

Transforming Systems through Systemic Development: Results of the 2023-24 DC Survey

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During the spring of 2023, the Data subcommittee of the Diversity Collaborative, a voluntary group of international educators committed to diversifying the leadership of international schools, partnered with International School Services and George Mason University's Center for International Education. The goal was to review the original questions from the 2019 Diversity Collaborative Survey (DCS) (Shaklee et al., 2019), remove any that did not yield useful data, modify others, and identify additional areas of potential future research.

The second goal was to update the survey to obtain longitudinal data about school leadership and diversity in the international school sector from the field of accredited international schools. We believe this information is crucial not only for the work of the Diversity Collaborative and the international school sector, but also to individual international schools as they seek to create more diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just educational communities across the globe.

The importance of having diverse and agile leadership teams in schools and other settings has been well documented. The National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS, 2023) notes that more diverse organizations “benefit from higher levels of creativity, engagement, collaboration, relationships, clarity and productivity” (para. 4). Strikingly, the fact that diverse perspectives give rise to new opportunities and new challenges to navigate leads to more inclusive decision making. These aspects help leaders to establish and build trust with the many different people in your school and community. Diverse school leadership teams not only have the potential to make better and more innovative decisions, but they also provide effective role models for all students, ensure broader access to talent, and enhance professional learning. Also, we suspect that when the board and leadership team of a school embrace an intercultural mindset, that perspective tends to affect all aspects of a school, from recruitment to student learning, from professional development and promotion to community and staff relations.

Process

In Spring 2023, members of the Diversity Collaborative interested in working on the next iteration of the survey started to meet. This group reviewed the previous DCS and the subsequent 2019 report (Shaklee et al., 2019). The most notable changes to the 2023 survey included the following modifications based on group input and an analysis of the original report:

- A question was added to ask respondents about additional aspects of diversity that future research should address;

- Options were created to allow respondents to self-describe, choose not to say, or choose alternative gender options (nonbinary/agender/gender nonconforming);
- Respondents were asked to self-identify (e.g. race, gender, ethnicity)
- An additional role category (Head of Academics/Director of Learning/Curriculum Coordinator) was added so that we could capture the most accurate role of respondents.

After revisions and changes were decided, the 2023 survey was created by George Mason University under the supervision of Dr. Kimberley Daly using Qualtrics. The 2023 Diversity Collaborative Survey was distributed in April 2023 to accredited international schools in the International School Consultancy (ISC) Research Database. The survey was sent directly to up to six school leaders at each school, who are typically engaged in recruitment and leadership development:

- Head of School/Director/Principal/Superintendent/Headmaster/Headmistress
- Head of Kindergarten/Preschool/Infants
- Head of Elementary/Primary/Juniors
- Head of Middle School
- Head of Seniors/Secondary
- Head of Academics/Director of Learning/Curriculum Coordinator
- Head of Human Resources/Director of Human Resources

Two reminders were sent out in late April and May, and the survey was also promoted on various social media platforms and through *InterEd*. The survey was open for approximately six weeks, closing on June 1, 2023. The survey received 843 confidential responses. However, since all responses were voluntary, not all respondents answered all questions, so the number of responses to each question varied. The research team at George Mason University, Center for International Education compiled and analyzed the survey results.

Data Analysis

A cross-cultural team at George Mason University, including two senior researchers and two doctoral students, used constant comparative methods to analyze the data. Constant comparative design is a method for evaluating qualitative data in which information is coded and compared across categories, patterns are identified, and these patterns are refined as new data is obtained. Themes from the data are distilled and identifiable categories created with sample responses that illustrate the category. It was selected as a common-sense approach to examining the qualitative data in the survey; in this case comparing responses between and across groups of respondents (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

The purpose of qualitative analysis is not to give direct comparisons (e.g. your school to responses) it is designed to look at and reflect on questions of transferability. The degree to which the findings in this report can be transferred to other contexts, settings or respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- In what ways are these responses relevant to your school?
- In what ways are the responses familiar or describe a shared experience?
- In what ways do they connect to your context, community and school?
- In what ways could you use the information to create a systematic focus for DEI?

Findings – Descriptive

The follow-up 2023-24 Diversity Collaborative Survey (DCS) was to determine patterns of development in diversity and school leadership over the past five years. Direct comparisons of the data are not possible because the data was derived at different times and from different respondents. However, we can report patterns and trends in the data that indicate positive outcomes as well as barriers to successfully diversifying leadership and community in international schools.

Demographic information included in the survey helped establish the gender, race, regional assignment, current role, and educational experience of each participant. We did not ask for ethnicity because there is not a generally accepted method of collecting such data in the international school world. Nationality/citizenship questions can also be complicated as many people have dual or more nationalities and/or citizenships, so we opted not to ask nationality or citizenship questions on this second survey either. In order to encourage respondents to share honest feedback, responses to the questions were not required. There was considerable variation in the response rates to individual questions. All survey responses were confidential.

Described in more detail below, overall, respondents to the DCS 2023-24 were experienced in international school leadership, and working in Asia, with Europe being the second highest regional response category and Africa and North America tied for third. In contrast to the 2019 survey where respondents were predominantly male; the respondents to this survey were predominantly female. By most measures, the respondents to this survey were more diverse than the respondents to the DCS 2019, which could be because the leadership of international schools has become more diverse and/or because of differences in response rates to the survey among different groups. We suspect that is it a combination of both explanations.

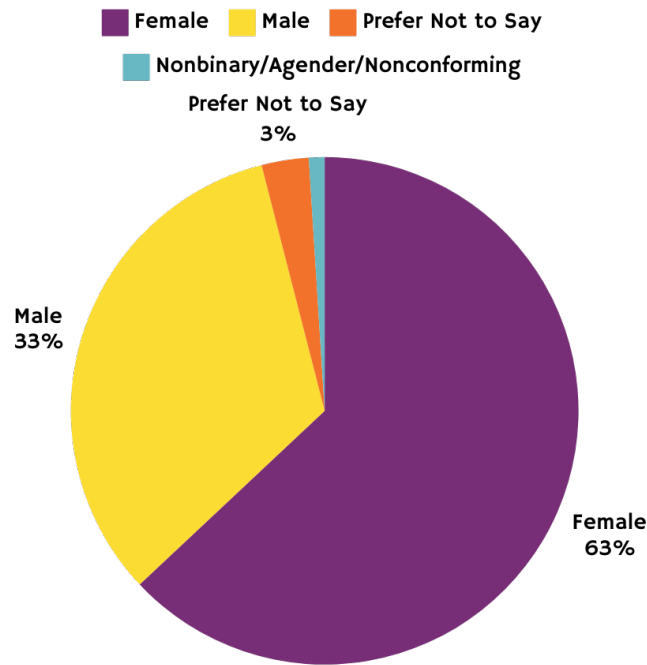
Demographics–Gender

Demographic information based on gender was collected using five options: male, female, nonbinary/agender/gender nonconforming, prefer to self-describe, and prefer not to say. The total number of responses to this question was 339 out of the 843 surveys received (40%). Respondents identified as female at 63% and respondents identified as male at 33%, with 3% preferring not to say, and the remaining 1% of responses choosing nonbinary/agender/gender nonconforming or to self-describe. The percentage of female respondents was higher than expected, given that senior leaders at international schools are more likely to be male than female. For example, the 2021 Diversity Collaborative survey (Council of International Schools) to determine the diversity baseline of international school leadership found that while senior leadership teams at international schools were balanced in terms of gender, heads of schools were three times more likely to be male than female. The percentage of female respondents to this survey was also

substantially higher than to the 2019 DCS when 56% of the survey respondents were male.

Figure 1

Gender Demographics



Demographics–Race

Demographic information based on race was collected by allowing respondents to self-describe. The total number of responses to this question was 311 out of the 843 surveys received (37%) respondents self-identified as:

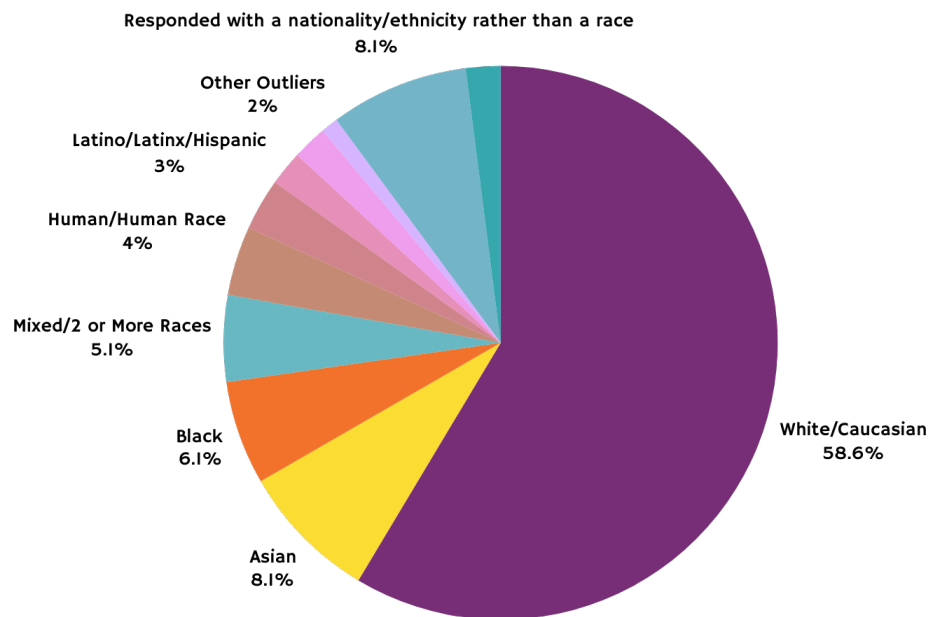
- White/Caucasian - 58 percent
- Asian–8 percent
- Black–6 percent
- Mixed/2 or More Races–5 percent
- Human/Human Race–4 percent
- Latino/Latinx/Hispanic–3 percent
- African American–2 percent
- Other Outliers–2 percent
- Arab/Middle Eastern–< 1 percent
- Indigenous–< 1 percent

- Person of Color—< 1 percent
- Responded with a nationality/ethnicity rather than a race – 8%
- Other (Not Listed Above) –2 percent

Overall, there were fewer White/Caucasian respondents than the baseline data collected by the CIS Diversity Collaborative in 2021, which found that 84% of heads of schools and 74% of leadership team members were identified as White.

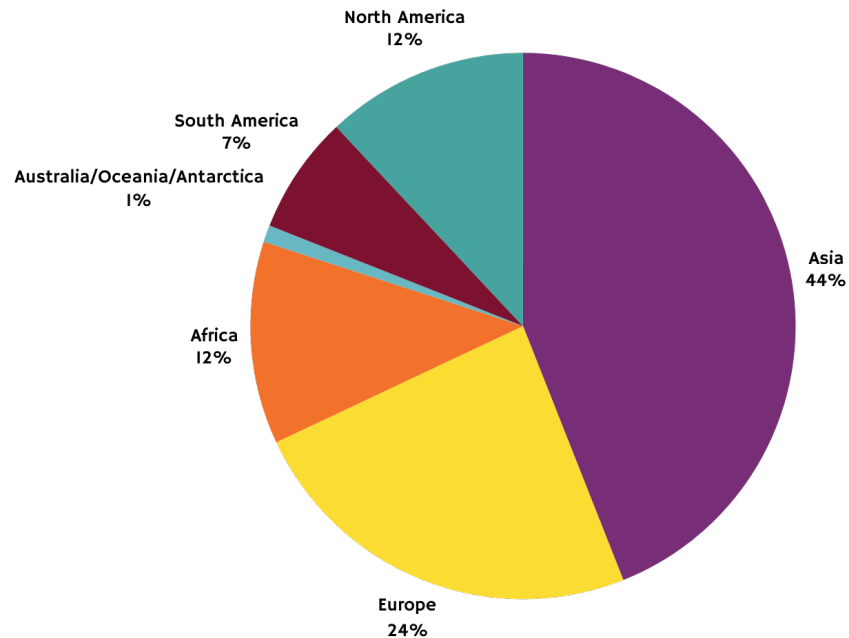
Figure 2

Race Demographics

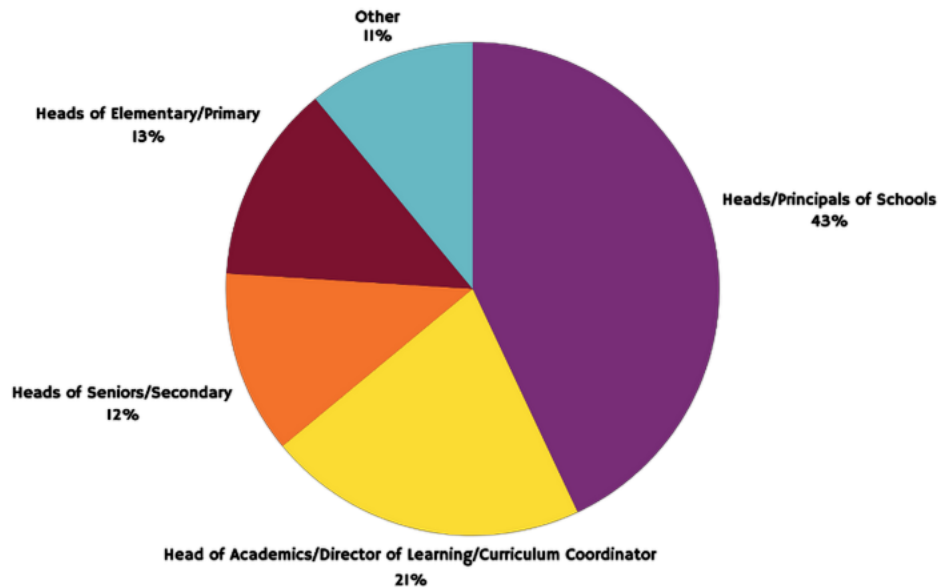


Demographics—Region

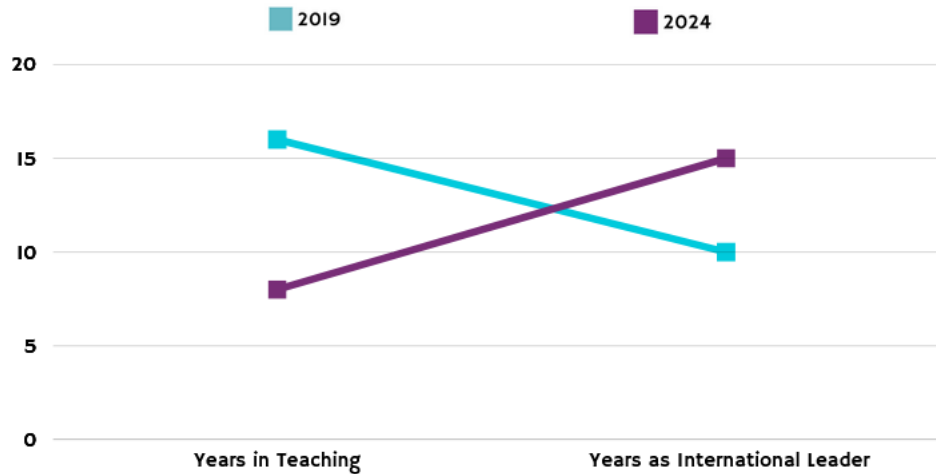
Demographic information based on region was also collected with a total number of specific responses to this question of 330 out of the 843 responses (39%). Of the total, the majority of international schools that responded to the survey came from Asia at 44%. The second highest respondent region was Europe at 24%, followed by Africa and North America each with 12%, South America with 7%, and less than 1% from Australia, Oceania, and Antarctica. The demographic spread of respondents is very similar to the spread for the 2019 DCS and for the overall distribution of accredited international schools in the ISC database.

Figure 3*Regional Demographics**Demographics–Roles*

Demographic information based on role was also collected with a total number of specific responses to this question of 303 out of the 843 responses (36%). As noted above, an additional choice of Head of Academics/Director of Learning/Curriculum Coordinator was added to the possible options to ascertain if those answering the survey were in these roles. Of the responses, 43% who answered this question were Heads/Principals of Schools. It was interesting, however, that the new option was the second highest response with 21% followed by Heads of Elementary/Primary and Heads of Seniors/Secondary essentially tied with responses of 13% and 12%.

Figure 4*Role Demographics**Demographics–Educational Experience*

According to the survey questions on educational experience the survey respondents (86%) had a mean of 15.8 years in international education, and 9.9 years as an international school leader. As a comparison in the 2019 report, the years of teaching experience in international schools was a mean of 7.8, and the years of leadership experience in international schools was a mean of 15.1 years. This drop in overall years of experience in international schools as well as international school leadership from the 2019 DCS could be due to the wider array of choices (e.g. Head of Academics/Director of Learning/Curriculum Coordinator) as a role option for the subsequent high response rate. The lower years of experience could also be attributed to retirements due to the pandemic.

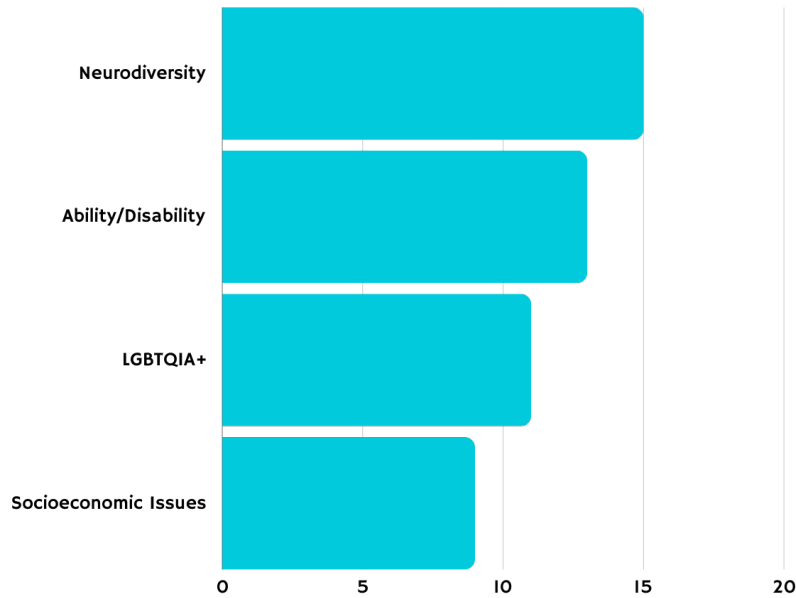
Figure 5*Educational Experience Demographics**Additional Research Needed*

In addition, respondents were asked what other aspects of diversity should be addressed. Seventy responses were collected for this question out of 843 possible responses. This was an open-response question to elicit possible future pathways for research initiatives. Four topics were recommended most often:

- Neurodiversity (15%)
- Ability/disability (13%)
- LGBTQIA+ (11%)
- Socioeconomic issues (9%)

Other possible areas for future research included the following:

- Language issues: particularly concerning non-native English speakers
- Decolonizing curriculum
- Country context and diversity
- Research focused specifically on non-teaching staff
- Research focused on nationality/culture/religion
- Age stereotypes
- Gender and pathway acceleration

Figure 6*Additional Research Needed – Percentages***Findings – Thematic Analysis**

The qualitative data on practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion for leadership and development in international schools was collected through a series of open-ended questions focused on Successes Achieved, Challenges and Barriers, and Stories & Reflections. For the purposes of this survey, the following definitions from the Diversity Collaborative were provided:

- *Diversity* is the presence of difference.
- *Inclusion* is valuing that difference.
- *Equity* ensures that everyone has access to the same opportunities.

Preliminary reviews across responses identified multiple terminology related to what constitutes DEIJ ‘work’ such as: belonging, international mindedness, human rights, and a broad array of descriptors (e.g. JEDI, DEIJB+, DEI, IDEA) that help educators move forward within the school/community environment. During the process of analysis, we categorize all these terms under the DEIJ umbrella.

In most instances, *context* was noted and shaped the responses. This should be carefully considered as the results are reviewed, because different cultural norms, laws, regulations, policies and even understandings of the definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion influenced the responses.

I. Stages of DEI Development

As in the 2019 survey, it was clear that international schools are at different stages of their DEIJ journeys. From this survey, data analysis yielded three categories:

- Transforming Systems
- Implementing Elements
- Exploring Opportunities

Transforming Systems or exemplary examples provided by the respondents indicated a strategic, long-term initiative beginning with hiring and selection, orientation, and onboarding as part of leadership practices that provided an integrated system (whole school) “to create a diverse and culturally responsive system”. Respondents noted beginning their work with policy review, changing hiring practices including leadership pipelines and strategic objectives for the school were often initial steps in the process providing the scaffolding needed for long-term change. Bringing the governance board and community into the conversation also yielded growth. Also included was evidence of anti-bias training for schools, leaders, and hiring teams.

Note that examples were longitudinal; they did not happen in a year; these were long-term plans that included changes in policies, thinking and leadership. “We have engaged in a multi-year DEIB for Board, leadership, faculty, staff students and family”. “Over the past few years, we have increased the diversity of our teaching and leadership teams, as of 2023, 40% of our hires were diverse (e.g. gender, race, inclusion).” Furthermore, in some exemplary systems, “the school has ensured the policies and processes are underpinned by principle of maintaining Diversity. We have sought diverse candidates and have a good mix now”. It was noted that “embracing the importance of Diversity as well as being intentional” were critical conditions of success.

It was also apparent in the more transformative systems that it was not just the leadership or the teachers, or the curriculum, it was the complex intersection at all levels that supported the success of the initiatives. “We include mandatory training for all search committee leaders; include DEI values for every position; as well as publishing a DEI statement on our website” or ‘we include DEI as a school-wide goal for WASC.’ These long term, sustainable efforts encompass the entire system.

Implementing Elements, were exemplified by less systemic, more modest or more limited successes; the respondents indicated that a loosely configured set of activities and experiences were employed by small groups of teachers with interest in **DEIJ**, initiatives such as book clubs, curriculum revisions for students, workshops about DJEI, focus on hiring practices, “DEI has become more prominent in our discussions both with our candidates and members of the selection committee.” Respondents also noted success in getting the concepts of **DEIJ** in the strategic plan that outlines curriculum or international mindedness and human rights statement approved by the board. Schools have expanded or addressed their inclusion policies and added to their vision statements and guiding policies. “Through our professional growth model, we have a large group of teachers interested in DJEI who have been meeting regularly. We recently reviewed our inclusion policy to address DJEI values and beliefs. Training has not yet taken place.”

The difference between Transforming and Elements in the responses seem to be that elements have yet to be deeply connected or strategically assembled for a whole school focus on DEIJ. Two areas appear consistently throughout the Implementing Elements responses—focus on hiring with anti-bias training and focus on professional learning primarily for teachers.

Exploring Opportunities – Schools considering change were also evident from the responses. These are categorized as schools that are working “across student, faculty and community to grow understanding and investment”. Notably the respondents said, “we are working on it, in a variety of ways oftentimes with students. “We have said yes to a student group who wanted to start an Affinity group”. In other responses there was evidence of forming DEIJ discussion groups; consulting with DEIJ experts; teacher professional learning; and student-led groups. There is clearly awareness evident in the responses, but they appear to lack connection to an overall DEIJ plan, “we (e.g. teachers) have a focus on DJEI but that is not necessarily the priority of the Board” “nor did they (e.g. Board) wish to be involved.” And in the same vein “we have organized some training but not sure if we are really doing this or just ticking a box.”

The difference between Elements and Exploring is the overall intent. Clearly, there is interest at various levels of DEIJ in Exploring school settings. Equally as clear is the lack of overall leadership that would focus intent, strategy (including governance and community) on the development of a plan for DEIJ initiatives in the school setting. “By default, we have a diverse leadership team, but I don’t believe this is a conscious strategy or decision by any accounts.”

Our international schools are so complex that few quantitative comparisons are useful; however, qualitative data is used to describe and more deeply understand why, how or what happened during conversations and implementation around DEIJ. It was apparent in the analysis of the qualitative data that progress in the DEIJ area was evident as we reviewed the responses. There were many more examples in this survey that could be categorized under Transforming Systems and Implementing Elements than there were in the 2019 study. In addition, there were fewer examples in the responses that could be categorized as Resistant to DEIJ efforts. That is not to say, however, that international schools looking toward becoming more diverse, equitable and inclusive overall and particularly in their leadership make-up do not encounter challenges and barriers. The most common themes, identified in the order presented in the responses, represent challenges and barriers and are described in the next section.

II. Challenges and Barriers

In response to the category of Challenges and Barriers, respondents provided a range of challenges and barriers ranging from parental interference, government restrictions and bureaucracy, representation, systemic challenges, leadership, and DEIJ policies. Respondents reported biases that included examples of internal, external, implicit and explicit biases in decision making. Many of the challenges were noted in relationship to leadership.

While discussed in detail below, the importance of informed leadership was pervasive across responses. “Not all leaders seem to value or understand the work” and “We also have leadership with varying degrees of buy-in and understanding”, which has impacted value systems, power

dynamics, communication, and staffing across the school systems as well as the impact upon the school systems. Indicative of these responses, “we had a very diverse faculty but with new leadership, we lost it.”

Parental Involvement/Interference

Some respondents identified the explicit biases of “parents complaining about teachers with foreign accents” and the discriminatory actions of “a parent who found out that a teacher was gay had withdrawn their child”. An extension of such discrimination impacted the staff as “some parents objected to the pride flag being raised in school, some members of the staff are worried how to create awareness without it being token measures”. Some respondents also noted pushback of parents whose children attended international schools and how the “parents don’t always accept local talent” as a possible measure of the parental mindsets and using their perceived and actual privilege and influence expressed as being pro-diversity yet understood by some respondents as “the inherent racism built into the very structure” of the school system.

Government Restrictions and Bureaucracy

The local, national, and international level governments were described as holding constraints, bureaucratic, a challenge toward efficiency, recruitment and retainment, and creating limitations and instability as noted by several respondents. A respondent from a Scandinavian country school in a remote area stated that “housing is very difficult to find here and no benefits are allowed by the government”. In addition, this same respondent stated that senior school leaders are not staying long, which has created instability and changes, that “the biggest factor is government constraints on payment and benefits for senior leaders”. Government hiring restrictions from bringing in candidates from certain countries including recognition of qualifications and certification requirements, were also mentioned amongst several respondents. In addition, the interconnection of government challenges and perceptions of who is hired is noted by a response such as “our school struggles to access visas for non-EU citizens—this may be used as an excuse that our faculty is not diverse. Although we do have new colleagues from the USA”. The difficulty and restrictions on obtaining work visas was noted by several respondents with the common challenge statement of “government restrictions on visas”, “the current work permit regulations are extremely restrictive”, and “host country rules about employment visas restrict the passport holders we can accept”. As well as “the decision making is not always at the school level”, which reinforces top-down decision making and lack of recruitment input at the school level. As a respondent, from an international school in Italy, noted, “Unfortunately, the country specific regulations in Italy, which are outside of our control, limits our recruitment to professionals who already hold EU/EEA passport or already have a work permit for Italy. This strongly limits our ability to recruit individuals from all over the world, which would be our preferred strategy”. A respondent from the United States noted that state level legislation has increased the challenges faced at the school level as “Our governor has been spearheading a lot of hateful legislation so working here has become more difficult and stressful”. In a few instances, respondents noted that their school leadership was committed to finding ways to ‘work around’ restrictions to embrace DEI initiatives.

Representation

Several respondents provided a range of challenges related to representation. These challenges varied across culture, language, race, gender, and how “a huge lack of diversity among teaching staff and leadership” impacts, as a deficit, minority representation. Yet, when diversity is noted as existing in the school, there can be “cultural and linguistic challenges in a diverse workforce ecosystem sometimes may lead to miscommunication and dissonance”. A lack of intercultural competence was expressed. In addition, a representation challenge noted by several respondents is the lack of diversity/representation between school leadership and staff as well as those that attend the school where “the student body and families do not represent a wide spectrum of society”. Several respondents also noted in regard to applicant pools and recruitment is that they can be “overwhelmingly dominated by non-minority candidates,” and due to school locations, it is not easy to recruit from a diversity standpoint, and “the challenge of finding candidates that reflect the makeup of our student population”.

An additional response on racial representation of school leaders and staff vs. student body is how a school supported by an U.S. embassy has an all-White board “even though we are in Africa” and “we have a very complex situation, but we are taking the issue of diversity very seriously indeed as our faculty doesn’t reflect our student body”. This response of the faculty not being reflective of the student body and local community was noted across several respondents who were from multiple locations and countries. One respondent even noted that “there are a couple of teachers who have declined our offer due to their understanding of the discrimination that exist in Vienna”. Aligned with this is the challenge of school leaders being “patriarchal, White, and older” as a challenge to expanding diversity and representation. This was not an isolated response. Retention was also noted as a challenge to more diverse representation as “many factors make long-term retention more difficult including lack of understanding/support in the broader social structure of the country and the existence of many opportunities in other locations”.

Furthermore, dependence on passport diversity (e.g. country of origin) as an indicator of having a diverse faculty is somewhat problematic when the diversity is all White, prepared in a western teaching tradition and focuses on similar cultural values; the question would be whether this is evidence of DEIJ. Building community was also noted in interesting ways, most particularly when the response indicated that adding diversity to leadership or hiring a diverse team of teachers would be too disruptive to the community and cause problems. This is the difference between seeing diversity as a strength and seeing diversity as disruptive.

Systemic Challenges

It was noted across respondents that systemic challenges, whether singular or in combination, were identified as race, government/political, structural, cultural, sexual orientation, communication, experience, recruitment, and training. Hiring practices and strategies were affected by such systemic challenges, such as “old world attitudes” (i.e. colonialism) and “the school is still looking for a Director because the Board wants a White man”. Trying to find different places to post job vacancies to recruit diverse applicants, how qualification and certification requirements reduce the number of applicants, how “trying to focus on many areas of improvement” makes systemic change challenging, as well as “the challenge we always face is how to change people’s minds to accept

this diversity”. One respondent with over 30 years as a teacher in the international school system, poignantly noted “I am well aware of the inherent racism built into the very structure. ... I believe I have seen a lot, and as a White person, I am very well aware I have not seen as much as my colleagues of color have seen”. Another respondent stated, “If a BIPOC makes it to the observation stage of hiring, they are often deemed not a good fit for our school”.

Other respondents noted the challenges between teachers, staff, and leadership due to “lack of experience, knowledge and understanding of humankind’s differences” that have “perpetuated existing traumas” - yet for at least one school it created an opportunity to begin learning. Additionally, it was noted of the systemic challenge of skillset vs. diversity. Applicants may have the skillsets and experience desired, yet would only provide the “same cultural background, gender and age-related perspective that we currently have on the team”. It was felt that by choosing a diverse applicant who was not the top candidate, that they were somehow “sacrificing one aspect for another (skillset vs diversity) instead of them complimenting each other”.

Few other respondents noted improvements toward systemic challenges, but some noted were, “We have participated in 6 DEI sessions on implicit bias this year and another series of them last year. Our district offers a racial equity training that center on systemic racism that was part of the founding of our country and how that system still perpetuates all parts of our society today”, and “staff gender neutral washrooms are made”. Others noted that training and “common definitions or language that support diversity” would be helpful to reduce systemic challenges, but that they were insufficient, siloed or “operating in pockets”, identity erasure, reactive responses rather than proactive, not available, or sidelined for other school priorities.

Leadership

Respondents across the survey noted several challenges regarding leadership. Challenges reported included bias, leadership vision that was unknown or misaligned, lack of accountability, priorities, homogenous and/or non-reflective of student, staff, and community populations, inexperience, nepotism, internal hires, and favoritism. Bias was explained as being non-appreciative or having low/lacking empathy as “not all leaders seem to value or understand the work”, “leaders wanting to keep the power”, and how, regarding diversity, created “varying degrees of buy-in and understanding”. Leadership recruitment and hiring responses offered insights such as “our efforts have been minimal due to no leadership turnover. We are trying to implement a leadership internship program for aspiring diverse educators”. As well as “Faculty of those who aspire to leadership positions are not mentored and sponsored through a formal leadership program”. For diverse hires in leadership positions, there was a concern for the “lack of support for BIPOC colleagues that have been recently hired and also for those that have recently entered leadership positions.” In addition, financial limitation for compensation packages and cultural challenges such as gender bias, lessens and limits the applicant pool, including diverse applicants. On the other side of hiring and retention, other respondents have noted that where they have diverse leadership, they have been through retention challenges that include being able to get approval or implement diversity improvements and that “a lot of leadership transitions to taking up this initiative [diversity/DEI] or any initiative has been difficult”.

The lack of diversity at leadership levels was also identified by respondents who noted that “the more senior the positions, the more difficult it is to put together a pool of diverse candidates”. One respondent stated, “Our leadership is very comfortable in its sense of White male superiority”, and another stated, “The majority of our Senior Leadership Team is White, CIS, and mostly heterosexual which leads to difficulties with broadening perspective when it comes to making DEI changes at the school. There are struggles with clear and transparent communication with priorities and decision making”. The sustainability of leaders, in place, who value diversity of leadership and faculty with a highly mobile workforce is problematic.

Commitment to DEI Policies and Priorities

There were varied responses toward DEI policies including the existence or non-existence of such policies, questions of measurement and accountability, performative vs substantive change, the challenge of “checking the box” or optics, external influences including parents, governments and school boards, and questions regarding DEI policies and the need for training and to “decolonize” the curriculum. Respondents noted how the “concepts of DEI are new to many” and there is unfamiliarity and fear on how to proceed. Yet, for those involved, it was noted that “it often feels like the same people involved trying to move things forward. Having DEI delegated people is turning into a situation of them (sadly) doing all the heavy lifting when we need more collective responsibility and accountability”. One respondent who was a DEI Coordinator stated that they are leaving their position and school “due to a lack of support from admin and lack of authority to make any changes in the school”. Also, “DEI suffers from a lack of leadership time and direction”. Financial limitations were discussed as “when it comes to budgeting, DEI is not necessarily a priority, and we need to advocate a lot to get more support. There is a slow shift in sentiment, but we still have a long way to go to make diversity a priority”.

Respondents who focused on the impact of DEI policies on students commented on concerns and solutions. Concerns include representation, acknowledgement, and the lack of support and stagnation by the board and region toward DEI due to having “trouble even putting the words into a policy”, “It is hard to know if we should recruit members of the faculty that will not feel a sense of belonging in the larger school community” and “if we don’t, how will we ever make a significant change for our students who crave belonging”. One solution is through a school that hired an ineffective DEI coordinator is now “looking to have students lead this initiative”.

Communication was listed as a priority for DEI policies and “we need to consider DEI on all levels as part of our communication initiatives”. An extension of communication is the lack of a written framework where there “There is no written recruitment framework/strategies that supports the work of DEI or J as it relates to improving recruitment”. Another respondent is aligned to this comment and stated that “We need ‘tried & tested’ tools to develop a quality action plan to support the statement. We do not want ‘just words’ ...we want action and support”. The focus and who controls the focus of DEI policies was noted by one respondent as “At times DEI is considered only to be focusing on sexual orientation and color. The local legal requirements [sic] are to be taken into consideration always”. Another respondent noted the perception of DEI focus and stated, “In our region DEI is perceived as about gender identity and sexual orientation, creating some challenges in heavily Catholic country”. An extension of this comment is the influence of religion and politics on DEI policies and how it has slowed work and how “we have faced challenges with a

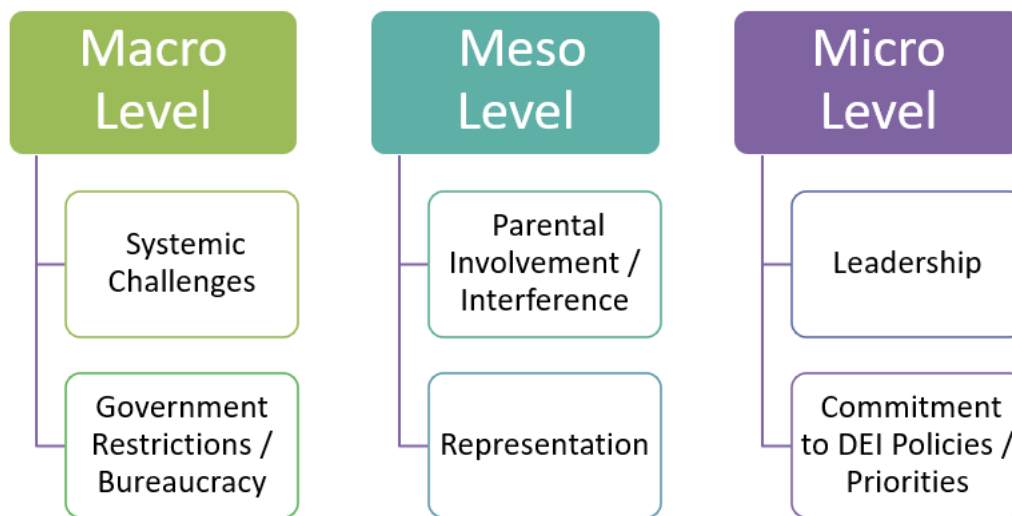
conservative board, and pockets of neo-liberalism in the community”.

What is necessary for DEI policies to be considered a requirement was commented on by several respondents as transparency, proactiveness, deliberativeness, DEI working groups inclusive of staff and students, and recognizing missed opportunities, all of which are critical to developing DEI policies. One respondent noted that “we have posted on our hiring page our DEI statement. We are also trying to work with our school leadership on how to be more Pro-active than Re-active to acts of racism and bias. We are better addressing some of the needs of our LGBTQIA+ students, but still lack the confidence to address racism....” The respondent also noted that “we have implemented an Anonymous Reporting Tool”. There is the need to be proactive and develop models with clear policies, and “to have buy in from the staff, it is essential to have a DEI policy and vision. Without it, it makes the work seem optional to White staff members”. One respondent summarized buy-in by all stakeholders regarding written policy and language awareness as “to try to find terms that achieve the ends without jeopardizing the journey”. One respondent detailed that their school’s DEIB policy “is deliberate in developing a safe and identity-affirming environment where every individual is valued, seen, heard, and respected”.

Looking at the challenges and barriers described by the respondents, we also saw alignment to parts of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (1979). At a macro level, respondents discussed systemic challenges that often impacted hiring practices and governmental restrictions such as restrictions on work permits, visa, and benefits. In the middle, or at the meso level, were items such as parental interference and pushback concerning faculty or programs and representation. Finally, at the micro level, respondents noted difficulties with commitment to DEI policies or lack of buy-in from various stakeholders, lack of diversity in leadership, and a lack of understanding of DEI work by some leaders among other issues.

Figure 7

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (1979)



Conclusions

As described above, using a constant comparative design method to analyze the hundreds of survey responses suggests that since the 2019 DCS, many international schools have made progress on their efforts to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive generally and in relation to diversifying their leadership. While some of the responses suggest that international schools are still in the Exploring Opportunities stage, based on the responses, other schools seem to be the Implementing Elements, and Transforming Systems stages. Regardless of what stage they are at, international schools seem to confront common challenges and barriers when undertaking DEI work, including: parental mindset; government restrictions/bureaucracy; lack of representation; intercultural competence; systemic and combined challenges; leadership; as well as DEIJ policies within country and context.

Three themes appeared often in all parts of the survey – context, community, and systems – so we end this report by sharing a few quotes that exemplify the importance of considering the context of a school, intentionally building community, and taking a systems approach.

School Context

“Our leadership team is a good mix of local and international hires, both male and female. We are considered strong and transparent in this process, but gender differences are still a difficult challenge in a conservative [religious] community.”

“We have engaged in a multi-year DEIB for Board, leadership, faculty, staff, students and family.”

“The school has ensured that policies and processes are underpinned by the principle of maintaining Diversity. We have sought diverse candidates and have a good mix now.”

The creation of an environment that values DEI (e.g. diversity, equity, inclusion). is important to the overall growth of a diverse learning environment led by a diverse team of educators. A school context should ensure that classrooms, teaching staff and administrative bodies reflect the multifaceted world we live in; it’s not just about the numbers, it is about all voices being valued and heard (Diversio, 2024). “It’s about being diverse not just being international.”

Community Strength

“So much work has not been done in the past, and there is so much work to do in this area. Time, and time and time, is needed to make this happen. But it is happening! I am so proud, although the challenges have been there, the energy, strength and community is stronger than any challenge we are presented with.”

“Through our professional growth model, we have a large number of teachers interested in DEIJ and we have been meeting regularly. We recently reviewed our school policies to include DEIJ values and beliefs”

“We are becoming better at recognizing the value of diversity amongst teams and the role we can play in promoting diversity.”

Schools that demonstrate transformative change also demonstrated the ability to include the community in their conversations and discussions of DEIJ. Starting with the leadership team often in parallel with the teaching staff and expanding to include the Board, community members, extended staff in the school and others creating an inclusive environment for their work. The actual order does not seem to matter as much as the strategic intention to build community by developing understanding and support for DJEI initiatives (Abu, 2022).

Systems Thinking

“We have done lots of good work over the last 3 years with our JEDI committee. This year we have formed sub-committees which have led to some very positive work. We have done training for staff, done a school and curriculum audit, begun to write JEDI policies, reviewed our hiring practices, formed a student group and reached out to local agencies as well.”

“It is a big part of our curriculum and is given the same importance as the delivery of other subjects. It is NOT just presented as a short unit but explored, dissected, lived and practiced by ALL at our school. It is reflected in all areas of the curriculum.”

“The school is seeking to build a contextual definition and shared understanding of key terms related to DEIJB. The areas of success are where this understanding has been applied to student well-being and safeguarding, particularly of marginalized groups.”

“DEIJ and inclusion have been more focused on this past school year as a whole school than they have in previous years. This is positive growth.”

Systems thinking (Stroh, 2024) appears to be an effective problem-solving tool for the approach to DEIJ + initiatives in international schools. Understanding that we are part of the larger system we are seeking to influence, and change gives a particular way for leaders to examine the DEIJ+ initiatives. Stroh offers the five “C’s” for systems orientation as curiosity, clarity, compassion, choice and courage. As he notes the “systems orientation is ultimately a way of being those points to alternative ways of thinking and acting” (2024, para. 7). This orientation is vital given the complexities, settings, countries in which international school thrive. It is not a matter of DEIJ+ being answered *in one way*, it is a matter of choice of the best way to implement, embrace, and enhance DEIJ+ initiatives.

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