



# Corporate Cosmopolitanism: Making an Asset of Diversity and Mobility at Swiss International Schools

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## Abstract

This article explores the subjective spatial relations that international schools in Switzerland seek to produce within the cosmopolitan enclaves they form. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at 21 international schools in Switzerland, we scrutinize practices related to diversity and mobility, which international schools construe as the main vehicles leading to the desired attributes of cosmopolitanism and which have historically constituted the defining pillars of international education. The article critically analyses the ambiguities of this emerging denationalised model that claims to foster a cosmopolitan worldview in students by drawing on the ideal of the richness of diversified societies while simultaneously restricting the benefits of “cosmopolitan capital” to members of the transnational upper classes. By tracking the underlying epistemology and the embodiment of diversity and mobility, we are able to trace a continuity between international schools and transnational corporations—the model with which the schools resonate. Our study thus



supplements analyses of cosmopolitan capital by focusing on how a flexible, corporate-inspired conception of cosmopolitanism is instilled from the earliest stages of education, thus shedding light on a paradoxical interplay of cosmopolitanism and space, wherein the praised capacity of international students to adapt to various settings goes hand in hand with their relative isolation from the local environment and its potential frictions.

## Keywords

Corporate cosmopolitanism; international education; enclave; mobility; diversity; Switzerland

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## Introduction

In December 2017, the journal *Education Investor* stated there were 9,318 so-called “international schools” worldwide, which corresponds to an average annual growth rate in student enrolment of 7.3 per cent since 2013—an increase only comparable to the marked rise in school enrolment during the development of nation-states. This large increase is set within a number of contemporary phenomena, including the privatisation, monetisation and internationalisation of education, which together have produced new transnational educational spaces. These are traversed by distinctive sets of values, which in turn are driven by various factors, including cosmopolitan ideals that, as we argue, largely mirror the social and cultural model of the transnational corporation. This article analyses some of the inherent ambiguities in the emerging “denationalised model” (Resnik, 2012) that promises to foster a cosmopolitan worldview in students by drawing on the ideals of the richness of diversified societies while simultaneously restricting the benefits of such “cosmopolitan capital” (Weenink, 2008) to the upper transnational classes who are de facto less attached to and determined by their affiliation to a national territory. We do so by locating our analysis in the networks of what we term “cosmopolitan enclaves” (Rey et al., 2019) formed by international schools in Switzerland. Our ethnographic study tracks the underlying epistemology and the embodiment of two notions in particular—*diversity* and *mobility*—which international schools construe as the main vehicles leading to the desired attributes of cosmopolitanism and which have historically constituted the defining pillars of an international education. As Igarashi and Saito (2014, 225) rightly note, “cosmopolitanism, which signifies open and inclusive attitudes, can be seen as a new kind of distinction” that simultaneously operates as “a marker of inclusiveness and as a basis for exclusion.” To approach this paradox, we look at the teaching apparatus of international schools and at the values and enactments of diversity and mobility in this context. We then trace a continuity between international schools and the model of the transnational corporation, whose “enclave spaces” (Sidaway, 2007) mirror the ambiguous geographies and educational values of international education.

In Switzerland, the international education sector has grown in parallel with the number of transnational corporations that have established a domicile in and around Swiss economic centres in the past 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Unlike public schools, private international schools position themselves within a global, transnational space in contrast to a local, national setting, and they cater mainly to the children of senior expatriate executives and increasingly to a local bourgeoisie seeking to acquire “cosmopolitan cultural capital” (Weenink, 2008). At a time when access to global movements has become a major factor of social stratification (Bauman, 1998; Kaufman et al., 2004; Urry, 2012), it is no surprise that the idea of “cosmopolitan capital” has grown in popularity (e.g. Bühlman et al., 2013; Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Wagner, 2011; Weenink, 2008), as it encompasses some of the major trends of class structure transformation induced by globalisation: on the one hand, there is access to mobility that some see as “the essence of cosmopolitanism” (Sheller, 2011) and, on the other hand, there are diversified forms of belongings that transcend local affiliations (Calhoun, 2003) and that even build and gain value through their symbolical opposition to the local (Friedman, 2018).

As Hannerz states (2004, 72), cosmopolitanism is an umbrella term referring to cultural questions such as the appreciation of human diversity as well as to more political issues such as the definition of society and citizenship. In both cases, cosmopolitanism builds upon similar moral premises, defined in Hannerz’s seminal essay as a “willingness to engage with the other. (...) [A] stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (1990, 239). While this “willingness to engage” implies a moral orientation, Hannerz rightly notes that cosmopolitanism is “also a matter of competence” (1990, 239), which can consequently be instrumentalised and constitute capital in the sense of Bourdieu. Our questions fall rather into this second line of enquiry, and our approach is inspired by a “critical cosmopolitanism” (Delanty 2006) that distances itself from normative political and moral accounts of cosmopolitanism as a universal culture and that conceives cosmopolitanism as socially situated, with unequal access to resources and inherent power imbalances. In Switzerland, for instance, recent research has demonstrated how political and economic elites have transformed the way they (re)produce their standing in the last twenty years by increasingly relying on transnational networks and gaining legitimacy through their cosmopolitan capital rather than through being embedded in long-established local elite networks (Mach et al., 2011). In such processes, schools represent key sites where forms of privilege

<sup>1</sup> According to a McKinsey study released by Swissholding, the lobby of multinational corporations (MNCs) in Switzerland, between 2009 and 2013 Switzerland maintained the first position in the share of headquarter relocations of multinationals within European headquarter hubs (Swissholding, 2019). According to the study, MNCs—of which the five most important in terms of revenue are commodity trading companies (Glencore, Vitol, Trafigura, Cargill and Mercuria)—make up 36 per cent of Switzerland’s GDP. As of 2019, although Switzerland dropped to third place in headquarters relocations, the number of MNCs establishing their headquarters in the country has continued to rise.

and social advantage are transmitted and reproduced, as several authors have argued (e.g. Dugonjic, 2014; Friedman J.Z, 2018; Wagner, 1998; Weenink, 2008).

However, in reaction to the tendency to equate cosmopolitanism with the experience of mobility (cf. Glick-Schiller et al., 2011), and as a complement to current efforts to measure cosmopolitan endeavours in the form of capital that functions through internationally recognised diplomas, international professional experiences and mastery of English (Bühlman et al., 2013, 212), we wish to interrogate which subjective relations to space are sought in school contexts that are considered cosmopolitan in nature. To do so, we break down the term cosmopolitanism into two of its main dimensions that represent the defining features of the environment at international schools: “diversity”, as the daily experience of engaging with a culturally different other, and “mobility”, as a driver of encounters with such others.<sup>2</sup> We draw on visits and interviews with teachers and staff as well as on ethnographic fieldwork at industry events (school fairs and job fairs in Switzerland and the UK) and at 21 international private schools in Switzerland, six of which we selected for extended immersion.<sup>3</sup> Our ethnographic study was conducted between December 2015 and May 2018 and consisted of shadowing teachers in their daily activities. This gave us the opportunity to attend a number of classes and teacher meetings across the entire K–12 spectrum (children from 4 to 18 years of age); we also participated in informal discussions with staff inside and outside of school. This work supplements existing analyses regarding capital by focusing on how international schools aim to instil a corporate-inspired conception of cosmopolitanism from the earliest stages of education. In doing so, we shed light on a paradoxical interplay of cosmopolitanism and space, wherein the praised capacity of international students to adapt to various settings goes hand in hand with their relative isolation from the local environment and its potential frictions.

### **International School Enclaves**

Given the explicit aim of international schools to not integrate children into the local society and labour market, but rather to introduce them to a global, transnational environment, such school settings offer an alternative lens to understanding the ways in which the notions of “diversity” and “mobility” are interpreted. We argue that these interpretations are indicative of the relationships international schools have to certain segments of the service economy, including its labour market. We contend that the spatial reach of international schools, which they

<sup>2</sup> While both terms are largely intertwined and often inseparable in the context of international schools, “diversity” refers mainly to a collective entity (e.g. school community), whereas “mobility” is framed mainly at the individual trajectory level (e.g. school students).

<sup>3</sup> The schools are located in five different cities in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. They use English as their language of instruction; three schools also offer a curriculum in French. All were founded in the 20th century. One school, however, shifted towards international education only after the turn of the 21st century as a means to expand its recruitment pool. These schools also experienced a significant rise in enrolment over the past two decades and constructed new buildings in order to meet the growing demand.

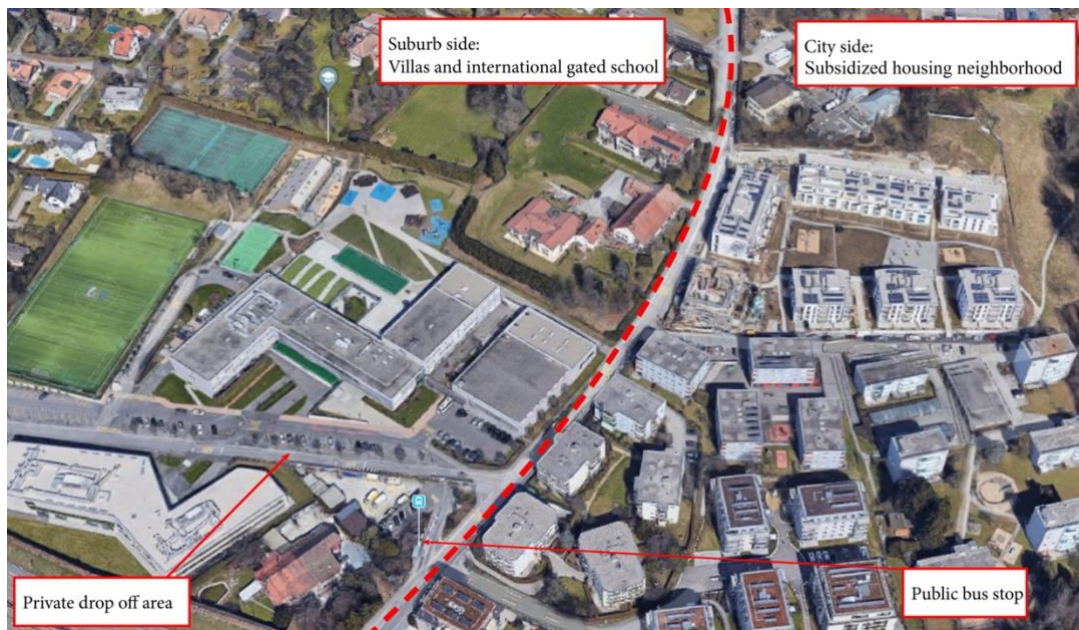
claim to be global, is inherently related to the enclave-network structure of international education, whereby the enclave serves not only to isolate but also to connect.

In this article, our understanding of the “enclave” derives from literature on the mining and commercial sectors (e.g. Bräutigam and Xiaoyang, 2011; Ferguson, 2005) where the creation of transnational connections and networks between enclaves facilitates the circulation of people, goods and capital while also offering a certain degree of “immunity” (Donner, 2011) with regard to local (national, legal and administrative) expectations. The analogy we draw from mining and commerce is not incidental, as some of the first international schools were in fact extensions of corporations such as Shell, which started providing schooling to the children of their expatriate staff already in the 1920s (Brummitt and Keeling, 2013). Put simply, international schools operate as the territorial nodes supporting spaces of “hops”, to borrow Ferguson’s phrasing (2005, 379): they facilitate the movement of people and ideas between enclaves on a global scale, enabling them to skip over most of what lies in-between, in particular local social, political and legal conditions and constraints. Further cementing the analogy between international schools and corporate enclaves, their effectiveness partly depends on the maintenance of material, institutional and ideological boundaries. International schools thus tend to follow the logic of an “urbanism of exception” (Murray, 2017) regarding their material and institutional boundaries, for instance, the use of gates and fences or their location in low-tax suburbs. As illustrated below, their relative sovereignty as private corporate entities largely fuels their ideological boundaries, which are substantiated in international curricula that are separate from national school programmes, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), and that transport conceptions and definitions of diversity and mobility that are different than the integration-driven philosophy of national school systems.

The scene takes place directly on the border of a city known for its vibrant economic activity in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. It is 7:30 in the morning. On the city side of the border, a small group of children—apparently of multiple ethnicities—walk from a neighbourhood of mainly subsidised housing to the bus stop to commute to one of the biggest municipal schools. At this public school, there are children from 55 different nationalities—so questions related to interculturalism are a daily, lived reality. Non-French speakers, recent entrants to Switzerland, regularly join the classrooms during the year, thus requiring the teachers to develop intercultural skills to deal with these children and their parents, and also making the school responsible for students’ integration into the classroom and the local community. In this case, the cross-border mobility of the children is framed in terms of migration: teachers view it as an educational challenge due to the children’s cultural heterogeneity, and political debates tend to frame it as a social

problem due to the necessity to integrate the schoolchildren into Swiss society.

While these students wait for the bus, on the opposite side of the road—a low-tax suburb—a long line of expensive cars slowly moves towards a drop-off zone behind an entrance gate. Each car drops off one or more children, who appear to be of the same age as those waiting at the bus stop. These children are mainly white and communicate in English as they enter a brand-new, modern building—one of the many international private schools in the region. In this school as well, children who have recently arrived from abroad regularly join the classrooms. For these teachers, however, this is less a challenge, as nearly all the new students already speak English—the official language of the school—and have already experienced this situation at least once in another country, in relatively similar school settings. In this case, the cross-border travel of children is framed in terms of mobility, and the term “migration” is carefully avoided. Although the diversity of nationalities is comparable to that of the nearby public school, it is displayed proudly in the school’s presentation material to emphasise the value of cultural diversity.



**Figure 1:** The school enclave (Source: adapted from Google Maps)

What the above description suggests is that “diversity” works as a “strategically deployable shifter” (Urcioli, 2010, 171) within the international school

enclave. It carries different connotations according to the context in which it is used, and it aligns with a particular perspective, which is tacitly racialized. In the Swiss context of political “racelessness” (Goldberg 2006, cf. also Lavanchy 2014), racialization remains unspoken and thus largely invisible. Children from abroad are either framed under the label of “migrants” as a heterogeneous group that needs to be integrated (as in the public school) or, for those of the dominant and mainly white group, they are made “transparent” in a way that underpins racial inequalities. Children of this second group are framed as mobile, global students embodying a rich cultural diversity (as in the private international school). This framing depends, among other things, on the social status of the students’ parents and their access to one or the other type of school. It is the social and economic position that dictates whether the students’ previous cross-border mobility, as well as their diversity, is seen as a resource or a deficit. “Migrant children” are compelled to adapt to vague and evolving conceptions of “Swiss culture” (Duemmler, 2015) and to work at removing their putative differences accordingly—language mastery being one of the most visible markers of a cultural deficit (Yeung, 2016). Yet, as Ossipow et al. (2019) demonstrate in the case of children of refugees born in Switzerland, such injunctions to assimilate are rendered largely impossible, as children are simultaneously racialized and possibly subject to discrimination regardless of their actual migration trajectory. In contrast, “mobile children” are taught to value difference—constructed as an indication of their cosmopolitanism—for being a marker of their capacity to adapt to various environments and contexts at a global scale while adopting a universal perspective, which is a highly valued skill in the service economy (Halsall, 2009). Indeed, in contrast to the repertoires of “migration” and “cultural heterogeneity”, which occupy the forefront in discussions on public education, the notions of diversity and mobility derive their positive connotation from the concept of the “self-as-a-business” (Gershohn, 2011), regularly evoked in the corporate context where elements of difference or international experiences are believed to increase the value of an individual’s human capital.

### **The Entanglement of International Education and Corporate Capitalism**

The literature on the development of international education emphasises the connection to the needs of international civil servants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than a correspondence to the expansion of modern transnational corporations that started establishing sovereign pockets worldwide during the same period (Barkan, 2013). Scholars generally trace the inception of international schools back to the birth of the League of Nations in Geneva in 1919. The popular foundational myth concerns the 1924 establishment of the International School of Geneva (Ecolint) as a response to the growing number of expatriate employees with families working in international organisations. As Dugonjic points out (2014), beyond the myth, international education also resulted from an alignment of several other factors: US

industrial corporate interests;<sup>4</sup> ideals of peace as articulated by political internationalism; active currents in pedagogical innovations in the Geneva area; and corporatist interest in the consolidation of an international employee status. One decisive factor in the development of international education was the launch of the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB) in 1968 and its expansion ever since. Supported by pacifist ideals and inspired by the objectives of the United Nations (UN) (Fabian, 2016), the IB facilitated the transnational mobility of expatriate families and increasingly became an aspirational educational standard for a growing, local middle class situated mainly in so-called emerging countries. This curriculum uses English<sup>5</sup> as a language of instruction and promotes “international-mindedness”—which can be broadly understood as cosmopolitanism—as a core feature of a curriculum that promises the development of a global citizenship beyond the nation-state framework (Doherty, 2009). In this context, and given the various disputed definitions of what makes a school international (Bunnell et al., 2016), schools tend to be symbolically hierarchised according to the diversity of their students’ nationalities. The more “diverse” they are, the more they can claim to be truly international<sup>6</sup>—although they are not necessarily more diverse than public schools in a given country.

In Switzerland, only 10 schools were affiliated with the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) before the year 2000; by 2018, however, this number had risen to 51.<sup>7</sup> As discussed elsewhere (Rey et al., 2019), this growth is attributed to the rise of economic globalisation and the parallel increase in the population of expatriate employees working in economic centres in Switzerland. In addition, a large number of international schools operate with curricula other than the IB. Though the curricula may differ, international schools share notable traits: they hire their teaching staff from within a common labour market of English-speaking teachers, they refer to the same foundational myth of the League of Nations, they strongly value the notions of diversity and mobility that mobile civil servants from all over the world symbolically embody, they have very high annual fees (starting from CHF 20,000 at the primary and CHF 30,000 at the secondary level), and many of them were established in the 2000s in tandem with increased support from multinational companies whose employees expressed growing demand for such curricula. In Switzerland, with its attractive taxation policies for multinational companies, it is unsurprising that this trend has taken off rapidly, with the Swiss

<sup>4</sup> The Carnegie Foundation has been a major sponsor of Ecolint from the start. This may be interpreted as part of a broader involvement to promote post-war economic liberalism through international relations (Dugonjic, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> French and Spanish are also recognised as official languages in the IB, but their use is sparse.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Sylvester (1998) argued that “a minimum of 30–40 student nationalities is needed for a school to be considered to be genuinely international”.

<sup>7</sup> Since 2000, not only have long-established private schools adopted the IB curricula, but a growing number of international schools have also been built near urban areas where multinational companies are headquartered (e.g. Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Zug, and Zurich).



media regularly reporting on the boom in international education from the 2000s onwards.

In some cases, multinational companies are direct shareholders in schools that address mainly the educational needs of employees' families; elsewhere, companies are the primary clients and have annual contracts with international schools to secure a certain number of seats for their employees' children—meaning that in practice they have economic control over these schools. Moreover, international schools are themselves increasingly operated by transnational educational corporations (such as Nordanglia Education, Pansophic Learning), especially with the aim of opening new markets and adding traditional schools with high symbolic capital to their portfolio. The dual role of multinational companies as both client and part of the school management is increasing apparent in the annual reports of several schools which, for instance, not only represent the student body in terms of its national diversity but also include statistics on the variety of the parents' employers (for example, major multinational companies such as Nestlé, Novartis, Roche, Syngenta, Procter & Gamble, Trafigura and Japan Tobacco). In addition to country affiliation, the parents' employers have become important symbolic markers for schools. As suggested by school agents, the larger and more varied the partner companies, the better the school.

The growing visibility of transnational corporations as clients, donors, shareholders, and owners of international schools has not undermined the schools' historical references to "pacifist internationalism". Nevertheless, the historical prominence of "internationalism" has been progressively transformed into "interculturalism" (Heyward, 2002) and has been embedded into an economic discourse on skill development. This shift during the first decade of the new millennium thus illustrates with a magnifying effect for international schools what Mitchell noted for the public educational sector (2008)—which is the decrease in educational concerns to shape tolerant and democratic citizens in favour of more strategic and competitive uses of diversity and cosmopolitanism. As contended by the Harvard Business Review, this notion is widespread in the corporate milieu, primarily because of the underlying competence-based reframing at play both outside the firm (clients)—"People are more inclined to trust their fellow nationals [in global markets]" (Ghemawat, 2011:95)—and inside the firm (colleagues)—"Diversity has a positive effect on group performance" (Ghemawat, 2011, 95). As Bereni and Prud'Homme (2019) observed in their study of officers of diversity promotion in French firms, while the rhetoric of diversity is indeed celebrated in terms of performance and innovation, everyday practices are very little affected by the increasing presence of this discussion; racialized minorities, on which the concept initially focused, have even been progressively erased from the scope of diversity in the work context (Coulon et al., 2018).

Drawing on these initial observations stressing the ambiguity of the enclave model of an international school partially detached from its surrounding while nevertheless claiming cosmopolitanism within its boundaries, we apply questions

related to the integrative role of schools—a demand placed frequently on public schooling systems (Duemmler, 2015; Alba and Holdaway, 2013)—to the growing field of international education.

### **What Integration Spaces for Whom?**

In Switzerland, as elsewhere, political and educational institutions tend to view children of lower classes families with migration background mainly through the lens of migration and as part of the social problem that is cultural integration. For instance, in her work on Swiss schooling, Duemmler observes that “although the current Swiss immigration policy declares that cultural diversity is socially enriching, assimilation into ‘Swiss culture’ remains a dominant criterion to define who can become a legitimate member of Swiss society” (2015, 379). Suárez-Orozco et al. also remind us that public schools, “as tools of state-making, are geared towards producing citizens and workers of a nation-state rather than dual citizens with global sensitivities” (2011, 321). As such, the diversification of the student body resulting from increased transnational displacement tends to bring discussions on language and identity to the fore. In this sense, they interrupt “the taken for granted cultural schemas and social practices that structure belonging to and membership in the nation” (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011: 322). In the context of public schools, the presence of migrant children raises questions regarding the norms and values of the dominant class, which in turn constantly transforms the migrants into others (Oester et al., 2007, 327). By contrast, children at the upper end of global citizenship, such as those enrolled in international schools, are viewed in Swiss politics through the lens of mobility and, within these schools, the cultural diversity that they are meant to represent is celebrated daily. Different “regimes of mobility” (Glick Shiller and Salazar, 2013) that employ competing assumptions of what constitutes difference thus materialise in the schools that assign value to this difference according to whether students are framed as undesirable and “suspicious migrants” or beneficial and “desired mobiles” (Shamir, 2005).

The Swiss political and legal context tends to reinforce this divide. First, as elsewhere in Europe, Switzerland clearly favours the entry of high-skill migrants (Wanner and Steiner, 2018). Second, Switzerland has implemented this skills-based approach to migration since 2002 together with EU agreements on the free movement of persons. It thus immediately followed the “three circles” model of the 1990s that since its inception has rightfully been interpreted as ethnocentric and openly “ethno-cultural” by migration scholars (Mahnig and Cattacin, 2005). The racialized hierarchies in this model have remained powerful in spite of a widespread belief of the absence of racism in Swiss migration policy procedures, in line with a society deemed “harmonious, multicultural and respectful of diversity” (Lavanchy, 2014, 8). Finally, the social integration of immigrants has historically been the object of very little policy work in Switzerland; instead, the “natural” mechanisms of labour markets are expected to facilitate the economic integration of immigrants, and social integration is believed to follow as a matter of course (Wanner, 2004). Schools

contribute to this process by orienting children, both Swiss and immigrant, towards their future occupations. This integrative function of education in the labour market became especially explicit with the development of modern schooling systems in the 19th century, which a large body of literature interprets as institutional support for capitalist systems of accumulation. The assumption here is that education contributes to fulfilling the social reproduction of social strata needed for capitalistic production (cf. Tomlinson, 2013), thereby suggesting differentiated spaces and degrees of integration.

Critical approaches inspired by the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) on the role of the school in reproducing class inequalities suggest that educational systems reproduce structural inequalities based on an individual's cultural and economic resources (cf. e.g. Felouzis and Goastellec 2014). We locate ourselves in continuation to these approaches, yet we seek to expand this body of research beyond the national framework in which it is rooted. Indeed, the role of schools is usually conceptualised in reference to social and economic integration within the borders of a nation-state—a goal that international private schools essentially put into question.

One segment of the literature on international private schools has pursued this line of enquiry by highlighting the role of international schools in reproducing social advantages among transnational elites (e.g. Dugonjic, 2014; Wagner, 1998). When building upon such work, we nevertheless should not overlook the fact that most children of managers and executives, who form the majority of the student body at international schools, must still make their way towards future employment, despite their undeniable social and educational privilege. We will therefore investigate how schools intend to train students in this regard, and how “mobility” and “diversity” are central to this process. Because international schools explicitly position themselves in a global “transnational space of learning” (Hayden, 2011, 212), the question that arises is that of the underlying epistemologies—if not of those rooted in the “nation/state/society” (Wimmer and Glick Shiller, 2002, 302)—from which the notions of mobility and diversity are derived.

### **Corporate Framing of Diversity and Mobility at Swiss International Schools**

Historically, diversity and mobility have been at the core of international education narratives. By breaking cosmopolitanism down into these two notions, the next two sections illustrate how, in practice, diversity and mobility are framed by market-based ideals that are valued in the corporate sector of the service industry.

We first consider diversity, which, in managerial lingo, is an indicator of the transnational reach of a firm and of its capacity to adapt to the local specificities of different markets and clients (Ghemawat, 2011). Inside the so-called cosmopolite corporation, the cultivation of diversity—real or performed—is also a way of nurturing a corporate culture based on inclusive affiliations among colleagues rather than exclusive, locally anchored ties, ultimately resulting in greater efficiency (Halsall, 2009). This programme requires students to learn competencies, which can be formulated based on our observations of the school context. We then look at

conceptions and enactments of mobility, demonstrating that spatial mobility, which stands as a *raison d'être* of international schools and as a major driver of cosmopolitanism, is increasingly understood as a response to professional uncertainty and equated with socio-spatial flexibility. We echo previous research on mobility and work in which the demand for flexible work entails continuous mobility across worksites and organisations, making the “mobility imperative” a condition for achieving a certain stability over the course of a career (Garsten, 2008, 82). In addition, we look at how schools intend to instil such imperatives already at the earliest stages of education.

### ***Diversity as the Sum of Differential Assets***

In an interview with the local press, one school director made the following statement, emphasising how important diversity is to the school.

Intercultural sensitivity is a learning process that changes with age. Children need to learn to accept and to understand themselves better. University students need to learn cultural sensitivity for the skills they require in addition to their diplomas. Finally, employees need to learn to be culturally sensitive so that they are able to clearly and efficiently communicate with colleagues, clients and different markets.

It can be summarised thus: the school provides an environment that allows students to develop the intercultural skills they will need in their future work in the global economic sphere. Implicit in this statement is that diversity is an imperative that is not only based on the actual diversity of the students but that must also be continuously performed in order to foster the acquisition of intercultural skills. Echoing Jeffrey and McFarlane’s view of “cosmopolitanism as a set of performances” (2008, 421), we argue that the performance and commodification of diversity legitimates the claim of cosmopolitanism as a marketable skill.

One feature common to all international private schools is their effort to enact internationalism materially and socially, both in their buildings and their teaching practices.<sup>8</sup> At most international schools, the national flags of their students adorn the large halls. It is also common that children and parents are asked to dress up according to their nationality at school events (see picture below). Similarly, children are regularly assigned tasks in class that require them to perform their nationalities. For instance, several schools ask their students to draw themselves and their classmates under different national banners, indicating their nationalities (many of them are pluri-nationals) and the languages they speak (most often at least two). Other versions of the task include, for example, pinning every child’s name on a world map according to their country of origin. Such everyday performances of (national) diversity accompany children throughout their schooling. In higher grades,

<sup>8</sup> Such collective performances are obviously not endorsed by all teachers; some argue instead that it is rather the children’s cosmopolitan background that makes a school international.

children are asked to conduct surveys in other classrooms; one of these surveys included questions such as: What is your belief system (religion)? What is/are your nationality/ies? What language(s) do you speak? In how many countries have you lived? What is your favourite dish? What is your favourite season? Such routine exercises enable a school to portray itself as the sum of a highly diverse and unique student body; as such, the school itself embodies a hybrid identity in which nationality, spoken language, and religion tend to be the most regularly thematised categories.



**Figure 2:** Country stalls on International Day at a school (Source: authors, 2017)

Strikingly, despite the regular thematisation of these alleged variables of diversity, race remains an unspoken category. In our discussions, several teachers affirmed that international-mindedness is manifested in the fact that children in these schools were colour-blind. Echoing “race muteness” in the Swiss context (Lavanchy, 2014), the affirmation of colour blindness—which teachers interpreted positively as a signal of the children’s ability to engage beyond difference—negates a major source of inequality that could be effectively combatted using targeted pedagogical approaches (e.g. Sleeter, 2008; Vavrus 2015). In this emptied out understanding of diversity, nationality and culture are instead upheld as markers of a school’s diversity. In international education, national diversity is often equated with cultural diversity and is framed using the vocabulary of interculturalism. For instance, the school mentioned in the introductory vignette claims on its website that “intercultural understanding” is one of its “core values”. In a type of Herderian ontology (Wimmer, 2009), this claim is correlated with a list of students’ nationalities as a logical corollary:  $n$  nationalities =  $n$  cultures; many nationalities = multiculturalism and intercultural understanding. In the promotional material of international schools, this logic is further mobilised as a marketing argument, with one school asserting that its “diverse and multicultural environment” is one of the reasons for its “educational excellence”—a claim that another school seeks to verify by conducting a yearly

survey on the “intercultural competence” of its staff and students. In our work, we have determined this competence is understood to consist of three skills—cooperation, negotiation and marketisation—which we delineate below.

### *Cooperation*

The shift from the national to the cultural has been rationalised in the field of international education using the argument that internationalism—in a world where nations are supposedly declining—should now be understood from the position of interculturalism, where the “interculturally literate person” is defined as someone who “possesses the understandings, competencies, attitudes and identities necessary for successful living and working in a cross-cultural or pluralist setting” (Heyward 2002, 10). In this competence-based understanding of interculturalism, the primary outcome should be the ability to work in a great variety of locations and adapt to a great variety of audiences. In our conversations with teachers, they regularly celebrated this vision of interculturalism by emphasising the capacity of purportedly highly different children to cooperate in the school context. A recurring example we encountered is what we call the tale of two unexpected friends—its variations included the Jewish and Muslim friends or the Israeli and Egyptian friends. Each variation suggests that the international context of the school allowed them to go beyond their alleged cultural (and political) differences—and by the same token, the narrative systematically neglected the proximity in social class that is prevalent in the school.

### *Negotiation*

At international schools, the further students advance in their education, the more they are trained to mobilise their putative differences. Paradoxically, it is their mastering of national repertoires that supports their learning of cosmopolitan social competence, interpreted in this context as the ability to collaborate with highly different others. For instance, several schools have a Model United Nations club, a highly symbolic activity recalling the mythological origins of international education, in which students participate in simulated United Nations conferences (Dugongic, 2014). Students perform the school’s diversity by representing a country other than their own and thus learn to decentre and shift perspective at a global level. Through such training, difference is constructed in a particular way and becomes meaningful within the grammar of international negotiation, as a fiction of equality between stakeholders, institutionalised in international organisations and highly valued in the business world (Salacuse, 1999).

### *Marketisation*

The personification of national difference is further applied to economic competition. In an economics class at the secondary level, for example, students are asked to role-play the mayor of a city in their “home” country and propose a tourism development strategy based on their knowledge of the place. Using the economic

theory explained by the teacher, they had to promote a strategy that commodifies the unique character of the city, personify it, and then pitch this branding against those of classmates. In such cases, the cumulative conception of diversity is now articulated with a market-based worldview, where differences are accentuated in order to attract investment and become a potential source of profit.

In addition to emphasising openness and intercultural understanding with the aim of realising a unifying project, references to diversity in international education often go hand in hand with the conception of individuals as bundles of cultural assets—broadly indicated by their nationalities. This supports a conception of the individual as human capital, echoing what Urcioli terms the “worker-self-as-skills-bundle”, which, she argues, is “a social construction cumulatively produced by years of skills discourses in business and education” (2010, 211). As we demonstrate below, mobility is also reframed in alignment to a human capital perspective.

### *Mobility as Flexibility Towards Social and Spatial Uncertainty*

Repeated international mobility is a lived reality for a majority of international school students. A short survey conducted in one school showed that 49.4 per cent of the students had enrolled in the past three years, 30.1 per cent four to six years ago, and only 19.7 per cent had been at the school for more than six years. Considering that the school caters to children aged two to eighteen years—and even considering a normal cohort effect and student mobility between local (private or public) schools—these numbers point to a high turnover that reflects the occupational mobility of the parents on the one hand, while on the other hand, also reveal that some students are rather immobile and qualify as locals.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of their actual experience of mobility, local students are nevertheless well-positioned in terms of motility (Kaufmann et al., 2004), meaning that most of them have the material, legal and economic means to move internationally with relatively little constraints.

As previously discussed, international mobility has historically been a common trait among students in international schools and indeed one of the reasons for the development of such schools. The shared experience of repeated international mobility (or exposure to it) provides fertile ground for a common sense of belonging, crystallised, for instance, in school anthems (“We are international”) or seasonal events when the school bids farewell to students and teachers about to leave for a new destination. In discussions, school management and teachers often insisted that as opposed to less authentic international schools oriented towards a local population, such as those flourishing in China or the Middle East, what distinguishes “truly international” schools is student exposure to international mobility and their capacity to adapt to changing contexts and environments—or what has been termed their cosmopolitan capital (Wagner, 1998; Weenink, 2008). In this view, cosmopolitanism is believed to result from the experience of international mobility

<sup>9</sup> The percentage of local students varies significantly among international schools.

and is expected to result in the development of cognitive capacities such as “open-mindedness and cultural empathy” (Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven, 2009), which are considered to be two of the core competences of the IB learner. Seen as the underlying premise for the development of a cosmopolitan mindset, mobility has, however, a limited association to a “willingness to engage with the other”, as in Hannerz’s much-quoted expression (1990, 239), but is rather framed as a capacity to adapt to a variety of work contexts. Teachers thus assume that all students have lived in several national contexts and prompt students to reflect on their cultural filters by replacing situations that they experienced in other countries with different contexts: “How would this have unfolded in India? What would people say about it in the US?” This kind of cosmopolitan reflexivity is well interwoven in the constructivist approach to education promoted in the IB and is regularly mentioned and praised by teachers, although the enclave structure of the schooling system does not encourage engagement with the local environment.<sup>10</sup> This type of cosmopolitanism, it seems, is realised through the enmeshed trajectories of students within the school rather than beyond its walls.

While social scientists have developed an understanding of cosmopolitanism as a shared experience in an era of global risk (for a review, cf. Beck and Sznaider, 2006), cosmopolitanism is also increasingly used as a pragmatic, competence-based ideal of the flexible transnational worker navigating uncertain contexts (Halsall, 2009). This ambivalent conception of cosmopolitanism is reflected in several educational performances and rituals in international schools that transform mobility into a flexible competence and a timely response to personal and professional uncertainty.

One way this uncertainty is taught is through the performance of a “hunger banquet”, an educational role play activity developed by Oxfam and commonly used in international schools to raise student awareness of topics such as global interdependence and inequalities. At one such event, a team of secondary school students and their supervising teachers invited their whole school section to gather in an activity room. There, each student received a card with a pseudonym and a few details on his or her role. The first markers are gender, age, and whether the person classified as low-, medium- or high-income on a global scale; the second marker is nationality and country location; the third is occupation. The students allotted high-income roles numbered less than 10 and sat on chairs around a set table; the 25 medium-income students gathered around a long table with disposable eating utensils; and the remaining students—over 50—were categorised as low income and sat on the floor (see image below). The organisers created a story to raise awareness among students about how decisions made by top executives in the high-income group could have consequences for medium- and low-income groups in other parts

<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, we observed that international schools tend to perform their engagement with the other through various forms of philanthropy, which helps maintain distance from the local environment (Schubiger et al., 2019).



of the world. The story also pointed out the precarious social position of low-range high-income individuals by displacing one high-income character to the medium-income group after being fired. In the discussion that followed, in addition to pointing out the arbitrary nature of privilege, teachers and students discussed the uncertainty of social positions and reiterated the importance of the ability to constantly adapt in a changing world. In other words, while the game promoted a classic cosmopolitan stance in terms of global interdependencies, it also suggested a more pragmatic one by stressing the necessity of being able to handle a global perspective while also successively readapting to social and spatial contexts over the course of one's life.



**Figure 3:** Role-playing “low incomes” at a hunger banquet. (Source: Retrieved from Oxfam Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N99Q5aLo8Q>)

The move towards greater flexibility is accompanied by another belief that one school director expressed with great confidence: “Within the next 20 years, we will all be freelancers!” This statement echoes organisational trends in the knowledge economy, where “workers have become entangled in employment regimes where labour is increasingly episodic, autonomous and unprotected, or, in neutral parlance, flexible” (D'andrea and Gray, 2013, 88). In the view of this “self-made” school founder—as she described herself when explaining how she had set up her school—nation-states and traditional employment were two parts of the same declining model whose ineluctable end she was expecting. Most of her students had been raised in a cosmopolitan context and, because of their past experiences of mobility, had become “open-minded, reflexive thinkers”. Now, in addition to this, she was preparing them for a world in which the “internationally mobile” individual

would also be an “independent freelancer”. The school not only offers the usual portfolio of entrepreneurship courses—which most international schools also offer—but it goes much further, the director argued, by providing students aged between 10 to 18 with self-assessment tools to develop their businesses in accordance with their strongest skills. She worked with HR specialists and a psychologist to develop an app that helps students know “who they really are” and develop their entrepreneurial projects accordingly. From there on, she argued they will “shine as entrepreneurs” on the global stage, and, in the meantime, such projects would also be valuable when applying to study at US universities—a possible future move for many international students.

This analogy may seem paradoxical, since multinational corporations often play a paternal role: they provide for most of the needs of their employees in exchange for allegiance and productivity, a model that schools partially reproduce with a large offering of extra-curricular activities. However, echoing the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999) in the context of a corporation, too, employees are expected to embrace the ideal of the entrepreneurial self, work for their own self-fulfilment, engage in market-based relations with peers and colleagues, and take responsibility for their own security. Under the label of “freelancing”, these expectations are increasingly institutionalised in the form of outsourcing and contracted services (Gersohn, 2017). From this stance, the new trend at international schools, including their efforts to render students efficient at “any time any place” (Bolay and Rey, 2019) may indeed reflect the changing organisational trends in the corporate sector of the economy.

### ***Producing Global Students for a Global Labour Market?***

Contrary to the “deficiency” approaches that view migration and cultural heterogeneity as educational challenges in public schools, the field of international education considers diversity and mobility to be cumulative assets that are in line with their competence-based understanding in transnational corporations. Nevertheless, if one of the “hidden functions” of public schools is to “orient children’s orientations” to certain segments of the labour market so that these segments can reproduce themselves (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), towards which socio-economic sphere do private international schools orient their students? Teachers, who often have contrasting views regarding the tensions between the global citizen and the corporate side of international education discourses and teaching practices (Bolay and Rey, 2019), regularly affirmed with a tinge of exasperation: “Anyway, the students all want to go into business.” Strikingly, statistics on alumni provided by one of the most recognised international schools showed that 34 per cent are employed in economic fields including consulting, management, banking, marketing and financial planning, with USA being the primary location of residence, Switzerland the second and the UK the third. This overrepresentation of the sector that corresponds to academic programmes in

business and economics schools confirms the tendency on the part of international schools to orient their students towards the corporate world on a transnational stage.

An additional question addresses whether students really develop into these flexible bits of cultural diversity required by the transnational service economy. Though our material provides no definitive answer to this question, our analysis reveals that students are indeed trained to enact the corporate ideals of diversity and mobility while developing skills that convert them into valuable assets; nevertheless, it is a striking omission to account for the possibility that diversity itself can be diverse when other variables, in particular class or race, intersect with nationality (Vertovec, 2007). Thus, it is also possible to hypothesise that, given their initial social positions, these students will be likely to later assume executive positions where they will be perceived as legitimate standard-bearers for disseminating corporate-inspired, positive framings of diversity and mobility and will expect permanent adaptability and flexibility to be normal characteristics of their subordinates. While, as in other educational spaces (De Lissoyov 2016, 191-192), the active production of uncertainty and anxiety is used as the driver to shape neoliberal subjectivities, as in Ho's "liquidated" traders (2009), the emphasis placed on uncertainty and the fictionalised experience of precarity increase the students' familiarity with this narrative - which they might later relay to their employees in their future work life.

## Conclusion

While integration discourses make it clear that, at public schools, immigrant children must adapt to their new local environment, children at international schools learn to construct, perform, value and make use of their diversity and mobility, which are upheld as indicators of their capacity to adapt to various contexts. This claim is paradoxical, given the enclave configuration of international schools and the assumed function of international education to support transnational mobility by providing students with a frictionless education system and school infrastructure. In this article, we approached this paradox by looking at the framing of diversity and mobility—two conceptual pillars of international education—as discursive and practical vehicles leading to the propagation of a cosmopolitan worldview that is inspired by the corporate world.

As we have demonstrated, international schools do not simply make note of the high mobility of the student body; rather, they build on it to actively produce a cosmopolitan milieu in which children are trained to acquire the linguistic and social competences needed to perform on a global stage. The same holds for diversity: the variety of nationalities, ethnicities and religious affiliations does not itself make diversity valuable—the student body at Swiss public schools certainly provides the most striking counter example. International schools train students daily in a highly valued, competence-based understanding of interculturalism, thereby aligning it with the dominant corporate view and making it accessible to local upper classes able to afford the high fees of international schools. They thus echo what Mach et al. (2016)

termed the transformation of the local elite—a change wrought through processes of professionalisation and increased transnational engagement—yet extends this logic to the earliest stages of education. As such, international schools provide a striking illustration of Friedman’s hypothesis (2000), according to which class structures tend to be re-arranged along the opposition between “indigenisation” and “cosmopolitisation.” The crystallisation of a corporate conception of the self that is based on notions of diversity and mobility allows students to escape the stigma associated with “migration” and instead transforms these traits into cumulative assets. In their formulation, these assets echo the economic values of “capital” and “growth” as well as the transnational expansion of markets in a globalised economy.

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