“We’re Away From Everything”: Understanding the Struggles Faced by Internationalized Schools in Non-Urban Contexts in China

Adam Poole¹, Yang Liujinya², and Shi Yue²

Abstract
This paper reports on an emerging type of international school, which we refer to as the Chinese internationalized school. This school caters to Chinese citizens and aspires to offer a fusion of national and international curricula. The majority of internationalized schools in China are to be found in large metropolitan centers. Accordingly, the literature has focused on relatively affluent urban centers, such as Shanghai, Suzhou, and Beijing. However, in recent years, internationalized schools have started to emerge outside of metropolitan areas in what have been described as tier-3 and 4 cities, which could also be described as non-urban or rural contexts, due to their remote location and proximity from metropolitan centers. This study adds to the scholarship on internationalized schooling in China by focusing on the struggles that schools in a non-urban contexts are likely to face. Focusing on one school, our interviews with 16 teachers and the school’s principal revealed that the school’s remote location made recruiting students and teachers problematic. Moreover, the effects of COVID-19 compounded this issue, with many prospective students abandoning their plans to study abroad and instead choosing to study in a local school offering the Chinese national curriculum. As a result, the school was forced to recruit students who did not possess the necessary English language ability to access the content of the Cambridge curriculum. This created a washback effect, which impacted on students’ academic achievement, their motivation, and the teaching strategies employed by the teachers. The paper concludes by considering what implications the findings might have for teachers and school leaders in internationalized schools in non-urban contexts.

Keywords
international schools, Chinese internationalized schools, professional development, COVID-19, China

Introduction
The international school arena has expanded considerably in the last 20 years or so. Where once the arena was largely confined to the global North, it has now expanded to encompass the global South (Bunnell, 2019). Along with this expansion has come a change in the values and nature of international schooling. Bunnell (2014) has characterized this change in terms of the movement from an “ideal” to a “post-ideal” epoch. Previously, international schools answered a largely pragmatic and ideological need. Pragmatically, these schools provided the children of expatriates with a pathway to a university back in their home country. Ideologically, these schools were designed to foster greater intercultural understanding. In a post-ideal epoch, however, international schools largely answer the aspirational needs of a local middle class who consider an international education to be superior to that offered in state schools and a more reliable pathway to an overseas university (Hayden, 2006).

Against this changing landscape, it is possible to discern three types of international school: Type-A, B, and C schools (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). Type-A traditional schools serve globally mobile parents and typically include a diverse range of cultural backgrounds (Bunnell et al., 2017). The majority of students attending Type-A schools will be from western countries, with English being the main medium of written and spoken communication (Brummit & Keeling, 2013). Type-B ideological schools are committed to making the world a more peaceful place. These schools are few in number, and include the United World Colleges and the

¹Graduate School of Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China
²Institute of Impact Studies, International Education Group, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

Corresponding Author:
Adam Poole, The Graduate School of Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100089, China.
Email: adampoole92@gmail.com

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international school of Geneva (Bunnell et al., 2017). Type-C non-traditional international schools are typically privately owned and enroll students from the local population, serving an “aspirational middle class” (Hayden & Thompson, 2013, 7). It has been asserted that local children fill 80% of international school places, a reversal of the norm 30 years ago, where 80% of international school places were held by expatriate children (Brummit & Keeling, 2013, p. 29).

This paper is concerned with the Type-C variety of international school, which increasingly are to be found in the global South, particularly in China (the focus of this paper). There are a number of different types of Type-C school in China, including, Chinese, American, British, and Canadian style private schools (see Wu & Koh, 2021 for a description of the latter three types). All of these types have been described as “internationalized” (Poole, 2021) as they serve a host country clientele and are regulated by the state. The case study school (referred to by the pseudonym, SCIS) in this paper could best be described as a Chinese internationalized school (Poole, 2021). The Chinese internationalized school is not a formal grouping as such, but a heuristic to identify and characterize a certain type of school that is privately owned and offers some form of international curriculum to Chinese citizens from grade 10 onwards. These schools may be embedded in local schools (as is the case of the school in this paper) or stand alone. They may also be part of an education group (as was the case of SCIS) or stand independently.

Although many internationalized schools in China advertise themselves as offering a hybrid curriculum that fuses western and Chinese approaches, Chinese internationalized schools will privilege the Chinese national curriculum and symbolic routines, such as the flag raising ceremony and the singing of the national, both of which are designed to inculcate in students a firm attachment to the state (Poole, 2021). In the case of these schools, the international is best thought of as being embedded in the national. Due to increasing government regulation of the private school sector, Chinese internationalized schools face restrictions on curriculum content from grades 1 to 9, which are considered to be compulsory years for covering subjects such as history, geography, and mathematics from the Chinese national curriculum (Gaskell, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). In grade 10, students typically study the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSEs), and then from grades 11 to 12 study either the A’ Level or the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP). Due to the compulsory requirements of the national curriculum, there is generally insufficient preparation for students to sit their international examinations (Gaskell, 2019).

According to Gaskell (2019), Chinese internationalized schools are staffed by both local Chinese hires (representing 60% of the school’s staff), and overseas expatriates (40%). Whilst both local and expatriate local teaching faculty will need to hold a bachelor’s degree and at least 2 years teaching experience, they will not necessarily need to hold professional teaching qualifications. This will very much depend on the school itself, with some requiring teachers to hold a valid teaching license and others valuing teachers’ “international capital” more highly than formal qualifications—such as where a teacher studied (e.g., the University of Cambridge) and the level of their qualification (e.g., a Masters or a doctorate; Poole, 2021).

According to ISC Research (2020), there are 857 international schools in China, with about 563 of them being designated as international Chinese-owned private schools (i.e., Chinese internationalized schools). The majority of Chinese internationalized schools are to be found in China’s tier-1 cities, typically located on the affluent eastern-sea board (Poole, 2021). For example, Shanghai has 169 schools, Beijing 141 schools, Shenzhen 55 schools, Guangzhou 47 schools, and Chengdu 27 schools (Gaskell, 2019; Poole, 2021). Tier-1 cities are directly controlled municipalities and leading provincial capital cities of over 15 million people (Wong, 2019). Accordingly, the study of international schooling in China has focused on tier-1 cities, such as Shanghai (Blatti et al., 2019; Poole, 2021; Wright & Lee, 2014), Suzhou (Kong et al., 2020), Beijing (Wright & Lee, 2014; Young, 2018), and Shenzhen (Wright et al., 2021; Ying & Wright, 2021). Kostogriz and Bonar’s (2019) study of the tensions between foreign and local teachers as they attempt to create a new professional culture is an interesting exception as it focuses on a school located in a satellite town outside of Beijing.

Although the majority of internationalized schools are to be found in tier-1 and tier-2 cities, they are starting to appear in tier-3 and 4 cities (Poole, 2021). Tier-3 cities, such as Nanning and Changde, are provincial capital cities and prefecture-level cities of 150,000 to 3 million people (Wong, 2019). Tier-4 cities, such as Chenzhou and Linhai, are prefecture-level cities and county-level-level cities of less than 150,000 people (Wong, 2019). Significantly, 1.1 billion Chinese people continue to live outside of tier-1/tier-2 cities, potentially presenting an untapped market of 165 million middle-class consumers (Abdo et al., 2018). However, access to Chinese internationalized schools that support such aspirations has traditionally been limited. It would appear that this trend is starting to be reversed, with increasing numbers of internationalized schools targeting a non-urban based middle-class demographic (Keeling, 2019). The type of school in this study—Chinese internationalized schools—can thus be situated within this burgeoning context of internationalized schooling that serves a growing middle-class who live outside of China’s mega cities.

This study adds to the scholarship on internationalized schooling in China by focusing on a context that has yet to be fully explored, namely non-urban contexts, such as tier-3 and -4 cities/towns. Specifically, this paper focuses on the struggles that teachers and students are likely to face in non-urban contexts. Although we focus on struggles, we are not suggesting that schools outside of tier-1 cities are in anyway deficient. Rather, we shed light on the difficulties that such
schools are likely to face due to their location and, in so doing, offer implications that will be of interest to school leaders and teachers in non-urban contexts. In order to do this, we draw on interviews with 16 teachers from an internationalized school in a tier-4 city. Our study is underpinned by two guiding research questions:

What difficulties do non-urban internationalized schools face and what are the reasons for these difficulties?

What implications do the study’s findings have for stakeholders in internationalised schools in non-urban contexts?

Methodology

As our paper focused on teachers in one school, we drew inspiration from case study design, which investigates real-life, complete dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships, and other factors in a unique instance (Cohen et al., 2011). For Creswell (1994), case study is a single instance of a bounded system, such as a school or class. However, others (e.g., Yin, 2009) argue that the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not so clear-cut, as a case study needs to be situated within a context in order to create verisimilitude and depth. We opted for the looser approach suggested by Yin (2009) as we were interested in exploring the role that the school’s location played in shaping teachers’ approaches to teaching international curricula to Chinese students.

In order to investigate internationalized schooling in a non-urban setting, 16 teachers, as well as the school’s principal, were interviewed from a newly opened internationalized school (pseudonym, South China Internationalized School; SCIS for short) in a tier-4 town in the East of China, some 3 hours drive from Shanghai.

We were able to negotiate access to the school due to our affiliation with an educational group with which SCIS was also affiliated. The authors of the paper were comprised of one British and two Chinese academics. We were invited by SCIS’s principal to interview the teachers as part of a larger needs analysis project with schools affiliated to the authors’ institution (referred to henceforth by the pseudonym, Global Education). Global Education provided its affiliated schools with academic support, such as professional development.

The findings from the needs analysis study were shared with the school’s principal and used as the basis for designing future professional development initiatives. However, our interviews also yielded insights into the teachers’ experiences that we had not anticipated. The teachers, for example, talked candidly and sympathetically about the students’ lack of English proficiency, which they attributed largely to the location of the school and the low quality of the English provision offered by schools in the local area. These unexpected insights were the inspiration for this paper. We focus on the teachers as negotiating access to the students was not possible due to ethical concerns. However, we were able to capture the students’ experiences through the teachers’ interviews, although this approach can only provide a partial glimpse into the students’ lived experiences.

The Chinese teachers were all bilingual, but none of the expatriate teachers spoke Chinese fluently. The majority of participants did not hold formal teaching qualifications. Rather, they held postgraduate qualifications, such as Masters degrees (one of the expatriate teachers had a PhD) and/or had studied overseas. See Table 1 for an overview of the participants. All of the participants gave verbal informed consent, and were provided with an information sheet stating the aims of the project and how their data would be used.

As our focus was on teachers’ perceptions of the school and the students, interviews were chosen as the most commensurate method for data collection. The interview questions were designed to generate “thick” description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which would enable us to make some generalizations about the research context that might have applicability to other Chinese internationalized schools. Inspired by phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2013), which utilizes different stages of interviewing, the interview was divided into three parts.

The first part of the interview elicited information about the participants’ backgrounds, such as how they got into teaching, their motivations for moving to SCIS, and their perceptions of the school and the students. This provided us with a context in which to situate the responses from the second part of the interview. Meanwhile, the second part of the interview explored the participants’ experiences of teaching in SCIS, focusing on pedagogical strategies and beliefs about the use of teaching strategies. The final part of the interview explored the participants’ experiences of professional development (PD) and the kinds of PD they would like to receive in the future. This third part of the interview helped to construct another context, this time oriented to the future and based on what the teachers considered they needed in order to develop as professionals. These findings are not reported in this paper, as our focus is on the participants’ experiences of teaching in SCIS.

| Nationality       | Name (all names are pseudonyms) |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Chinese teachers  | Alvin, Avril, Angela, Franny, Jean, Lily, Laura, Mike, Patricia, Rosanna, Sally, and Terry |
| Expatriate teachers | Harry, Derick, Kelly, and Patrick |
Due to the distance of the school from the authors’ institution, as well as travel restrictions imposed by the outbreak of COVID-19, it was not possible to physically visit the research site. Instead, we conducted interviews via the Chinese social messaging application, WeChat, which allowed for asynchronous face-to-face conversation. We used WeChat due to its ubiquity and ease of use. As WeChat does not allow users to record audio from the application, we resorted to recording the participants’ interviews using Quick Time Player on our laptops or the recording function on our mobile phones. Each participant was interviewed once, with interviews lasting between 40 and 50 minutes. The participants were encouraged to use English during the interview, but were given the chance to use Chinese if they wished. In all but two cases, the interviews were conducted in English. The two interviews conducted in Chinese were translated into English before data analysis began. Once transcribed, the interviews were returned to the participants to review. The member-checking process not only strengthened validity by ensuring the accuracy of the transcriptions but also enhanced ethics by inviting the participants to take some ownership of the research process (Harvey, 2015).

Data analysis was based on thematic analysis, which is defined as a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because thematic analysis can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it was ideally suited to our needs, that is, understanding the struggles of a newly opened non-urban internationalized school.

The first phase of data analysis involved familiarizing ourselves with the interview data. This meant reading over the transcripts, returning to and writing up field notes, and sharing our experiences and emerging insights with each other. The second phase involved generating initial codes. In order to create what Nowell et al. (2017) refer to as a “coding framework,” we separately analyzed a small sample of interview transcripts (n = 3), coding them for teachers’ needs, teaching strategies, and struggles. We then convened to share what we had found. The process of comparing and contrasting highlighted issues related to the students’ English proficiency as particularly salient. This master theme formed the template for further data analysis. We also identified the school’s location in a non-urban setting, as well as the students’ prior learning experiences, as significant themes.

The third phase of data analysis utilized the master theme (the students’ English proficiency) as a starting point for analyzing the rest of the interview transcripts. We worked on transcripts individually and then shared our findings with each other in weekly meetings. This third phase of data analysis identified a further two key themes: students’ motivation and teachers’ restricted use of pedagogy.

In order to manage the coding process, we created an interactive document using Shi Mo, an online, collaborative workspace, which we populated with the codes from the third phase. During data analysis, we transferred interview chunks to their relevant theme in the collaborative workspace. If a new or unexpected theme emerged, the researcher would create a new heading in the workspace and place the corresponding interview data there. In this way, we could access and retrieve the data with relative ease whilst retaining a holistic view of it.

Context

The Research Site

The following description is primarily based on our interviews with the school’s principal (pseudonym, John). South China Internationalized School (SCIS) was a “typical private school” (Jean) located approximately 3 hours drive from a large city in the East of China in a county-level (tier-4) town, which we refer to by the pseudonym “Yangtze town.” Although Yangtze town was classed as a city, the area contained rural areas many times the size of its urban, built-up area. The participants described the campus as “beautiful,” but found its remote location to be problematic, as illustrated by the following two examples: “It’s in the countryside, far away from the city center” (Angela) and “the school is a little far out from the city so we’re away from everything. Even just going to the supermarket, you’re a good 20 minute drive away” (Kelly).

SCIS’s relationship to the local school in which it was embedded was complex. On the one hand, SCIS was independent from the local school, as the students followed an international curriculum (Cambridge International Examinations). On the other hand, SCIS was, in the words of the principal, “under the auspices of the local school, who provide support, infrastructure, and lodging.” This relationship was not always harmonious. One teacher, Patrick, believed that “the general sentiment I feel is that our school or our students are inferior. And I don’t think they [the local school] even try to hide that fact.”

SCIS was primarily administered by an education group (Global Education, pseudonym), with whom the authors were affiliated. This group was engaged in school operation, curriculum design and delivery, teacher development, and evaluation and research, with a particular focus on the internationalization of K-12 education. SCIS was part of a division which consisted of a number of other Cambridge curriculum centers (schools authorized to offer Cambridge examinations, such as the IGCSE and A’ Levels).

SCIS opened in 2018 with 28 students, but almost immediately experienced difficulties due to a lack of discipline. The principal, John, reported that many students were dating, gangs formed, and there were also fights between students. After 3 months, the first principal was replaced by John. John swiftly established clear disciplinary rules, introducing a student handbook that outlined behavioral expectations. As a result of this tightening up of the rules, some of the cohort left, leaving just 13 of the initial 28 students. However, as will become evident, discipline remained an issue, with
many students refusing to hand in their homework or sleeping in class.

During the second year (2019), SCIS received assistance from the local school in order to recruit more students. As a result of this initiative, 60 prospective students were registered. Ultimately, the school ended up recruiting just 32 students in order to maintain academic standards. However, SCIS was unable to maintain the same rigor the following year, in 2020, due to the impact of COVID-19. This, coupled with the location of the school, made recruiting students difficult. Many of the students who had signed up for SCIS went to the local high school instead. Despite this, the school managed to recruit 33 students. However, the quality of the students was lower than the school had anticipated, with Mike, the academic director explaining, “this year, due to uncontrollable changes in the international situation like the pandemic, there was a drop both in the number and the quality of new students. It’s like this everywhere in China.” Another teacher, Sally, also explained that “for some of the kids, they cannot literally get into any school with their scores. So that’s the kind of students we’ve got. They cannot even spell some basic words like ‘prize’.”

At the time of this study, the school had a total of 73 students, who were divided into five classes: Two grade 10 classes (30 students), two grade 11 classes (30 students), and one grade 12 class (13 students). There were 15 teachers and 7 administrators. Of the 15 teachers, 4 were expatriate teachers.

**Findings**

**Students’ English Proficiency**

The most significant struggle reported by the teachers was the students’ English proficiency, which was almost universally described as “weak.” Many of the teachers used the IELTS (The International English Language Testing System) score as a way to describe the students’ language ability. IELTS is an international standardized test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers wishing to study in an English-medium university. There are also a number of other tests that students can take to demonstrate their proficiency, such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Patrick estimated that many of the students’ English was at about 3.5. This was echoed by Terry, who estimated that “another part of students who can only reach like 3.5 or 4.5” and Kelly, who explained that “we have grade ten 1-class, the average IELTS score is 4.5. And our class two, the average is 3.5.”

As a point of comparison, IELTS scores of 3.5 to 4.5 can be mapped on to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which is an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. An IELTS score of 3.5 to 4.5 corresponds to level A2 (Basic User) on the framework, which assumes that students can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment, and matters in areas of immediate need (CEFR, 2020). However, the IGCSE courses are pitched at B2 (Independent User), which assumes that students, amongst other things, can understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics and produce clear, detailed texts on a wide range of subjects (CEFR, 2020). This clearly indicates that the students did not possess the necessary English skills in order to access the Cambridge curriculum.

However, not all of the teachers considered the students’ English ability to be so low. Jean, for example, took pride in watching her students’ improve over the course of a year:

> Now I’m dealing with G12. When I arrived here at the beginning of G11, their level was basically 4.5 to 5. Now their average is 5.5, and for some students it’s 6.5 now. So it’s really good (Jean).

The average of 5.5 would put the students at about the right level for accessing the content of the IGCSE Cambridge curriculum. The reason for this discrepancy might be attributed to Jean’s focus on just one class—she had followed a group of students from grade 11 to grade 12 and was therefore able to see their improvement. Jean’s response also suggests that the students were able to make progress, but only over an extended period of time. Sally put this into perspective when she explained that: “it is the small bits of success, the feeling of success, that leads the students forwards. So, you have to make them feel they are capable of learning, of moving forwards.”

The students’ lack of English proficiency was largely attributed to perceived deficiencies in Yangtze town’s local education system, which did not provide the students (the majority of whom had passed through the local education system prior to joining SCIS) with the necessary English foundations to succeed in an international school:

> I think it’s just the local environment. It’s because of Yangtze Town’s [pseudonym] education system. When they are in primary school and middle school, they don’t have an English environment. This is something that can’t be helped (Laura).

Laura believed that the students’ lack of English proficiency was not their fault, but the result of studying an English program that did not align with the linguistic expectations of the Cambridge curriculum. The focus on reading exercises may be sufficient to prepare the students to sit the university entrance examination in China (the Gao Kao), but such an approach would provide the students with the necessary linguistic capital for engaging with the Cambridge IGCSE and A’ Level, which is pitched at a higher level than the Gao Kao.

Although SCIS had hoped to recruit students with advanced English proficiency, the outbreak of COVID-19,
meant that many of the stronger students abandoned their plans to go abroad and instead chose to attend a local school:

It’s tough for us because the pandemic has affected not only the students but also the recruitment. Some parents wanted to send their kids abroad, but they would think, ‘No, I cannot do that, it’s not safe outside, because of the pandemic’. Especially parents in a small city like here (Laura).

The students’ lack of English had a detrimental impact on their academic performance, as illustrated by the following two excerpts:

Even if the students can understand what you mean, they cannot write it down, but in the A-level courses you have to write it down in English, in essays. So their vocabulary limits them quite a lot (Terry).

If their English is not so good, there are a lot of things they cannot learn. A lot of maths or physics knowledge will be very difficult for them. Compared with students from other places like Beijing or Nanjing, their English level is much lower, so it’s more difficult for our teachers to teach them (Laura).

Once again, location is considered to be a significant factor in explaining why the students’ ability was low. Students from more cosmopolitan places like Beijing and Nanjing are considered to be at an advantage, as they have access to better educational resources.

**Students’ Motivation**

The students’ lack of English proficiency also had a negative washback effect on their emotions and motivations, which Patrick described as “decimated.” This was corroborated by other teachers, such as Kelly, who observed students who were:

Sleeping, so disengaged. And the teachers always put the blame on the students. ‘It’s their self-discipline, it’s their motivation. They’re lazy.’ But you always try to say, ‘Put yourself in that situation. What about if you were in Spain, in Spanish classes all day and you can’t understand anything because nobody is taking the time to give you some matching exercises or some time to talk to the person sitting next to you to discuss some ideas to make sure you can understand it?’

Kelly’s observation is significant for a number of reasons. Not only did she capture the general mood of the students, but she was able to relate to their situation empathetically. Rather than blaming the students, she tried to understand the situation from their perspective. Not only did the students need to study in a language that was not their own, but most of the classes required the students to be passive. When Kelly says that “nobody is taking the time to give you matching exercises” she is suggesting that active learning would help to get the students more engaged. Yet, as we show later, implementing student-centered activities that fostered active engagement was no easy task.

Another reason for the students’ lack of motivation for studying was due to the de-accreditation of the IGCSE English as a Second Language course:

When I was working in another international school, British universities still accepted IGCSE scores as a replacement of IELTS, so some students would work really hard for it. But now, most universities only accept IELTS, so most of the students do not want to take that exam (Jean).

Many teachers noted that the students were not intrinsically motivated to study hard. Only when there was some extrinsic motivation, such as a high stakes examination, did they become motivated. However, the IGCSE exam was no longer a high stakes examination. As a result of this downgrading, many of the skills that the students needed to succeed at the IGCSE, such as inference and adopting different registers, were not being sufficiently developed in the course because the students did not consider them to be that important. Rather, they put more energy into their IELTS classes, as these had a more significant bearing on their university applications.

The students’ relatively affluent social status (middle-class) also influenced their attitude toward studying, as illustrated by Derick, who explained that many of the students were not motivated to study because “they’ve either made it in life or they don’t see any reason to keep pushing forward or harder. Some students have given up emotionally.” Another teacher, Terry, gave an example of a grade 10 student who, in his own words, tried to “buy” him:

There’s a new student in G10, and through the pictures on WeChat, she said that her current balance is a hundred million, as a kid, so she could do whatever she wants. She thinks she can buy me. That’s what she actually said. She said she would give me a million yuan to let her do whatever she wants. A lot of students here break my imagination.

The students’ lackadaisical attitude toward their studies and their somewhat irreverent attitude toward their teachers was also attributed to the parents’ lack of education, with one teacher speculating that the students were:

Naughty because they all come from the countryside. Maybe the education foundation of the parents is lower. So their foundation may be not very good (Angela).

Angela’s observation adroitly highlights the precarious position that the students and the parents occupied within the middle-class as the *nouveau riche*. Whilst they possessed economic capital, they did not necessarily possess the cultural capital that is a marker of cosmopolitanism (i.e., cultural capital accrued through international travel and sojourns...
abroad). That cultural capital would be duly cultivated by sending their children to an international school and on to an overseas university. Young (2018) has described this type of social position as “precarious.” Newly-minted middle-class families have entered the middle-class, but have yet to establish a firm foothold. Once again, international education becomes a strategy for Chinese parents to consolidate and advance a middle-class trajectory. It would appear that for some middle-class Chinese parents, the impact of COVID-19 had produced unexpected benefits, as the vacancies from which their children would normally be excluded (or would struggle to secure) were now available due to the more highly qualified students abandoning their plans to study abroad and choosing instead to study in a local school.

**Teachers’ Restricted Use of Pedagogy**

The students’ lack of English also limited the kinds of teaching strategies that the teachers could employ. Derick, for example, was keen to make use of a variety of teaching approaches, but felt constrained by the students’ lack of English:

> It’s pretty difficult going for the student-centered approach because their English foundation is not very good, especially the students we have here, their English is quite poor. So having students lead the class and asking them to answer questions doesn’t work well.

Another teacher, Rosanna, also expressed the same frustration as Derick:

> That’s the reason why I think it’s really hard to do some activities to get them involved, because they fail to understand you, and they fail to give you anything. Maybe they have some ideas, but they feel hard to translate it into English or they are not confident enough to express themselves. That makes our class harder (Rosanna).

The issue of time also factored into some of the teachers choosing to abandon student-centered approaches, which are generally considered to be effective for scaffolding critical thinking, in order to utilize more teacher-centered approaches:

> I’m a little bit teacher-centered because I have limited time out there teaching. I only have 12 months to finish IGCSE courses and IGCSE courses in Britain cost like two years. So I can’t be too student-centered, I won’t have time to finish the reports (Terry).

Student-centered activities were also difficult to implement as they often led to issues with discipline and classroom management:

> I try to focus on student-centered approaches, but they sometimes lose control or lose their interest in English, so it’s hard for them to be the centre, especially in the input classes like reading and listening (Rosanna).

The need to control the students and to ensure that enough content was being covered resulted in many teachers leaning heavily on teacher-centered learning strategies, which forced the students to adopt a passive attitude toward their learning. The findings suggest that the teachers were forced to utilize the same teaching strategy (largely teacher-centered) in order to deal with the students’ disengagement, which was the result of their low level of English. In fact, our interviews revealed that most of the teachers had a good grasp of pedagogical approaches, but were unsure of how to deploy them in their current situation.

Despite the difficulties, the teachers had developed a number of strategies to deal with the students’ lack of English. Patrick, who taught Chemistry, explained that:

> I would say basically it is an ESL (English as a Second Language) class at this point. How do you use these words in a sentence? And bringing them to the lab. I’ll show them a piece of equipment. It’s basically like teaching my daughter, who’s four and a half. ‘Okay, this is what? A measuring cylinder (Patrick).

Harry, who taught Physical Education, also attempted to build the students’ vocabulary by “making a glossary list of difficult words and definitions,” but he felt that this was not enough, as the students did not possess a firm enough linguistic “foundation” on which to scaffold more sophisticated vocabulary/language. As he put it, “you need to have enough language knowledge to level yourself up.” The expatriate teachers’ approach to scaffolding new vocabulary, though a well-meaning and expedient way to deal with the students’ lack of linguistic foundations, nevertheless positioned the students in deficit terms. As Sally noted, the students had “acquired inability. They are used to failure. They are used to being unable to learn.” Treating the students as “incomplete” international students could reinforce the students’ “acquired inability.” However, whilst it is necessary for teachers to find a balance between expediency and empathy, it is clear that the reality of the situation made doing this difficult. This created a paradox: the teachers needed and, based on our interviews, wanted to treat the students as mature and independent learners, yet the situation precluded the development of empathetic foundations.

The Chinese teachers had also developed a number of strategies for helping the students to understand the content in English:

> I want to say that there is a bridge for them to learn English easier. If I ask you to learn Chinese, you will say that it’s just really hard, right? That’s because nobody told you that these two languages have similarities. I help my students build a general structure of English, and if they don’t know how to say a word, I ask them to first say it in Chinese (Jean).

About two-thirds of the students can understand what I have introduced in the class. And about one-third of the students
cannot understand me. I introduce the knowledge most in Chinese during my teaching, so that all students could understand me better (Rosanna).

It would appear that the Chinese faculty were in something of an advantageous position compared to their expatriate counterparts, as they were able to utilize their students’ first language in order to scaffold new linguistic and conceptual knowledge. Meanwhile, the strategies employed by Harry and Patrick had limited efficacy, although the expatriate teachers were able to offer native-like abilities (in terms of accent and accuracy). Whilst the Chinese teachers were able to scaffold new knowledge more easily, the over-reliance on Chinese limited opportunities for students to listen to and use English, as illustrated by Patrick who observed that the students’ exposure to English was “limited to only one period a day, maybe two. Basically, your Chinese teachers are teaching all subjects in Chinese.”

Discussion
The findings reveal a number of tensions that impacted the teachers’ deployment of pedagogic strategies and the students’ motivation. The first tension relates to the students’ language proficiency. In order to develop a firm linguistic foundation, the students needed to be in an immersive English environment. Yet, because the students did not have this foundation, the teachers had to lean heavily on the students’ mother-tongue, as well as teacher-centered approaches, in order to help them access the content of the curriculum. The teachers attempted to introduce student-centered learning activities into their classes, but often found this difficult due to the students’ motivation and their lack of English proficiency.

The second tension relates to the school’s reputation. As the principal told us, “the exam results are an urgent task. As the school is new, and has struggled with its reputation and recruitment, it is essential that we achieve excellent results.” For example, the school was forced to admit students who did not meet the entrance requirements in order to hit recruitment targets and, presumably, remain profitable. Striking a balance between profit and quality is no easy task, particularly in a market as competitive as the internationalized school market in China, which continues to expand at an incredible rate (Gaskell, 2019). Striking this balance becomes even more difficult for schools like SCIS, which are located outside of urban centers like Shanghai and Beijing, and therefore struggle to recruit students and teaching staff. The impact of COVID-19 had exacerbated this situation, with many of the prospective students who met the school’s entrance requirements choosing to opt out of studying abroad altogether and, instead, enrolling in local high schools.

The final tension relates to the parents’ expectations for their child(ren) to be accepted by an overseas university, preferably one that was considered prestigious. Although we were unable to interview the parents directly, we were able to infer the parents’ motivation, largely from the counsellor, Laura. However, we acknowledge that this only provides a partial picture, and it could very well be that the parents’ motivations were more nuanced than presented here. At the time of data collection, the school had yet to graduate any students, so there was not any evidence of whether the students were able to accomplish their plan of studying at an overseas university. The parents’ expectations, as reported by the teachers, were also at odds with the reality of the situation. Patrick summarized this paradox well: “What you’re telling me is my poorest performing student isn’t good enough to go to China’s number 700th ranked university, but they’re perfectly okay to go to Harvard.” The parents’ “unrealistic” expectations can be explained in terms of social class making aspirations—the parents were consolidating their precarious position in the middle-class through their children, many of whom were from a single-child family. The parents were staking a great deal on their children’s future success. This situation was not unique to SCIS, but is something of a universal phenomenon in China (Hu & Hagedorn, 2014). The parents expected a great deal from the school, which needed to ensure that the students got into a good overseas university. Yet at the same time, the conditions for achieving success were not yet securely in place. This put the school, the teachers, and the students in a precarious position, all of which was exacerbated by the emergence of COVID-19.

It must be reiterated that we are not trying to position non-urban internationalized schools as inherently inferior to schools in urban contexts. During our interviews, we found many positive aspects about the school and the teachers, including a strong sense of community and a positive and open attitude toward professional learning. However, the findings made it clear that the teachers and students struggled a great deal, and these struggles could be traced back to the school’s location. Rather than an indictment of non-urban internationalized schools, this paper presents the “reality” of such schools, a reality that is both similar to, yet different from, internationalized schools in urban contexts. This gestures toward a more nuanced understanding of internationalized schools, which hitherto have tended to be interpreted through the lens of urban privilege.

However, it is necessary to recognize that regardless of context, internationalized schools typically cater to elites. Therefore, we should also be conscious of the ways in which internationalized schools in non-urban contexts reproduce social inequality, although it is likely to be somewhat different than international schools/internationalized schools in urban contexts. Rather than viewing internationalized schools
In terms of an urban/non-urban dichotomy, it might be more useful to conceive of them as falling along a continuum of privilege, with urban and non-urban representing the poles. Whilst both contexts are privileged, the nature of that privilege and precarity (i.e., struggles) will be mediated, amongst other things, by the school’s location.

**Implications**

Based on the tensions identified in the previous section, we explore implications for teachers and school leaders. These implications will be of relevance to schools like the one in this case study—that is, newly opened, internationalized in nature, located in tier-3 and tier-4 localities, with students whose English language skills are not sufficient to undertake study at GCSE and A’ Level.

**Teachers**

Teachers need to realize that second language learners are not necessarily lazy and certainly not inherently deficient. The findings suggest that many of students were demotivated because they felt overwhelmed by the linguistic demands of the curriculum. Therefore, they should not be blamed for not possessing the necessarily English language skills. Our interviews implicated the students’ lack of exposure to English in their households (due to their parents being newly minted middle-class), as well as during their primary and middle-school years, as factors that limited their English development.

One way to dismantle this deficit discourse is for teachers to adopt an asset-based approach to understanding their learners. Rather than defining students based on what they do not possess (i.e., “weak” English learners), an asset-based approach assumes that all students, regardless of their background (such as linguistic ability) are fundamentally competent and come to the classroom with a wealth of skills, experiences, and bodies of knowledge that are typically not recognized by teachers as having epistemological value. These excluded assets have been referred to as funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016). Funds of knowledge/identity represent a diverse repertoire of cultural and linguistic resources that students use in their out-of-school lives and which, amongst other things, include a student’s mother-tongue (L1), hobbies, family occupations, and family values and traditions.

We found some evidence of funds of knowledge being used intuitively by the teachers in this study. The Chinese teachers, for example, talked about using the students’ first language (Mandarin) as a way to scaffold the students into the content in English. This was relatively easy for the Chinese teachers as they shared the same language as the students. However, their use of the students’ L1 as a scaffold was utilized in a somewhat ad hoc manner. Utilizing a funds of knowledge approach would require teachers to think more systematically about how their students’ L1 could be incorporated into the curriculum. Whilst there is a danger that the L1 could be over-used to the detriment of the development of English, teachers should nevertheless consider their students’ L1 as an invaluable resource. If teachers can identify and mobilize their students’ funds of knowledge/identity they will be in a better position to view students more positively and also incorporate their funds of knowledge/identity into the curriculum, which might help to deal with the language/motivational issues. This approach would work particularly well for foreign teachers, who may struggle to understand their Chinese students due to the cultural and language gap.

**School Leaders**

School leaders need to be aware that the school’s location will limit the quality and number of staff they can recruit. Highly qualified teachers (i.e., those with teaching qualifications and experience teaching in their home countries) will most likely flock to metropolitan cities like Shanghai and Beijing, where salaries are higher. This leaves a relatively small pool of teachers from which schools outside of Tier-1 and 2 cities can recruit. These teachers are likely to be less experienced and qualified than their counter-parts in cities like Shanghai and Beijing.

Given this reality, the most practical strategy for leaders to best support teachers is by investing in high quality ongoing professional development that would lead to the teachers’ obtaining some form of teaching qualification. Examples include The University of Nottingham’s PGCEi (Post Graduate Certificate in Education International) and Buckingham University’s “PGCE-China,” a teaching qualification tailored to China and host country teachers. Not only could long-term professional development expand the teachers’ repertoire of pedagogical strategies, it might also help to retain teachers. Referred to colloquially as “golden handcuffs,” teachers are usually required to “pay back” professional development costs through post-qualification service to the school (perhaps 2–3 years). If they leave before this time, they will usually have to cover the professional development costs themselves.

If the finances for long-term professional development are not available then school leaders might want to consider investing in smaller, short-term courses, such as Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). CLIL is focused on the integration of both subject content and language learning, rather than merely emphasizing language itself (Sépešlová, 2015). Whilst there is a prevailing view within International Schools that every teacher is a language teacher, the general attitude in SCIS was that content teachers did not consider it their job to “teach ESL,” viewing it as the sole responsibility
of the English department. As Kelly remarked, “the teachers just teach their content syllabus. They are not here to teach English.” School leaders might also consider setting up a Professional Learning Community (PLC) as a way to implement CLIL. A PLC aims to establish a trusting professional learning environment between teachers who share similar goals and cultures of teaching. Unlike prevailing and normative forms of professional development, such as lectures, workshops, and observations, which are chiefly top-down initiatives conducted and delivered by school leaders and experts in the fields, a PLC is self-sustaining and self-directed. PLCs are particularly effective in supporting teachers’ pedagogical needs.

Conclusion
This paper has added to research on international schooling in China by exploring a type of international school—internationally standardized and non-urban—that has yet to be fully explored by researchers, who have instead focused on schools in tier-1 cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing. Our study adds to Young’s (2018) study of a “remedial” international school, which highlighted how such schools offer students opportunities for alternative progress in the Chinese educational system. Whilst international schools offer Chinese students an alternative pathway to that of the national curriculum, our study also suggests that some students are also likely to struggle when transitioning from public schooling to private, internationalized schooling. This is evidenced by the students’ relatively low English proficiency and their lack of motivation.

This study could have been augmented by interviewing the teachers and administrators to understand the experience of teaching in English. Moreover, we were unable to do this at the time of data collection due to logistical and ethical constraints (arranging interviews with students via WeChat would be difficult to arrange, as the students would be in class for most of the day). This is a limitation that needs to be acknowledged, but which subsequent research will need to address. Access to the students’ perspective would also allow us to explore how the students perceived their teachers and the efficacy of the strategies used for English language teaching.

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ORCID iD
Adam Poole https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5948-0705

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