EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conversations around national and global identity construction within international schools are rising in the field of international education. These conversations have taken place largely outside of the Middle Eastern context, and that of the United Arab Emirates, where some of the highest percentages of international migrants and residents in the world exist. For this reason, this research project explored various aspects of student identity which were then examined in relation to an international school in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. This perspective is important considering previous policy research in the region has demonstrated the importance of assessing and addressing local needs within the context of wider global trends. In this case, the diversity and cohesion that uniquely characterizes the region are taken as pivotal factors to explore the tensions between the global and the local within international schooling in Ras Al Khaimah. The findings are reported on this basis and respective policy recommendations are presented.

Diversity and Cohesion in International Schools in the United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

Similar to other oil-rich Gulf nations, the number of migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) significantly exceeds the number of native citizens. In fact, the UAE has the sixth-largest number of migrants in the world (World Education News and Reviews, 2019). It is not surprising, therefore, that there are a growing number of international schools catering to both expatriate and national students in the Middle East region. Between 2013-2018, more than 430 new English-language international schools were established in the region. As of 2018, there were a total of 1.513 million students attending an international school in the region, and the average annual expenditure per student was $7,658 USD (Relocate Global, 2018).

The UAE is a leading provider of education in the region, with 624 international schools that offer a variety of curricula (World Education News and Reviews, 2019). It is because of this that the UAE's educational policy landscape can be considered an Education Hub, a country-wide endeavor that allows it to catch up or even surpass previously established spheres of international students (Erfurth, 2019). Even though the concept of education hub typically refers to higher education, it can apply to lower education strata such as secondary schooling.

The UAE employs a highly effective strategy, in terms of internationalizing education across education levels, and has gained credit for its comprehensive approach to international education, particularly in terms of openness to students from different backgrounds (British Council, 2017). As a result, internal mobility has been sharply increasing; that is, more students from abroad are coming to study in the UAE (World Education News and Reviews, 2019). Statistically, this sharp increase can be witnessed in the UAE's current inbound mobility ratio (the number of incoming international students relative to the student population at large), 48.6%, which is higher than most other globally-oriented destinations (World Education News and Reviews, 2019).

Despite these favorable trends and statistics, vast changes in the UAE and other Arabian Gulf countries frequently give rise to debates about the powerful and complex interactions between the national and the global aspects of these nations (Publishing Perspectives, 2010). These dynamics are not well-researched in terms of their implications for international education at the regional level of the Gulf or the country level for the UAE.

However, academic research that currently exists on international schools in other regions of the world, including Asia, Europe, and South America, suggests that understanding these dynamics at an educational level and mapping them out for policy purposes can be done (Bagnall, 2015). This paper presents research from a study of

identity formation of 16 to 18-year-olds in international schools to explore how both global and local forces shape students' experiences at international schools and with their local surroundings. It argues that there are varying influencing factors and that they ought to be accounted for at a policy level.

Within these overlapping academic, cultural, and policy contexts, this paper utilizes previous literature to explore the ways in which international students in the UAE, particularly in this Ras Al Khaimah case study, navigate the tensions between the global and local influences on themselves and their international schools. It then presents policy implications of the findings for the wider UAE and other similar contexts.

Global and Local Identity Development in International Schooling

A pertinent debate within international schooling is whether national and global identity can be cultivated alongside one another. The most comprehensive research into these matters is a two-year study on over 80 students from seven international schools across Europe, South America, and Asia (Bagnall, 2015). This study concludes that various influences affect student identity, ranging from the student's and the parents' country/countries of origin as well as the schools attended, to the extent to which their families are/were globally mobile. Bagnall (2015) argues that these influences form three different types of identity in international school students: an unknown identity, national identity, and global identity.

While the study acknowledges and legitimates that multiple identities exist for international school students, it does not examine the complex interface between them. This interface is significant given that education scholars have long touted the complicated nature of identity (see, e.g. Appiah, 2008; Carretero, Haste, & Bermudez, 2015; Hayden, 2017; Nussbaum, 1996). The study also did not examine important factors such as diversity of nationalities and cohesion across groups, both of which have already been established as important in the contexts of the Gulf, UAE, and Ras Al Khaimah. These factors are therefore the focus of this report.

Equally as important for this policy report, this nation-wide study did not look at any countries in the Middle East, or the Arab Gulf region. Four of the six international schools were located in the global north: Berlin (Germany), Geneva (Switzerland), London (United Kingdom), and Paris (France). Only two of them were located in the global south: Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Manila (Philippines). Addressing this gap in the literature on national and global identity in international schools in the global south and the Middle East is important given that education for cosmopolitanism has been considered more broadly (Akar & Ghosn-Chelala, 2015) and that the

Arab Gulf region in particular is home to many debates about the interactions between national and global identity (Publishing Perspectives, 2010). This is even more so the case when considering that the UAE is host to many international schools that offer a wide variety of curricula (World Education News and Reviews, 2019). Although Bagnall's (2015) study did not cover regions such as the Middle East, it was a useful enquiry upon which to base further academic research.

Current educational policy research in the region contextualizes these academic arguments and demonstrates what is, more vitally, at stake for the UAE and Ras Al Khaimah when considering the interactions between the global and the local tensions that may arise. It is framed as such: "[Education] trends can be glamorous... A pressing question here is how the shimmer of adopting those agendas locally... correlates with local needs" (Erfurth, 2019, p. 6). In expansion of this thesis, it is argued that finding this balance between the global and local agendas is a notoriously complex challenge, but that focusing more closely on local needs and determining the extent to which these can be addressed by global narratives is crucial (Erfurth, 2019). This report therefore takes two crucial aspects of Emirati society – diversity of its citizens and students, as well as the cohesion between them – and examines them within international schooling. It does this by studying the global and local identity development among 16 to 18-year-olds in an international schools in Ras Al Khaimah.

Home was used as the central motif to explore these identity-related issues due to it being a "multi-spatial, multi-faceted and hence, multi-definitional" concept (Prazeres, 2016, p. 37) that captures one's relationship to physical spaces (Kellett & Moore, 2003), as well as one's own feelings or lack thereof (Ahmed, 1999; Johnston & Longhurst, 2012; Longhurst et al., 2009). In this sense, home is a "second skin" (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341) in that "people feel 'at home' as much as they move to/from, with and between home(s)" (Prazeres, 2016, p. 37). This definition emphasizes the intersections of home and mobility as relational concepts (Allen, 2008; Ahmed et al., 2003).

Molz, for example, argues that "whether home matters anymore amidst... mobility" is no longer of importance when we think about "how home matters," (2008, p. 326). Mobility inevitably forms a backdrop to most students' lives at international schools: these students usually move around from location to location as a result of their parents' work. The notion of *how home matters* is therefore used to explore how students in international schools relate to home differently among not only their mobile lives that have them caught between national and global landscapes, but also amidst these debates about whether home is a feeling, a place or something in-between. These different conceptual understandings will hereafter be referred to as home-as-place, home-as-feeling, and home-as-both.

Overview of Methodology and Methods

Based on current and emerging literature, two main research questions arise:

1. To what extent do 16 to 18-year-olds attending international schools in the UAE, using Ras Al Khaimah as a case study, view their international school as home?

2. To what extent do various factors differently affect their view of their schools as home?

To answer these questions, qualitative research was carried out utilizing a simple yet well-known methodological framework (see Guba, 1981) that consisted of extended narrative interviews with students (at least 45 minutes). Questions were ordered in a way that allowed for as much depth to unravel as the participants wanted and laying clear all of the processes in the thesis so that the enquiry can be repeated.[1]

To capture the complex and dynamic interface between the national and global identities of students attending international school in Ras Al Khaimah, the narrative interviewing method is appropriate as it forefronts the stories that individuals tell both themselves and other people about the lives that they have lived in the past, the lives they are presently living, and the lives that they aspire to live in the future (Fay, 1996; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Miller & Galssner, 2016). These narratives are treated as the primary tools that students draw on to continuously negotiate their identities (Haste & Bermudez, 2017), particularly at points where there are different or contradictory spheres of meaning in their lives (Squire, Andrews, & Taboukou, 2013). The set-up of narrative interviews, with open-ended questions ordered sequentially to examine participant's past, present, and future lives, allowed for participants to share experiences in a way that is structured but makes most sense to them (Mears, 2012; Seidman, 2013).

International School–As–Home

One theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was around the extent to which the international school felt like home because of the diversity in its culture. Some participants claimed that the international school did feel like home for this reason, especially those that already perceived home as a feeling rather than a place; other participants claimed that international school did not feel like home for this reason, particularly if they perceived home as a physical place rather than a feeling; and one student said that international school was very dissimilar to home. To ensure depth of data, two sub-themes will be explored one by one, with short direct quotations being

used to set up context and longer direct quotations being used to explore the substantive details of the participants' narratives.

International School: Another Home

Of the participants that felt a sense of home at their international school, they all felt it for different reasons. Perhaps the strongest sense of home as a result of the school's diversity came from Monica,[2] even though she acknowledged the role of friendships too. She said:

> "I think that being surrounded by students from so many nationalities makes it feel like home. Honestly, I think when you share the same kind of struggles, I think you bond closer with people because you're kind of carrying the same burden. And that, it's comforting to know. To know that it's not just you: you all kind of suffer the same kind of effects and struggles and those kind of stuff. It makes it more homely, for sure. If you're by yourself, you're not going to feel comfortable.
>
> "Being in IB, we have such a small family of people that have kind of suffered together. You know, we all text each other to complain about how much we have to do and about how we're on like the fifth mental breakdown of the day [laughs]. So in that sense, I feel a unity amongst us, which is really, really nice. It's just this idea of your going through the same thing I'm going through, let's make a joke out of it. And I think that's nice."

Despite the fact that Monica talks about the sense of unity she feels with her classmates, she does make an interesting remark concerning the make-up of the student body, which have a higher percentage of local students than other international school settings around the world, and how that impacts integration and feelings of belonging. This was echoed by another participant as well:

> "I think that other international schools I've attended have felt more like home than [my school]... In my old school, it was predominantly expats whereas here it's not, which isn't a problem of course: it's nice to see this culture thrive here, in their own land. However, it's a bit unfair, not to us, but in the sense that the way they treat people here because they have the upper hand.
>
> "You know, there's integration from our side but it's not always so cohesive from their side, which makes a little bit of a problem. Yet when I was in my other school, because it was such a mix, there was no bunching and grouping: everyone had to

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get on because we're all not from anywhere. You have to mix in, whereas here you have a clump and a clump. So, you're just kind of there trying to make the best of it."

Somewhat similar to Monica, Kate also perceived her international school to be home in some senses, due to the caring teachers, as well as the student diversity:

"It feels like a big family, so it's again to do with the people, especially when you've known these people for such a long time. You even have teachers that genuinely care and they'll pull you aside and talk to you about your issues for like an hour and stuff. So it does feel like home to an extent, but again it's the people. I went through a pretty rough time around last year November/December, which was really bad for me. And I had one teacher that really, really just helped me. He would sit with me and talk to me for hours and just ask me what's going on and talk to me and all of this stuff. It was one of those moments where you just go to school and you still have people that look out for you and you still have people that care and that will help you if you need it. With my close friends, two to three people, it's also the same.

"Being surrounded by students from so many nationalities definitely widens your horizon on what is home. When you grow up and live in one country your entire life and you're not really surrounded by people who have seen different places, you have a really narrow view of home. And then meeting people that have moved their entire lives and meeting people who have never had a physical place that they would call home, it definitely does impact you and make you think about what home is in a different light. When you ask someone what is home, they usually describe their ideal house, or their ideal country; and then you talk to people at international school, people who have moved a lot and they say that home is a person, it's a feeling, it's a moment. So being surrounded by people who have only ever had that experience, coming from a place where I've never had that experience, it did change my view on home as a whole."

Another participant who viewed international school as home was Robert. Like Monica and Kate, one reason for this was his good relationships with his peers and teachers:

"For me, I think the school very much feels like home. I'm very comfortable going here. I have a good relationship with most of my teachers and I have a lot of friends, and also I've been here for almost seven years, so it's not this idea that I'm in a new school or that I'm going to leave after a bit. But I do feel solidified in that I have a place at this school."

Robert feels this way despite his "initial anxiety because I was going to a new school" when, "after a few months [he] really enjoyed it" and "felt happy at this school." He then goes on to expand, similarly to Monica and Kate, that this sense of home was tied to the school's diversity:

"I think that sense of home came from the fact that it was like a melting pot of different cultures so it's not like you were either an outsider or you weren't an outsider: everyone had something to bring to the table. And it's not like it was separated into little cliques based on where you were from or where you weren't from. It was very much based on you as a person. I wouldn't say it's the primary reason for my sense of home at the school. I think that was more to do with the fact that I was feeling more confident. I think that I just had more confidence once I moved here. I would say that the growth in confidence came with the moving. I think it was the change more than where I was actually going. Like I had moved to somewhere else in America, I think the same thing would've happened. Being in an international space has contributed, but not as a primary factor, if that makes sense."

International School: Similar to Home

Unlike the other participants, Noah shared the feeling that the international school felt like home for him but differed in that he didn't necessarily attribute this feeling to the school's diversity. Instead, he explains that it is the deep and lasting friendships that he made, irrespective of who they were with, which gave rise to the sense of home that emerged from his school in Ras Al Khaimah:

"I started in year six when you start actually understanding where you are and seeing what life really is, that's when you start being a teenager; that's when you start remembering your memories because you obviously won't remember what happened in year one because you were too young. After year six and onwards, you can remember those memories and I grew up with these people and I'm still friends with until this day. That's what makes it feel more like a home.

"So obviously in France there was just French people at school. And here at the international school, it's a mix of much more open-minded people. You learn about all of the student's cultures and traditions. I don't know if it makes me feel more at home. I think it's just... I'm not sure actually. It's more the actual people. When you meet them and you become friends with them; that's what makes you feel at home. So, I think it would be the same in France. I don't think it's the international element that makes it feel like home."

Hence, Noah's perception of international school as home is not inextricably linked to the fact that it is a nationally diverse space: he thinks he could have made the same friendships elsewhere and made a home of elsewhere too, such as back in France, his country of origin.

International School: Unlike Home

The one participant that really stood out from all of the others when talking about whether international school felt like home was Jake. Although he did not have as much to say on the matter as other participants, he was clear about the fact that as much as he appreciated the diversity of international school, it was very dissimilar to what he associates with home:

> "Being at an international school feels very different to home because it's so mixed and international. I mean, it feels great to be in a place where you'd have people from Asia, Africa, all over the place, and it would sort of take you away from home and broaden your horizons. So, I would say I appreciate the diversity at the school, but I wouldn't associate it with home. I feel like diversity is obviously a very good thing, but when it comes to your home, it's more to do with your culture, your people, your family, your friends - your inner circle. So, I would associate home more with that."

In a way similar to Jake, Malcolm also did not imbue the international school with a sense of home, but his reasoning was different: it was concerned with student carelessness, which seems to be acting in part as a proxy for cultural understandings of schooling and behavioral norms:

> "In Canada, I really liked school - I still do to an extent. But here, sometimes I feel like the people ruin the school. Sometimes certain people will treat teachers rudely or not respect people properly and that plays a huge role, in my opinion at least. As a nice student, I respect everyone: I'm not rude to any teachers, I've never gotten into fights. Like I'm a good student, you know. But the people here, most of them are troublemakers: they always run around, they always try to make trouble. They have a sense of carelessness. I feel like it's a certain group of students and then that will lead into more students making trouble. Here you have different gangs: you have the people who play sports together, the people who hang out together, the people who read together. You know, different kinds of groups. In every year there will always be one certain gang is bad to the environment of the school. It's not everyone: it's mostly mixed. It'll sometimes be international students and it will sometimes be local students."

Discussion

Even though previous literature does not study the international school as a site worthy of being deemed home, all participants touched upon this theme to some extent. In itself, this makes for an interesting finding in that it might be worth carrying out a full investigation that examines the sense of home that students imbue (or do not imbue) their international schools with as a result of their constant mobility. It is worth pointing out that previous research has studied the school as a site of belonging more broadly for students, concluding that there are various contributing factors, such as "who they came to school with, how long they stayed in a particular school, whether or not they had any choice about attending a particular school, and the nature of the school itself" (Bagnall, 2015, p. 75).

However, one possible contributing factor that gets no mention is one of the previously established hallmarks of international schools: their high levels of national diversity. It is in this way that this paper sought to contribute to the literature with regards to the theme of international schools-as-home: it highlights how this factor may be extremely important for some (not all) participants' notions of belonging, particularly in relation to viewing their school as a home. Another possible contributing factor that gets no mention is a problem that international schools typically encounter because of the different groups of students they serve, integration across different students of different nationalities, which could play a more explicit role in schools' policy and practice decisions. This is another way in which this paper potentially contributes to the literature with regards to the theme of international schools-as-home: it highlights how this factor may be extremely important for some (not all) participants' notions of belonging, particularly in relation to viewing their school as a home.

Moreover, the fact that some students in the study claimed that international school felt like home and the fact that other students claimed that it did not point to a multitude of factors that may affect why this is (or is not) the case. For example, while some students associated their sense of home at school with its high level of diversity, others did not for that very same reason. The same applies to levels of integration across different groups.

In this sense, this study highlights not only the need to perceive international schools through the lens of home, but also the need to uncover the multitude of reasons as to why students may or may not attribute a sense of home to their international school, including the school's levels of diversity. Once again, due to the fact that a small population was studied, these findings are not representative nor conclusive; but they offer an interesting perspective on how some students may perceive their international schools as homes in and of themselves, with implications for levels of student achievement,

well-being, tolerance and cultural awareness, and global citizenship. This is a potential contribution to academic literature on international schooling.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following is clear: all of the participants' positive affect toward their international school were based on strong relationships with their peers and/or teachers, and all of the participants' negative affect toward their international school were based on weak relationships with their peers or different peer groups. In this sense, peer-to-peer relationships in international schools, particularly among international students and local Emirati students, should be an important area of interest for policymakers and school administration and staff, whether it is for the sake of conducting more research to better understand the factors and their implications or for decision making. In particular, there are two specific policy recommendations that emerge from this study in order to make international schools in Ras Al Khaimah, and possibly the UAE at large and beyond, feel more like home for international school students, promoting diversity and encouraging integration.

Promoting Diversity in International Schools

The first policy recommendation is that policymakers and educational actors interested in international schooling further explore the ways in which the national diversity of an international school's student body impacts student belonging in these spaces. The findings of this study suggest that for a handful of international school students, their comfort at school is attributed to being immersed in a diverse learning environment.

However, the sample of this research study is small and, while the findings may be transferable to other contexts within both Ras Al Khaimah and the wider UAE, these findings are tentative. Moreover, it is unclear whether the relationship between the diversity of an international school and a student's sense of belonging is applicable to Emirati students who attend said international schools. It is therefore worth exploring both whether this relationship holds traction for international schools across the emirate and the broader UAE, possibly through questionnaires and surveys. If this relationship holds, it might be worth considering how to make international schools more diverse in order to increase student's sense of belonging, and in turn, potentially increasing their achievement levels, well-being, and global competencies.

Encouraging Integration in International Schools

The second specific policy recommendation is that policymakers interested in international schooling further explore the ways in which student cohesion between international students and Emirati students unfold across international schools. It is clear from the findings of this study that for a handful of international school students, some tensions between themselves and the Emirati students exist.

However, this area needs further research to validate the concerns of the cohort that was studied as part of this research project. Moreover, based on this and other prospective research, it may be worth investing in a formal induction to local culture for international students in international schools at a nation-wide level, as well as further ongoing pedagogical activities throughout the academic year which encourage cohesion between Emirati and international students.

Promoting Diversity and Encouraging Cohesion in the UAE

While the findings of this study are situated within the sphere of international schooling, the policy recommendations are much wider reaching than the context of Ras Al Khaimah and educational policies alone. The introduction highlighted that the international workforce in the UAE served as the context for the educational problems that were then explored in international schooling. In this vein, it is important to remember that while promoting diversity and encouraging cohesion is important within international schooling, it is also significant in the wider national landscape, whether in the workforce, home life, or tourism sector. The UAE has increasingly recognized the importance of this, as evidenced by the formal appointment of a Minister of Tolerance to the UAE Cabinet starting in 2017 and declaring 2019 as the Year of Tolerance, which included numerous initiatives aimed at creating dialogue and building more cohesive intercultural communities.

For example, it is worth thinking about whether these spaces are already promoting diversity, encouraging cohesion and global competencies for a changing world. If they are, it might also be worth exploring if these measures can be reflected in the education sector, whether through private international schools or even between international and state-funded local schools. If no measures of this sort are being taken, the ways in which they might be implemented may be considered in order to support any work that is being planned for schools. The importance of focusing on these relationships is compounded by a vast range of educational research within comparative and international education that assumes that there is always a dynamic interaction between a state and its education system.

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