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# **Researching on international education: overcoming the paradigm of methodological nationalism?**

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## **Introduction: the expanding and heterogeneous field of international schools**

International schools have been expanding and diversifying at a global level, especially during the last decades. Two main explanatory approaches for this development can be identified: a normative motive for their creation, which aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and thus at contributing to a better international understanding and to world peace on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an explanatory pragmatic approach. This approach finds explanation for the expansion of international education, bearing in mind the increasing migration of highly qualified employees of global companies and the need for internationally compatible courses for their children. Ball and Nikita (2014: 82) call them a “global middle class” and a “burgeoning, mobile, post-national middle class who operates on a global scale” (see also Firmino da Costa 2015). These two approaches can be regarded as complementary.

Especially in the last decades, one can observe a stronger diversification of international schools, because international education is not only demanded by global mobile families, but increasingly by autochthonous non-mobile populations. International education and internationally recognized diplomas promise growth of “cosmopolitan capital” (Weenink 2008), which helps getting a better position in the global market. Dill (2013: 1) observes in this context “one of the fastest growing educational reform movements today”.

The most prominent example is the IB World Schools, whose number has grown to more than 4000 schools at a global level (IB 2018) in the meantime. There are also other models of international schools, such as the European schools, the UNESCO schools, the Cambridge schools, bilingual schools etc. They have grown rapidly in number, especially in economically strong regions and in “global cities” (Sassen 2000). The growing heterogeneity of the school population who demands international diplomas has also created new, in part hybrid models of international schools, which are also extending to the public educational system. Public schools more and more offer international curricula and diplomas alongside their national ones.

In the context of the expanding and heterogeneous field of international schools, it is difficult to define exactly what terms like “international education” or “international

school” mean. Murphy (2000: 6) points out: “No one has so far come up with a definition for ‘international school’ that does not exclude some schools which consider themselves international, and does include others which may not be [...]”

What is also fundamental for understanding the field of international schools is the growing regulation through transnational educational organizations, partially recognised as non-profit organisations, such as the International Schools Association (ISA), the International Baccalaureate® (IB) or the European Council of International Schools (ECIS). These organizations aim at standardizing international schools because they are very diverse. In order to do that, they aim at introducing an international curriculum or an internationally compatible higher education entrance qualification.

## **1. Lack of conceptual and methodological analytical tools for research on international education**

Despite the increasing number and complexity of international schools worldwide and also heightened public awareness, a research deficit can be detected. An overview of the international research on international schools, especially in the Anglophone space, shows that there are some studies on the expansion and development of international schools, their educational concepts, forms of organisation and curricula (e.g., Bates 2010; Hayden & Thompson 2011; Hayden et al. 2015). However, there is a worldwide deficit of empirically consistent studies about international schools at the institutional level, as well as about the social actors in these schools.

This situation can be partly explained by a lack of analytical tools for researching on the complex field of international education, as Resnik (2012: 292) confirms:

“[...] there is a feeling that something else is happening, and the analytic tools we possess are too narrow or imprecise to grasp the complex nature of sociology of international education.”

Educational research has been dominated and it is still dominated by the ‘nation-state paradigm’. Indeed, the nation-state has been the reference point of this research, as it controls the system of formal education to a large extend (Adick 2005: 244-245).

For researching international education, especially international schools, which could be understood as “transnational spaces of education“ (Hayden 2011; Keßler et al. 2015), the traditional analytical research tools, determined by the nation-state paradigm, have to be rethought. Educational transnational phenomena have to be analyzed bearing in mind their special condition, and therefore an adequate “apparatus of concepts and analysis“ (Adick 2005: 246; also Resnik 2012) is needed.

Michael Kuhn (2016: 15) goes further and critiques the dominating social science thinking, in the sense that its rationale implies the obligation to “be nothing but thinking about and through the constructs of nation state socials and that the only way for social thought in the social sciences to recognize the world beyond national socials is, therefore, the aggregation of nationally constructed social thought”.

## **2. Overcoming the paradigm of methodological nationalism: the concept of “transnational spaces of education”**

The paradigm of methodological nationalism - which equates society with nation-states societies - has proved to be inadequate to analyse transnational developments and phenomena in the field of education (e.g., Adick 2005; Hayden 2011).

This paradigm is based on the assumption that national societies and nation-states are “natural reference units“ for the research on social phenomena. In contrast transnationalism as a “research programme”

“[...] mainly focuses on those social phenomena and social relationships which extend above several local units in different national societies, which are relatively stable and which contain comparatively dense interactions.” (Pries 2010: 10)

The borders of a nation-state as a reference unit tend to blur with this new perspective and thus the focus shifts towards cross-border phenomena, which can extend over several national societies. In the context of his research about work migration from Mexico to the USA in the 1990s, Pries (1996) developed the concept of “transnational social spaces”. The concept of space does not only imply herein its traditional physical meaning of location, but primarily designates relatively stable relationships between social actors which cross national borders. It is a different concept of “space” that includes different territories related to implied social relations (see Faist 2000: 14). In this context Pries (2008: 4) defines “transnational social spaces” “in a narrow sense” as “nation states and national societies spanning interaction frameworks in the dimensions of (1) intensive and stable social practices, (2) systems of symbols, and (3) artefacts“.

Ulrich Beck (2000) in his reflections about “What is Globalization?” picks up the concept of transnational social space by Pries (1996, 2010) and states:

“[...] the approach centred in transnational social spaces maintains that something new is emerging: social contexts of life and action to which Here-and-There or Both-And applies.” (Beck 2000: 28)

The concept of a transnational social space focuses on the transnational social practices of actors, for example when communicating over the internet, which enables

a social proximity of people who are not geographically close. If these practices are very stable and intense, so much so that they are part of everyday life, they can be called “transnational social spaces”.<sup>1</sup> An example is a transnational family, whose members are spread across the globe and have durable and close relations in their daily practices. They constitute, for that reason, a “transnational social space”.

Because the social actors in international schools, such as pupils and teachers, often belong to a “global middle class” (Ball and Nikita 2014), which have dense transnational social practices and, therefore, are transnational social spaces, one can say that international schools are “transnational spaces of education”.

In this context, there are some first approaches which take up the concept of “transnational social space” (Pries 1996, 2010; Beck 2000) and develop it in educational settings in the sense of “transnational social spaces of education”. Adick (2005: 262ff.), for example, assigns the following features to this concept:

- transnational social spaces of education can arise “from the bottom”, which means from the practices of social actors, or “from the top”, which means the promotion of transnational providers of education
- they function on the basis of already existing transnational convergences and they promote more convergences
- cross-border processes of education are taking place in transnational social spaces of education
- in comparison to national or international spaces of education, transnational social spaces of education are non-governmental, which means they are not state-controlled, but organised “privately”.

As regards the research on international schools, Hayden (2011) introduced and developed the concept of “transnational spaces of education”, referring to Beck’s (2000) theory and his concept of “transnational social spaces”. According to her, international schools represent an answer to globalisation processes and “the aspirations of global knowledge workers for their children” (Hayden 2011: 212).

### **3. Overcoming the paradigm of methodological nationalism: some reflections on reconstructive qualitative research**

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<sup>1</sup> Pries (2010: 29ff.) elaborated two more levels of transnational phenomena, which are less intense and stable than “transnational social spaces”, namely “transnational relations” and “transnational networks”.

Overcoming the paradigm of methodological nationalism puts into question traditional spatial units of reference of social research, which can no longer be considered “coherent and contiguous geographical ‘containers’” (Pries 2008: 6). Khagram and Levitt (2004: 26) confirm it:

“The local, regional, national, and global are not automatic, taken-for-granted social arenas, but rather categories that must be investigated as constructed and contested social facts”.

The dissolution of these reference units causes methodological problems and challenges which require new analytic tools, as Resnik (2012) has shown.

The concept of “conjunctive space of experiences” (Mannheim 1980: 155), which focuses on collectively shared knowledge of social actors, can be related to local, regional, national, and global reference units. The “conjunctive space of experiences” can be conceived as a space of amalgamation of these dimensions.

A reconstructive empirical approach, such as the documentary method of interpretation (e.g., Bohnsack et al. 2010), which aims at reconstructing the conjunctive knowledge of social actors, can be an adequate methodological approach for analysing social reality and overcoming the paradigm of methodological nationalism.

The documentary interpretation method focuses on the analyses of atheoretical knowledge, expressed in routine-based and habitual actions - it can be understood as “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1966). This atheoretical knowledge is included in the “conjunctive space of experiences”, a space, which arises through the connection between social actors, for example, by generation, gender, milieu or ethnicity. If there is a dense collective social connection rising above local units and national borders, the “conjunctive space of experiences” can be regarded as a “transnational social space”.

In this context, Annette Scheunpflug, Susanne Krogull and Julia Franz (2016: 20) have shown the potential of the documentary method when applied to the empirical research on global learning:

“The potential for these approaches is far from exhausted, as many questions in the context of global learning are still unclear, for example, what kind of world societal attitudes and orientations can be built at which period of life, by which form of learning, and what forms of action can be motivated and triggered. This form of research has the potential to contribute substantially to understanding the complexity of world society.”

#### **4. Can international schools be considered “transnational spaces of education”?**

International schools can be regarded as “transnational spaces of education”, if the social actors of these schools share “common spaces of experience” (Mannheim 1980: 211) determined by transnational phenomena. In this case, these spaces would be constructed “from the bottom”, from the practices of the social actors.

On the other hand, these schools are regulated by transnational educational organizations, such as the International Baccalaureate® (IB 2018), and transnational spaces can arise “from the top”, through the promotion of transnational providers of education.

Within the scope of an ongoing research project about the institutional identity of international schools in the area of Greater Lisbon<sup>2</sup> we will analyse – using some of its empirical insights (interviews with school boards; focus groups with students) – if and to which extent the international schools analysed can be considered “transnational spaces of education”.

Surprisingly, considering that inter-/transnational education is a diverse field, which is expanding, there is a global research deficit, especially in Portugal. There are some isolated studies about international schools especially in the North of Portugal (Macedo 2009; Louça et al. 2014; Macedo & Araújo 2016), but as regards the area of Greater Lisbon there is only a first overview (Schippling & Abrantes 2018).

The research project on the international schools in the area of Greater Lisbon is a reaction to this research deficit and it aims to overcome the paradigm of methodological nationalism regarding its conceptual and methodological framework. It uses the documentary interpretation method. In this way, it draws on insights from the research on transnationalism and uses them in the research on international schools. This is rare since school research mostly uses as reference the nation-state paradigm (e.g. Adick 2005; Keßler et al. 2015; Schippling 2018).

Overall, this contribution represents a conceptual and methodological reflection about researching in the field of international education; and, on the other hand, it explores the inter-/transnational dimension in education based on insights drawn from qualitative empirical data. In fact, international education is such a complex, heterogeneous and diverse field that it seems a rather short-sighted perspective to consider international schools “transnational spaces of education” where a “global ruling class” is created. Bearing this in mind, we refer to Lauder’s words (2015: 179):

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<sup>2</sup> The research project “The internationalisation of the elite education in Portugal. A qualitative study on international schools in Greater Lisbon” (CIES-IUL, Lisbon; Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg) is funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). It works together with the research group “Mechanisms of elite formation in the German educational system” (FOR 1612) (Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

“It would be surprising if the children from such a mixed community emerged with the same dominant view of globalization and its implications for solving fundamental problems. That said, this is an area that is greatly under-researched [...]”

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