

As Others See us

ICP President Elect Peter Kent writes about Ethical Leadership in the UK and how much he has gained from working with ICP

The poet John Donne famously wrote that 'no man is an island'. In education we can extend that metaphor to say that no school or education system is an island. Whether we realise it or not, part of our moral duty as leaders is to foster connection and learning across as broad a canvas as possible. Part of that moral duty is to encourage our staff and students to look beyond the boundaries of our own schools, regions and countries.

When serving as ASCL President in 2014-15 I attended the Helsinki Convention of the International Confederation of Principals, the only group that aims to represent school leaders worldwide. Having gained a huge amount from the chance to compare notes with leaders across the world, I stood for election to ICP's Executive and since then have tried to play my part in fostering these worldwide connections.

Spending time with my international colleagues is a fascinating experience. Conversations over dinner normally start with 'So... Brexit... can you explain it to me?' If anything, question two tends to be even harder to answer 'And your schools? How are they organised? I am not sure that I understand how your system fits together?'

I found it fascinating to host the Executive of ICP when they attended ASCL's conference in Birmingham. Colleagues from areas as diverse as South Africa, Australia, Kenya, Ontario and Shanghai sat through two days of high quality seminars and keynotes that explored the main elements of our education system.

As we discussed the conference, my colleagues were hugely appreciative of the hospitality that they had been shown and emphasised how much they had enjoyed meeting English school leaders. However, it was their questions that stuck particularly in my mind:

- *Why are you so bothered about results and how to measure things?*
- *Why is everyone so frightened of Ofsted?*
- *What is the common direction that you are all going in?*
- *When do you all celebrate together?*

Some aspects of the conference did have a strong resonance with them. I think that all of my colleagues were encouraged to be reminded that some parts of the leadership experience, such as making do with limited resources, dealing with challenging parents or responding to aspects of accountability are pretty well universal. Informal conversations with English colleagues over coffee only emphasised the need for an organisation such as ICP which allows school leaders across the world to spend time together sharing their experiences and learning from one another.

The aspect of the English system that particularly interested ICP delegates was our current focus upon ethical leadership. As one colleague from Australia observed 'We all agree that you need to do the right thing- the problem is, how do you know what it is?' In the UK we are trying to work through what 'do the right thing' means in a highly autonomous system, where large elements of decision taking is left to the headteacher and their leadership team. In more centralised systems, or areas where resources are more limited, the questions and answers linked to ethical leadership may well be rather different. However, the challenge to 'do the right thing' is consistent, wherever one works in the world.

There is no doubt that English schools and those who lead them are respected across the globe. However, despite the admiration felt by my international colleagues, our focus upon comparing one school with another and the fragmentation often seen in our system does cause surprise. I must admit that I also struggled to explain why our accountability system places such a burden upon schools and those that lead them.

Perhaps instead of John Donne, a better poet to express my experience with ICP is Robert Burns, who wished that some power would *the gift give us to see ourselves as others see us*. Despite some fuzziness and smudges, that reflection in the international mirror should encourage all of us to seize the chance to learn from and share ideas with our colleagues from across the world.