysia. There were five emergent themes from the analysis: principal autonomy; ownership support; principal accountability; principal affective dissonance and the locus of control. There were wide-ranging levels of autonomy given to principals, significant support from owners in terms of financial backing for areas of development and methods of accountability that ranged from formal to informal. Principals seemingly had affective dissonance over working in for-profit schooling and there were issues surrounding the locus of ownership. There is little research in this area, particularly in Asia and this work appears to be the sole work that includes consideration of leadership in international school chains.

## Introduction

There has been a significant rise in the number of schools describing themselves as *international schools* this century. With the number of international schools globally increasing by almost 40% between 2012 and 2018, and with projections that the number of students in international schools will reach 7 million by 2023 (ISC Research, 2019), understanding the world of international schooling is as significant to global education as understanding the education system of a medium-sized country like England (Bunnell et al., 2016). This rise has been predominately in Asia and the Middle East (Chuck, 2015).

Concomitantly, the nature of international schools seems to be changing. This growth has been accompanied by new forms of ownership and governance in international schools (Chuck, 2015). Additional changes in the composition of international schools

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have also been noted. Previously international schools predominately served the children of expatriate families whilst now they contain a higher proportion of local host nation children (Hayden, 2011). The driving force behind this growth is frequently local population demand which makes a distinct difference from the traditional international school which were populated by overseas families (Chuck, 2015). Some theorists suggest changes in international schooling have created distinct types of international schools; for example, Gardner-mctaggart (2016, 2018) differentiates ‘international’ international schools serving an internationally mobile global elite from ‘local’ international schools serving upwardly mobile host national. By contrast, Hayden and Thompson (2013) create a typology of 3 based on cohorts and curricula, whilst James and Sheppard (2014) create four categories of international school governance based around the notion of fiscal profit. A common concern across these conflicting classifications is to capture a growing diversity in international schooling – in who attends such schools and in how they are managed and owned.

These changes render examination of governance relationships in international schools particularly pertinent. There is a limited literature in this area, suggesting that the lines between governance, ownership and management in international schools have frequently been blurred (Hayden, 2006). More recently, James and Sheppard (2014) indicate that the way international schools are governed has not been studied extensively to date and state that the ‘ownership basis is likely to influence decision-making, especially of a strategic nature and is therefore directly related to governance’ (James & Sheppard, 2014, p. 6). Previous literature has shown that issues relating to governance, ownership and management can lead to international school principal discontent. For example, Benson (2011) cites the relationship with the Board being the largest reason for principals leaving a school. Given that principal turnover in international schools is high, with Hawley (1994, 1995) calculating an average tenure of 2.8 years and Benson (2011) 3.7 years, respectively, then it would appear valuable to focus on the principal governance relationship. Hayden (2006), James and Sheppard (2014), and Machin (2014) have explored these issues to some extent; however, both Hayden (2006) and James and Sheppard (2014) appear to concentrate on European and USA based International schools. The literature on leading international schools in Asia is low, Lee et al. (2012) finding only three studies that targeted international school leadership in Asia, concluding with a call for further such work. Although there has been an increase in published work since 2012, nonetheless such work is in its infancy. Machin’s (2014) work, like the current paper, is based in Asia although it primarily focuses the contestation around working in a for-profit school.

This paper contributes to the field by exploring principal perspectives on international school ownership in Malaysia which, like many Asian countries, has seen a rapid growth in international schools. It includes discussion of the leadership of schools with both single and chain ownership; an area that appears unexplored to date. The data analyzed here are 12 face-to-face interviews of international school principals, the schools having been sampled to include a range of ownership and governance models. In Malaysia, international schools are non-government funded fee-paying schools that deliver a foreign-based curriculum in a foreign language (predominately English) and are staffed, certainly at senior level, by foreign nationals. The titles given to staff in leadership roles in international schools vary, although most international schools have a single person in

a top leadership position (Keller, 2015). In Malaysia, the title used by the holder of such a post is almost exclusively 'principal', which will be used in this article.

## Literature review

This review explores the extant work on international school ownership, governance and owner-principal relations. Governance is not an easy concept to define; Hodgson (2015, p. 8) defines governance as 'the way in which organisations are directed, controlled and led', drawing attention to rights and responsibilities, rules and procedures, monitoring performance and assignation of accountability. Examination of governance first needs to be set in context by analyzing the changing nature of international schools, their types, ownership and the nature of their cohorts.

The growth of international schools globally has been transformational (ISC Research, 2019); in 2000, there were approximately 2500 such schools whilst by 2017 there were nearly 9000. The number of children attending international schools had risen from less than 1 million to 5 million over the same period, with a corresponding increase in staffing to nearly half a million staff. The nature of international schooling has fundamentally changed; in a space of 30 years, international school places have gone from 80% filled by expatriate children to 80% host national local children (Brummitt & Keeling, 2013). In 2000, the majority of international schools were in Europe and the US whilst by 2017, over half of the international schools were in Asia. The growth of international schools has also changed the ownership landscape so that the ratio of for-profit now outnumbers not-for-profit by around 2 to 1 globally. The majority of new international schools are set up by entrepreneurs and venture capitalists and may have shareholders concerned about financial return and are likely to view these schools as high-risk investment and therefore seek high returns (Chuck, 2015). As most international schools are fee-paying, in 2017 there was a global fee income of USD 43b; this is education for many children and is big business. The market is forecast to double in the next 10 years (ISC Research, 2019), though as Machin (2017) points out, gold rushes rarely last forever. This raises the question of who benefits from this expansion – for example, who gains economic and cultural capital as a result of this process. We suggest that, in consequence, analyzing contested understandings of international schooling and its governance is not an academic exercise of marginal interest, but one infused with power and with macro effects. Changes in government policies toward international schools are leading to an implicit marketization of public systems of education in some Asian countries (Kim & Moberand, 2019).

In Malaysia, the expansion of international schools has reflected these global trends. The number of international schools has grown rapidly since the government relaxed regulations that prevented most Malaysians from attending international schools in 2012. By September 2018 there were 280 English medium schools in Malaysia, making it the largest sector in South East Asia and the 5<sup>th</sup> largest in the world, educating 100,000 students and employing 10,000 teaching staff (ISC Research, 2019). The Malaysian Government officially recognize 135 international schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018), defined as ones that deliver a foreign curriculum. This difference of numbers is explained by the ISC including all English medium schooling, some of which may well be language schools, although the ISC figure will actually exclude some non-English medium international

schools in Malaysia. The majority of these international schools were in the West Peninsula, and were concentrated in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and the adjoining urban conglomeration of the Klang Valley (ISC Research, 2019). The 2012 changes also removed previous restrictions on foreign ownership of international schools, and there has been a consequent introduction of international chains into the Malaysian market.

Several theorists have attempted to make sense of this expanding market by offering typologies of international schooling. Two important works on this classification are Hayden and Thompson (2013) and James and Sheppard (2014); each is addressed in turn. Hayden and Thompson (2013) offer a threefold typology based around cohorts and curricula. Type A 'traditional' international schools typically offer an English or US curriculum to expatriate families and tend to be privately owned or run as parental cooperatives (Bunnell et al., 2016). The origins of international schooling also lie in part in Type B 'Ideological' International Schools, which aim to bring students together to foster a belief in world peace and develop international mindedness through their curriculum, for example, with the International Baccalaureate (IB) (Bunnell et al., 2016; Hayden & Thompson, 2013). They suggest that the international school landscape has recently been 'reconfigured' (Bunnell et al., 2016) with the creation of Type C 'Non-Traditional' International Schools (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). Type C schools are ones that cater to host nation families, the economically advantaged who seek to give their children a social advantage and are the main growth area globally (Bunnell et al., 2016; Gardner-mctaggart, 2016). These schools usually are English medium and deliver an internationally recognized curriculum and qualifications that would assist students' entrance to universities in the UK or the US for those who 'perceive a western education and fluency in English as a route to future success and prosperity in a globalized world' (Hayden & Thompson, 2013, p. 7). A significant distinction of Type C schools is that they tend to be privately owned and operated on a for-profit basis (Bunnell et al., 2016).

There are problems with Hayden and Thompson's typology. Firstly, these are clearly simplifications, as international schools have always segued between the types. For instance, many Type C schools, serving local populations, offer the IB programs, or originally served expatriate populations until government restrictions on host country enrollment were relaxed. Equally, many international schools offer dual programs (a local curriculum alongside an international one). In addition, the Type B schools have also been subject to the criticism of Westernization, as their view of what it constitutes to be international seems to be grounded in the habitus of the Western elite (Tamatea et al., 2008). Finally, some aspects of school climate are not captured by this typology; by contrast, Hatziconstantis and Kolympari (2021) differentiate between 'inwards-looking' (p. 6) international schools that celebrate existing cultures (either of host-country students or of the home cultures of expatriates), and cosmopolitan international schools. The expatriate/host nation binary division concept is problematic; increasingly these schools are marketing themselves internationally, attracting children from other Asian countries without their parents and may offer boarding facilities. To look at the nationalities of the children in the school does not tell you their story, they may be from expatriate families or be attending without their parents' resident in the country. Moreover, with some expatriate families not from the Western country where the school's curriculum is sourced, the idea of an international school being a 'home school not at home' is not true for these children. Nevertheless, discussion about different types

of international school reflects a growing contestation of international schooling; this changing landscape of international schooling does not only concern a growth in sheer numbers but in addition changes in who they serve and who owns them.

The idea that international schooling is a contested and evolving construct has implications for governance and the professional working relationship between owner and principal. Privately owned schools could be for-profit or not-for-profit, for-profit schools operate on a commercial business where the product they are selling in the marketplace is 'education', not-for-profit schools are more like other social-based organizations like charities in that they are not focused on fiscal profit (Chuck, 2015). However, as James and Sheppard (2014) point out, this binary distinction is unclear, can evolve and may overlook personal financial gains made by individuals in ostensibly not-for-profit settings (James & Sheppard, 2014). The recent growth in international schools also includes the development of 'chains' of schools, whereby an owner owns multiple schools within a country or even across nations globally (Kim & Mobernd, 2019). Hayden (2011) refers to the big international corporate players of Nord Anglia, Cognita and GEMS who manage schools in a range of countries, and the satellite campuses of prestigious private schools from the UK and US such as Harrow and Dulwich. These chains are also complemented by internal chains within one country, often owned within that country.

Nord Anglia Education's 61 international schools are located in 28 countries across the Americas, Europe, China, Southeast Asia, India and the Middle East. It has relocated its HQ from Hong Kong back to its original London home (<https://www.nordangliaeducation.com/>). Cognita is also UK based although its majority owner is Jacobs Holding AG, a global investment firm based in Switzerland. Cognita operates private schools in the UK and international schools in eight other countries in South America, Asia and Europe, with a total of 74 schools (<https://www.cognita.com/>). GEMS, founded as Global Education Management Systems (GEMS), is the largest operator of international schooling globally, with 98 schools in 12 countries in the Middle East, Europe, South East Asia, Africa and the USA. GEMS builds new international schools but also has a practice of acquisition of existing private schools, particularly in the UK (<https://www.gemseducation.com/>).

Asia has particularly seen the importing of English elite private education, with satellite colleges emerging as hyper-capitalism ventures of high-status schools such as Dulwich and Harrow – Harrow, for example, now operates Harrow International Schools in Bangkok, Beijing and Hong Kong. These international schools are usually operated as a franchise within the foreign country (Bunnell, 2008). This is a growth model with 72 such schools existing by July 2018, the largest increasing single year (<https://www.tes.com/news/exclusive-record-number-independent-schools-expand-overseas>). As Machin (2014) succinctly puts it, 'today, it is almost *de rigueur* for the great and the good of British (and increasingly American) private schools to loan their name, brand, iconography and imagery to locally financed, overseas outposts' (Machin, 2014, p. 20).

James and Sheppard (2014) indicate that the way international schools are governed has not been studied extensively to date and create a categorization of international school governance based around ownership and fiscal profit and therefore differs from the Hayden & Thompson typology outlined earlier. International schools can be owned by a single owner or shareholders, this situation they describe as being in the private

ownership category. They can also be owned by a trust or foundation, these schools would be in the community ownership category. These two distinctions can then be further divided into those for-profit and those not-for-profit. Their study found international school principals in privately owned schools generally viewed the governing arrangements positively; this could be due to their reports of enjoying considerable autonomy over educational matters. The owners who participated stated that there was a high degree of autonomy given to principals in all but financial matters. The accountability of principals appeared to be gained through market-based mechanisms, for example, 'student enrolments, examination results, periodic assessment by accrediting organizations and of course their own professional accountability' (James & Sheppard, 2014, p. 17).

There are two potential limitations of James and Sheppard (2014) work that have a bearing on the work reported here. The first is the nature of their sample. Although we do not know the location of the schools that participated, the sampling sites of conferences in the US and Europe and a UK-based doctoral program may have inadvertently skewed the sample toward principals from these areas. The composition of the ownership categories may reflect this with private for-profit schools making up 11%, private not-for-profit 4%, community not-for-profit 86% and community for-profit 0%; the most common type of international school in Europe is the not-for-profit model whilst the for-profit is the most common in Asia (Chuck, 2015).

The second limitation in their study is the variance in the *locus of control* within governance and the concept of chain governance. James and Sheppard do not take account of the development of school chains in their model, probably as it is not reflected in their sample. The chain model of schooling brings complex governance models and in particular moves the location of the *locus of control* of ownership. If there is a single owner of a single school then the locus is within that school, whilst chains remove the locus exterior to the school. A group or chain may have other schools *intra* national (so the locus moves from the school but within the country) or even, trans national, where a school chain has developed and spread internationally but has an HQ in one country which may be different to the school (the locus is in another country). This locus shift may affect a principal's professional working relationship with the Board. We offer this concept as additional thought in the fluidity of international school construction.

One particular finding in James and Sheppard's study is that there is a potential problem with international school governance – the blurring of lines between governance and leadership and management (see also Hayden, 2006; Hodgson, 2015). Overzealous Board members may try to 'micro manage' the principal (Blandford & Shaw, 2001) and this occurs more frequently when there is a lack of Board training, few written policies and high Board member turnover (Hayden, 2006). This blurring of lines may be problematic and occur more than in national schools (Hayden, 2006) although Walker (2004) believes the lines of distinction between management and governance are not strictly fixed.

These changes in patterns of ownership have important implications for the nature of international schooling and the leadership of international schools. For example, the cultural differences between principals and their host nation governors and staff are frequently referred to as part of the challenge of being a principal in an international school (Hayden, 2006; Sarros & Sarros, 2007; Terwilliger, 1972).

However, we hypothesize that this may become more marked as schools ownership becomes transnational, a principal could be dealing with a local host national representative of an owning organization based in yet a different country (for example, a Malaysian representing a UK-based organization to a South African principal in a school in Thailand). In addition, there is concern that cultural and linguistic diversity may be lost as global companies increasingly come to dominate education (Steketee, 2004).

The existent work on international school leadership in Asia does not address these critical concerns, however. Lee et al. (2012) discuss the challenges that face international school principals in Asia, although they restrict themselves to schools that use the International Baccalaureate curriculum. Their work, which includes schools from several Asian countries, does not address the principal owner/board relationship. More recent work that discusses the role of an international school principal in Asia does cite governance and the business elements as challenges and notes the wide-ranging models of governance in international schools (Bailey & Gibson, 2019). Nevertheless, the sole piece of work we have located that specifically discusses international school principal-owner relations in Asia is Machin (2014), where 3 of the 15 participants were from Malaysia (the others being in Thailand and China). However, the sample is described as ‘principals and heads of school’; we are unclear what level of seniority they were. Nonetheless, Machin’s work provides us with an insight into the contested role of the principal in a for-profit school. Machin (2014) examines the colliding worlds of commerce and education within the role of a for-profit school principal. The language of markets may be familiar to many principals across the world, however for many international school principals such discourse is not only familiar but brings inherent tensions as ‘marketisation and the pursuit of revenue are not alien, unfamiliar and unwelcome concepts; they are, arguably at least, a central, if not the central, purpose for organizational existence’ (Machin, 2014, p. 20). International school principals are increasingly being asked to perform dual roles in protecting both educational standards and the commercial bottom line. Machin concludes that increasingly international school principals need to be versed in the language of commerce.

In addition, there appears to be no academic literature that addresses principal-owner relations in chain-based international schools. The idea that schools could operate as groups with singular ‘branches’, i.e. schools, is a trend also occurring in state-funded schools in different parts of the world and there may well be parallels to international school chains. Academy schools in England, Charter schools in the US and free schools in Sweden are such models (Chapman, 2013). Academy schools in England often operate within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) governance model, where a single MAT may operate several schools throughout the country. Academies were introduced in 2000 and by 2016, there were some 1121 MATs running 4041 academy schools (Gibson, 2018). Gibson (2016) explored the relationship between academy school principals and their MAT. The study showed a continuum of principal autonomy from their MAT, ranging from ones that were autocratic to those being *laissez-faire*, with some MATs controlling the uniform, curriculum, staffing structure, building design, and teaching methods. Representatives from MAT companies described such control as building their ethos brand. It is useful to see whether international school principals face similar challenges when working in a chain of schools.



This review has explored the changing landscape of international schooling and the effect that this has had upon ownership and governance. It has argued that typologies of international schooling have indicated the scope of such changes, but leave unanswered the question of whether and how such changes are shifting power relationships within international schools, and who gains from such changes. We have seen that there is a dearth of literature exploring the relationship between international school Boards and principals in the expanding international markets across Asia. This is an emerging trend and the literature has not yet kept pace with such changes. We have further argued that this has parallels to similar issues faced by autonomous schools within government systems of schooling. The remainder of this paper seeks to explore these issues in the context of Malaysia. This paper seeks to answer one overarching research question:

What are the challenges facing International school principals in the professional working relationships with their governors/owners in Malaysia?

## Methods

The research that this article reports upon was a multiple case study. Case study has a strength in analyzing real-life situations (Yin, 2014), offering first-hand experience from participants who share their professional life, providing rich data. Case studies reflect the complexity of social truths and can provide deep insight (Cohen et al., 2018). However, a disadvantage of case study is that generalizations are problematic (Cohen et al., 2018). Our wider project was focused on understanding school leadership in international schools in Malaysia, and the significance of governance arrangements to principals emerged as a theme in the process of our research. This does not aim, therefore, to be a comprehensive examination of governance, as we do not consider other stakeholder perspectives. We offer our data as insight into an under-researched area and hope that it will be useful to inform the field.

The sample of principals interviewed was selected by a combination of opportunistic and purposeful sampling. A professional association of international schools in Malaysia distributed our call for participants, although we also contacted others. Snowballing increased the sample with some principals playing a part in recruiting others. There is a wide range of international school ownership in Malaysia, and we aimed to gain a selection across this diverse smorgasbord, rather than to obtain a representative sample. Our sample includes for-profit and not-for-profit schools, single owner schools, a parental cooperative and both intranational and transnational chains. In each school, we conducted an in-depth face-to-face interview with the most senior educational leader in the school, who was typically termed the 'principal'. These interviews were all performed in 2018. We acknowledge that one limitation of this approach is findings may not be generalizable, but assert that they nevertheless offer insights into some of the challenges that principals face.

We sought to include principals from a range of different backgrounds; despite these efforts, none of the participants were Malaysian nationals, and it should be noted that they were predominately (but not exclusively) from Western countries such as the UK and the USA, and also predominately were White. This demographic feature of leadership of international schools in Malaysia and its social meaning is explored in another paper we are publishing out of the same data-set, and there is no space to explore it here.

However, we acknowledge that the voices in this paper therefore largely constitute a Western perspective on international schooling in Malaysia. The language of instruction of all the schools was English and whilst the curriculum varied, it was invariably from Western countries. The participants' mother tongue was English, and this was the medium of the interviews. Each participant was given a pseudonym to preserve anonymity, although gender was preserved. The authors were acutely aware of the sensitivity of the research, involving, for example, participants commenting on their employer, therefore [Table 1](#) contains the maximum detail about participants that we could ethically provide. We acknowledge that further demographic details would have helped to contextualize comments, but they could have compromised anonymity.

## Findings and discussion

There were five emergent themes from the analysis: principal autonomy; ownership support; principal accountability; principal affective dissonance and the locus of control. This section will discuss each in turn; however, it will aid the reader to have a tabulation of the categorization of each participant with salient elements of their school. [Table 1](#) provides relevant information on each school arising from the literature review. We have been careful to preserve anonymity of participants, and this limits the ownership details that can be included.

It is noticeable that our sample is significantly different to James and Sheppard (2014), who had 86% of participants working in community not-for-profit schools and only 11% in a private for-profit school. In this study, the figures are essentially reversed with 3 out of the 12 being not-for-profit and 9 for-profit schools. Although the sample is not representative in any sampling method, it does reflect the ownership of international schools globally, particularly in Asia. The recent chain development of international schools is also reflected.

### *Theme 1 principal autonomy*

We found considerable variation in the spheres deemed to lie within principals' control, with areas traditionally delegated to principals, such as the curriculum, sometimes being seen as matters for Board control. In describing their working relationships with the Board the theme of autonomy was immediately raised by all participants; they felt that they had a high level of autonomy on educational matters like James and Sheppard's participants, although in some cases the owners' control was significant. Lisa's summary, 'the governors are strategic, I am operational', was offered by several of our sample. The principals stated that they would be the person who hired and fired staff and had control of the curriculum, however, they frequently had close working relationships with a representative of the board. Bernard described how he felt he had a 'huge degree of autonomy' and his interview was peppered with 'I decided this' or 'I wanted this', he felt that the trustees were not educationalists and placed a large amount of trust in him because they perceived the school as successful.

As experienced principals, Lisa and George established a clear demarcation between the governors and themselves upon taking up their posts. Lisa's school was parent owned

**Table 1.** School details for each participant.

Pseudonym	School governance type	School grouping *	School ownership details
Jack	Community not-for-profit	Single school	Community Board.
Bernard	Community not-for-profit	Single school	Single family owner with others on board.
Lisa	Community not-for-profit	Single school	Parent governed.
Luke	Private for-profit	Group of schools, most in Malaysia one in another South East Asian country	Company own other private educational establishments.
Barry	Private for-profit	Single school	Single owner with board controlled by family.
James	Private for-profit	Single school	Owned by property development company.
Lilly	Private for-profit	Group of schools in Asia and others globally	International group based in Europe.
George	Private for-profit	Single school but part of franchise based in South East Asia	Single owner (parent). No Board. Franchise arrangement.
Isabella	Private for-profit	Group schools in Malaysia	Company own other private educational establishments.
Henry	Private for-profit	Group schools, most in Malaysia one in another South East Asian country	Company own other private educational establishments in Malaysia.
Amelia	Private for-profit	Group of schools in Malaysia	Single owner with board controlled by family.
Terence	Private for-profit	Group of schools, most in Malaysia one in another South East Asian country	Company own other private educational establishments in Malaysia

\* The exact numbers of individual schools within a chain are not given to protect anonymity. Groupings vary from 2 to over 50 schools within the chain.

and governed, and Lisa performed the governors' orientation and training herself, thereby marking out her territory – the hidden agenda of the training was about power and where it resided. She also had conversations with potential governor candidates before they applied to explain the demarcation, 'it's explained to them even before they run for the board that this is their role and this is not their role'. George had a single private owner who also was a parent, and he described how he had established boundaries between the owner's role and his own:

She was more hands-on in the past and I've actually helped her get out of the day-to-day stuff. And said, "this is my role, you be gone," and we had a few choice words in the first week. But we managed to draw the lines and say, okay. Quite a bit of conflict in the first week or two and now we get on very well.

Mutual trust and negotiating skills appeared to be at the forefront of mapping the demarcation boundaries (Hayden, 2006). Jack explained:

We've spent a lot of time on this, in terms of where do the boundaries lie in terms of what is for the head of school . . . to deal with the operational aspects of the school, the day to day and then what is for governors to decide in terms of strategy, fiscal responsibility etc, and where is the overlap in those areas?

Autonomy is an emotive word for school principals, who are unlikely to admit to having little. In many schools, there were restrictions on the principal's decision-making, despite the principals stating they had large autonomy. In some chains, things were dictated; for example, George's single owner school had bought into a franchise that mandated a Reggio Emilia teaching approach, as well as the 'uniform and business colors, the corporate aspects all centrally controlled from the franchise owners'. Isabella's school was newly opened after the owners had spent considerable time undertaking market research into how to attract a certain parental group. A technology focus and the use of Singapore Mathematics curriculum was a market strategy directed from the owners, Isabella explained, 'because that's something the market . . . [chair of Board] is very committed to, you know. He thinks that it is a real draw for parents as well'. This control of the curriculum, often seen in the literature as part of a principal's autonomous role (Hayden, 2006; James & Sheppard, 2014), was centrally dictated by the owners in order to create a niche market. Similarly, in Henry's school the decision to be an IT-based learning environment was taken before any principal appointment. Chains were seemingly searching for different markets in a competitive environment, and this creation of unique selling points for individual schools within a chain sometimes involved one school targeting a specific ethnic group in Malaysia. Two of the three schools with private single owners employed family members and this was another matter not open to principal negotiation. This wide range of principal autonomy within our sample was similar to Gibson's (2016) findings in chain schools in England.

### **Theme 2 owner support**

Support offered by owners was seen as important to principals, although the forms of support given differed according to school ownership type. All of the principals referred to the large amount of support they received from the owner/board. In the case of single-

owner schools, this support could manifest itself in personal encouragement. Amelia's owner was 'a mentor' to her, this being her first principal post. George's owner had an office in the school and was there almost daily. Amelia's interview contained extensive praise for the owner, and principalship was clearly *de facto* a joint affair at the time of the interview. Several of our samples were new school builds within a chain that would not exist without the owners' funding. Large amounts of capital were required to make Henry's IT-focused school, and older schools had been renovated to ensure they retained their marketplace.

Operationally, chains sometimes provided mutual support from partner schools, for example, on curriculum development and teacher CPD. In all the chains, this mutual support was an explicit aim. In addition to these formal planned supportive mechanisms, principals reported 'sounding out' other principals before raising issues with the Board, each having a 'go to' person for mutual support. Support from governors for principals has been highlighted as a key ingredient for school success (Hayden, 2006).

### *Theme 3 principal accountability*

There was a range of formal and informal principal appraisal mechanisms within our sample. Despite research-informed best practice indicating that regular fixed reviews of principal work should take place by the Board (Hayden, 2006; Hodgson, 2015), some of our sample had little, if any, formal review; Lily recalling, 'I've never felt that I've had a formal, right I'm going to sit down and tell you what you're good at and can't do.' Both Barry and Bernard had no appraisal procedures until they instigated them, providing the owners with development plans and specific targets for themselves.

The appraisal systems varied; in the case of one chain, it was a formal system operating across all the schools, involving tiers of management, chair of the Board and an annual parental questionnaire including questions specifically evaluating the principal. However, even when there was a formal system, in some schools, the primary focus was the business bottom line; numbers on roll. George explains his appraisal, 'the ways things work at the moment it's purely numbers [student roll], because they were concerned with this ... but I would think that my only KPI from this current round was based on numbers. So like once I reach 160 for the year, then I will get like a financial extra payment I think'.

### *Theme 4 principal affective dissonance*

Working in international schools, particularly those which are for-profit, may provoke moral dilemmas that participants had not faced in national schools in their home country. International schools source many of their teachers from other countries and this was a problem for Isabella, 'but I need to say there isn't a day, working 16 years in state schools, that I don't feel guilty about taking good teachers out of the UK'.

Like Machin's (2014) principals, the notion of working in a for-profit school also provided affective dissonance. It is notable that only a clarification of the status of the school was on the interview schedule, not how the participant felt about it, yet most discussed the ethics of for-profit schooling. The dialogue with James became one of

openly defending the concept of profit, ‘all schools are for profit, otherwise they wouldn’t exist. The question is what happens to the profit and I think that’s more of the identifier’. Others defended for-profit schooling by explaining the nature of their owners’ business interests. For example, Luke said:

We are for-profit but at the same time as an organization which is focused on education. The CEO talked about the education business or the business of education. And he said a number of times if we don’t get the education bit right, there’s no business. The other thing about [owner group] which is quite important is that it is a family business and so it’s not an organization which is looking to make lots of money very quickly.

Words such as ‘family’, ‘education business’ and ‘small’ were used by some of our participants to defend their company’s for-profit stance. This was openly contrasted with what they described as ‘big’, ‘corporate’ and being involved in other areas of commerce when describing some other international school owners, for whom they would be reluctant to work.

The organization that James worked for, however, was a large corporation,

We’re a part of a . . . Malaysian based group, and they have got branches which are involved in timber, and oil and gas, automotive, shipping, IT, they employ around 250, 000 people, it’s a massive group. And one branch of that is property and education was within property. They’re realizing now that education is a lucrative business to be in, so now, education is becoming a branch within itself, so we’ve come out of property.

James had seemingly bought into the big business of his employer and was proud of their business success; however, he defended his school profit by asserting that it was marginal to the business, ‘the profit that [the school] will make is equivalent to selling one house for example.’ James here though is being selective in the business model. Frequently property developers cannot sell houses to families if there are no schools, so a developer may build a school too. The international school is almost a ‘loss leader’ in attracting home sales which are the bigger profit; the profit is just displaced. This business model of, in effect, subsidizing school fees to increase profit on houses, was raised by other principals, who perceived such schools to have an unfair advantage in the market.

The affective dissonance surrounding working in a for-profit institution was also raised by those who worked in not-for-profit schools. Lisa had always consciously sought work only in a not-for-profit school and explained her strength of feeling about for-profit schooling, despite not working in one:

there are few schools in Malaysia that are not-for-profit . . . I think I would find it difficult in many many cases to work in [a for-profit] environment, . . . because resources are not spent for students, but rather the bottom line is making money.

During the interviews with participants in for-profit schools, the discourse of business featured, with their vocabulary frequently including ‘competition’, ‘enrollment figures’, ‘marketing’ and ‘market place’, and several participants seemed at ease with the ‘simultaneous educational–commercial discourse’ (Machin, 2014, p. 19). However, Henry clearly had affective dissonance with the nature of the business side of the role, being less than a year in post, observing ‘It’s more different than I ever imagined’. Henry’s reflections on leading a for-profit school underline the danger many principals felt: ‘I’d be in danger of losing that moral purpose. I’d be in danger of just saying all I really care

about is just having that 3% profit . . . Whereas, if I can keep reminding myself why I'm doing this. I'm doing this because I want to make a difference to kids'.

The principals in this study, like those in Machin's (2014), embraced the education-commerce plurality of their role. Their role became one of seeking and exploiting nuanced markets, all of the principals were very aware of the market their particular school was engaged with and who the 'competition' were. These markets were set by such parameters as fee-bracket and the curriculum offer. This education-commerce plurality created further role-tensions for them.

### *Theme 5 locus of control*

Whilst the growth of international schools has diversified their governance models, unfortunately the literature does not appear to recognize the issues surrounding the locus of control. Both Hayden (2011) and Machin (2014) refer specifically to the growth of chains but do not address the peculiarities that this form of governance may bring for a given principal. In the situation of a single owner, the locus will reside inside that school, a unitary locus; chains within Malaysia will have an intranational locus; and those with a headquarters external to Malaysia, transnational. This concept may be important for international school principals in navigating their relationships with owners. It creates potential complexities for the international school principal, navigating a relationship with an owner who is in your school daily and may well have an office next to yours, is different to say one who resides in another country. This theme cuts across all of our samples which had unitary, intranational and transnational loci of control.

Two principals in our study were in unitary locus schools owned by individuals who employed various family members in the school, and one had the owner's child as a pupil – all resulting in tensions. For example, in one case, family members would complain directly to the owner about issues that dissatisfied them in the school and the Board was made entirely of the owner's family. The principal felt that one family member was not executing their job effectively but was unable to remove them from post. This direct intrusion of the owner into the daily life of the school was exemplified by a further principal who reported that the owner had instructed her on the types of clothes to wear to work.

Some of our sample were in intranational arrangements, whereby principals felt they had to solicit support for change within the organization (and hence their school) from other principals; a more political activity. Equally in one of our chains there was a demarcation in the aims of individual schools, to cater for different markets and so was beyond the scope for individual school principals.

The principal in the sole school that had transnational governance had little ownership contact; Lilly pointed out that 'I have a regional support team in Vietnam because there are other schools in Southeast Asia. I have a regional director who's my direct line manager . . . He isn't interested in the day-to-day running of the school at all . . . Now, if one month he came and numbers are dropped, results were terrible, he'd suddenly become very hands-on, very interested.' By contrast, the principals who had a single owner sometimes received daily visits. These ownerships are also becoming more complex; George, for example, felt that he had two 'bosses' in that he had the sole 'owner' of

the school who was regularly in the school, attending meetings of teachers with free rein to walk in and out of classrooms and a further 'boss' who was the company that the school was a franchise of. This parent company was based in another country but called George to meetings.

A more local locus of control may have benefits for principals in quick responses to urgent issues and being able to develop working relationships, the latter is of course a two-edge sword with potential tensions that may not exist with a more remote locus. George, for example, refers to heated arguments over establishing boundaries due to his concern over his perceived owner's micromanagement of the school. However, a transnational locus appears to warrant management of principals by adherence to metrics. This is not a clear-cut pattern though, for example, Bernard, with a unitary locus, had little contact with his owner. Autonomy and accountability may be different in these situations, we offer some evidence here from our sample but further work is required for what is an increasing phenomenon.

This concept of locus of control and governance needs further exploration. We noted above that our sample of principals was predominantly Western; in other words, in schools with a locus of control outside Malaysia, cultural colonization might be a greater risk than in schools with a locus of control within the country, even if both are led by non-Malaysian principals. We highlight this as an important area for future research.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the working relationships between owners and international school principals in Malaysia. The data here corroborate the findings of Hayden (2006), James and Sheppard (2014), Hodgson (2015), and Machin (2014) that the demarcation between educational leadership and governance may be blurred in international schools. There were challenges for principals working with owners, particularly single-owner families and the lines between management, governance and ownership were blurred. We found five key areas of principal ownership challenges: principal autonomy; owner support; principal accountability; principal affective dissonance and the locus of control. However, our work also points to new issues that are under-represented in the literature, such as international school principalship in chains, particularly the growth of transnational global actors and the concept of the locus of control. Principal autonomy varied across the sample; the 'traditional' area of principal control, the curriculum, for instance, was not within the remit of principals in certain international school chains. All of the principals felt that they had support from their owners, though navigating relationship this was problematic when a single owner was in the school daily. Walking the 'tightrope' of interpersonal relationships with owners was key for principals. Some of the principals had no formal accountability measures and the key theme across the sample was that student enrollment figures were paramount as an accountability measure; all had short fixed-term contracts. The affective dissonance that principals felt between their value and their employment was marked; for-profit schooling was not something with which all were comfortable.

These findings raise critical questions about whether/how the nature of international schooling is impacted by this contested relationship. We have noted that some principals expressed concern about the increasing encroachment of commercial concerns into



international schooling. We have also questioned the extent to which the locus of control of international schools was being detached from its cultural setting. These aspects of the role of principalship in international schools merit further research; we caution that this project had a sample of only 12 schools in one country and is therefore exploratory.

The nature of international schools is changing at a rapid pace. Both Hayden and Thompson (2013) typology of international schools, and James and Sheppard (2014) categorization of ownership, are problematic and further work is required in this area, particularly in the growth areas of Asia and the Middle East. We would caution that our findings suggest that models of ownership and leadership developed in Western contexts cannot easily be applied to other cultural and legal settings. The concept of international school chains is not recognized in James and Sheppard (2014) categorization of international school governance. The chain concept brings different structures and tiers of governing and working professional relationships for an international school principal, one that merits further research. There are issues in this study that relate to the locus of control of ownership and how principals navigate it. The growth of school chains both in international schools and in a national setting is a pattern that poses questions over the nature of ownership, governance, leadership and consequently over the nature of the education provided. The growth in international schools is seemingly unchecked and we could perceive a situation where a not-for profit MAT from England operates for-profit international schools under a subsidiary. This growth is occurring at an alarming rate with the line between the public and the private becoming further blurred. These changes in the private sector have direct implications for inequalities in public education and for the relationship between schooling and citizenship (Kim & Mobrand, 2019).

In summary, the relationship between principalship and governance in the context of international schooling merits further investigation, and may suggest future patterns of change in principalship and governance in national settings. We could be observing the tremors heralding a global seismic change in the nature of school leadership and governance.

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