

INCLUSION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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Publication of the NFI/ISC Research Survey on 'Inclusion in International Schools' provides an opportunity to consider how we might look forward to a post-COVID future beyond our 'acute-phase' present. Administered in November/December 2019, the results provide a picture of international school inclusion pre-COVID and offer a chance to reimagine inclusion in a post-pandemic world.

A few surprises emerged in comparison to the 2017 results. These included a rise in schools serving children with special needs in collaborative, mainstream settings, as opposed to being isolated from other students. This hopefully indicates a growing awareness and responsiveness, on the part of general education, to the needs of all children. Another surprise was an increase in schools reporting programmes for English as an Additional Language. Given that most international schools use English as the medium of instruction, hosting programmes for non-native speakers of English who might otherwise 'sink or swim' on their own seems logical and sensitive. There was also the recognition that children in international schools may suffer mental health or emotional conditions requiring interventions. The 2018 publication of the first survey on wellbeing in international schools (Higgins & Wigford) may have provided the impetus for students and staff alike to bring wellbeing into focus. These points are important

to consider in our current circumstances and in a post-COVID future.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE KIDS?

In a recent conversation, a head of school recalled the early days of the pandemic: "We quickly got learning online and took care of kids' education. We took care of teachers' anxiety. And we took care of parents, meeting them and talking through concerns about technology and online learning. We were so pleased with ourselves, getting everything done so quickly! And then as the dust settled, we suddenly wondered to ourselves... 'What about the kids with special learning needs? How are they doing?'"

"The truth is," he said, "we forgot about them. We were doing so well, then realised we failed to consider the needs of our most vulnerable learners. Of course, they'd been looked after by learning support teachers, but the teachers hadn't received guidance from leadership. That shouldn't have happened."

Uncertain times are stressful for all stakeholders, students and adults alike. This was particularly true last semester when there was little warning of the gravity of the pandemic nor any script for what was required. Our current reality continues to be volatile, complex and ambiguous; little appears to stand still for long. The effects on us are myriad: we find ourselves on edge or



suddenly demotivated, stretched in our capacity to think through possibilities, perhaps unsure of ourselves and wondering how to lead when we ourselves are unsure of ‘what next?’.

What might it take to be inclusive at all times, remembering our mission and diverse population – even during a pandemic?

FUTURE THINKING, LOOKING BACK

Thinking about ‘What next?’ invites us to think in new and different ways. Drawing on work by leading futurist Bob Johansen (2020), we know our minds grasp for certainty during times of disruption. This may constrain thinking. Johansen urges us to refrain from the temptation of certainty and look instead for clarity; he suggests we imagine a post-COVID future and use that as a lens to look back to our present circumstances, to shed insight on where we are at the moment and help us determine a future direction.

The ‘Desired State’ map (Garmston & Wellman, 2016) may be useful to guide our attention, determine resource allocation, and make decisions. This map asks us to clarify our present circumstances, and develop a vision and goals for the future.

The original ES/DS map has a single arrow moving from the Existing State towards a Desired State. In this adaptation, using the future as a lens to look back at the present, another arrow has been added pointing back to the Existing State, to indicate how a future lens can help us in framing our direction. The double arrows suggest that construction of meaning might be iterative instead of uni-directional: that is, as we look from the future back to the present, we might reinterpret present circumstances, which then might have a further effect on our actions towards the future.

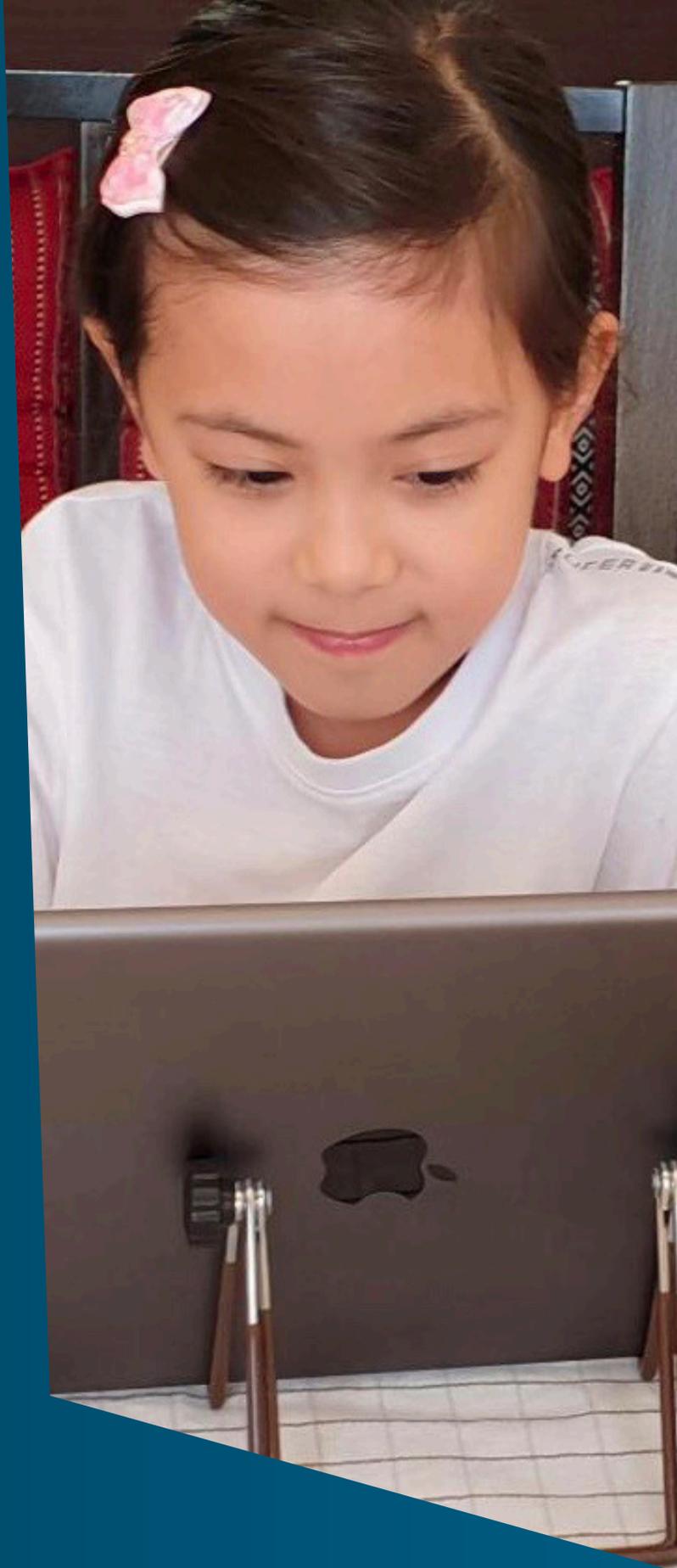
The following suggestions are offered as schools utilise a future lens to develop a Desired State map for inclusion:

- Always, always focus on relationships: Organisations are based on human relationships and trust is required for individuals and teams to speak up and take risks. Conversations that include a diversity of perspectives, including the possibility of pushback, provide opportunities for growth and adaptivity. Presuming positive intent on the part of others, using this as a lens to interpret behaviour (students and staff alike), supports the development of empathy and understanding and gives the best chance of generating innovative ideas in moving towards a more inclusive post-COVID world.



- Clarify values, beliefs, mission and identity: In a post-COVID world, what would we like our school to stand for? What will inclusion mean in our context? If families should suddenly have to leave our school, what would we like to be remembered for? Thinking of values and beliefs grounds us, and gives clarity of direction and flexibility of implementation.
- Invite thinking beyond dichotomous choices: Either/or approaches constrain thinking. Whenever faced with a decision, for example, “Can we serve this child in our school?”, consider ideas beyond ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Ask questions like, “Under what circumstances might this child succeed in our school?”. Invite others to pose questions and offer suggestions that stretch thinking: “What might we learn from having this child in our midst?”; “Who on staff and in the student body might help us plan a successful programme for this child?”

Our world has changed because of the pandemic and it would be futile to try and return to pre-COVID days. While not suggesting we ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’, an ongoing commitment to inclusion requires us to develop a new understanding of the world we live in and how we learn together. Coming to understand this work necessarily exists in the dynamic conversation space between diverse learners.



THE AUTHORS

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