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International K-12 Schools Seeking U.S. Accreditation: An Analysis of the Rationales Involved in Earning Accreditation Through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Kerri Knapp
SIT Graduate Institute

INTERNATIONAL K-12 SCHOOLS SEEKING U.S. ACCREDITATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RATIONALES INVOLVED IN EARNING ACCREDITATION THROUGH THE WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Kerri Pike Knapp
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Adviser: Dr. Sora H. Friedman, Professor of International & Global Education; Chair, MA in

International Education programs

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Dedication/Acknowledgements

I could write a separate capstone just for acknowledgements because these last two years have been trying, to say the least. Only one other time in my life did so many challenging events converge into a two-year time span. This would be the second of such convergences and the fact that this capstone has been completed and accepted is historic, to me at least.

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I dedicate this capstone to those I lost these last two years. Babies unmet, Wally, Gus, aunties, friends, and *too many* others. Your tears are in this work and my heart beats for you. I hope you've met one another wherever you are. Say "hi" to my dad. Thank you. I love you.

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List of Abbreviations

ACS WASC	Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges
ACSI	Association of Christian Schools International
CIS	Council for International Schools
CPS-NEASC	New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Public Schools
FOL	Focus on Learning
GCE	Global Citizenship Education
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
IB	International Baccalaureate
IC	International Consultant
IRB	Institutional Review Board
ISC	International Schools Consortium
MSA-CESS	Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools
SIT	School for International Training
UN	United Nations

ABSTRACT

The international K-12 school market is growing fast, and new international schools are opening every year. Hundreds of those international K-12 schools seek out accreditation to help validate their institution's authenticity. Accreditation allows potential students and families to trust that the education provided is legitimate according to a set of principles and standards provided by the accreditation organization. Colleges and universities, particularly those in the United States, where thousands of international students strive to be accepted, typically require students to matriculate from an accredited school. With this market growth comes a need for accountability, and therein lies accreditation. The United States has four regional accreditation organizations who accredit both domestic and international schools, but this study focuses on just one organization, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). This qualitative study explores various rationales provided by participants using Grounded Theory as the method and institutional theory as the theoretical framework. This paper examines the institutional legitimacy aspect of institutional theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four staff members at WASC, and eight experienced WASC leaders at various international K-12 schools in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The interviews sought out insights and rationales to understand why schools chose WASC, considering the time, expense, and cultural considerations involved. This study concludes that WASC accreditation is, in fact, worth the cost and effort required. However, like the WASC Focus on Learning self-study process itself, there are areas of commendation, and areas for growth. The results provide direction for the both the WASC organization as well as international K-12 schools considering pursuing accreditation.

Keywords: accreditation, WASC, international, international school, K-12, Grounded Theory, institutional theory, institutional legitimacy, evaluation, global citizenship

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Introduction

History of International Schools

The dramatic growth of the international school market is catching the attention of researchers world-wide. International School Consortium (ISC) Research (2023) published a White Paper titled *Why more international schools keep opening* that addressed why the international K-12 school market is continuing to gain momentum globally. Their research from February 2023 notes that "in the last ten years, the number of international schools around the world has increased by 52%, from 8,700 schools in January 2013 to 13,190 schools in January 2023" (p. 4). This increase in the number of international K-12 schools has resulted "in a 53% growth in student [ages three to 18] enrollment over the last ten years, from 4.2 million students…in 2013, to 6.5 million students" today (p. 6). Historically, international schools were created to provide schooling for the children of expatriates, military personnel, or "diasporic communities," etc.; however, that history is changing (Morris, 2022, p. 151). Additionally, researchers are finding that "international schools vary extensively in the standard of their educational provision, facilities, and tuition fees" (ISC Research, p. 4). Bunnell (2022) described the unwieldly concept of international education, noting: "Put simply, the role of international school is always changing, and the past does not always match the future" (p. 53).

Much of the growth in international schooling over the last ten years has been in the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Wu and Koh, 2022; ISC Research, 2023). According to ISC Research (2023), 57 percent of the entire market for the number international K-12 schools is in Asia. Furthermore, 64 percent of all student enrollment in international K-12 schools is in Asia

(p. 7). In comparison, the same research shows a "stability of enrollment and international school development across Europe but no evidence of overall decline" (p. 21). Compared to Asia, the growth of the number of international K-12 schools in Europe over the last five years has only increased by four percent (p. 21) and Europe only represents 18 percent of the entire international K-12 school market (p. 7). Interestingly, the market in China has shifted because the Chinese government has put limits on the number of Chinese students who can attend an international school in China. This is forcing families to emigrate to other places, primarily Southeastern Asia to access international education for their children (p. 17). The growth of local children attending international K-12 schools in their own country is one of the greatest indicators of the global expansion of international schooling (Yemini, et al., 2022, p. 2).

When focused on Middle East, excluding Egypt, research shows that this area "continues to be the leading subregion of the world for the enrollment of children in international schools. As of January 2023, there were 1,909,800 students attending international schools in Western Asia" (ISC Research, 2023, p. 19). The authors also explain that in this subregion, enrollment has increased six percent over five years, in part because the number of international K-12 schools in the region "has increased from 1,900 to 2,050" (p. 19). With this ever-changing idea of international education in mind, researchers are implored to find ways to qualify the legitimacy of international K-12 schools.

**History of Accreditation**

The two primary purposes for seeking accreditation, which are globally accepted, include "quality assurance (a status) and quality improvement (a process)" (Phillips and Kinser, 2018 as cited by Groves and George, p. 23). Bunnell (2022) validates the practical role of accreditation, noting, "International Schooling traditionally has had a pragmatic mode of activity which has

also always seemingly been positively received" (p. 41). Groves and George (2022) also concede that many international schools will use the accreditation process as leverage to help improve their schools and ultimately foster student growth (p. 27). Thus, external agencies are needed to foster the accreditation process.

Groves and George (2022) explain that the first school evaluation tool, created in the 1930s, was used for 35 years and "had a major impact on American secondary school education" (p. 19). Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a shift in focus around school improvement, prompting the questions: "What are the characteristics of an educated person, and what are the characteristics of a good school?" (Groves and George, p. 19). The full history of accreditation in the United States is lengthy, but the major themes presented note that there is always change, and change promotes growth, which improves student learning.

In the United States, there are four regional accreditation agencies that work at the secondary level. Kenney (2020) provided a brief overview of the regional accrediting agencies including: Cognia, which oversees accreditation in the north-central, northwest, and southern regions in the United States; the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CESS); the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Public Schools (CPS-NEASC); and Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC). The two tables below display maps of the territories loosely covered by each agency, including how the Cognia consortium is laid out geographically. It should be noted that the regional agencies described below are all private, not-for-profit organizations and participation in the process is voluntary (Elgart, 2023, p. 5).

Figure 1

The Six Regional U.S.-Based Accreditation Agencies and Their Territories
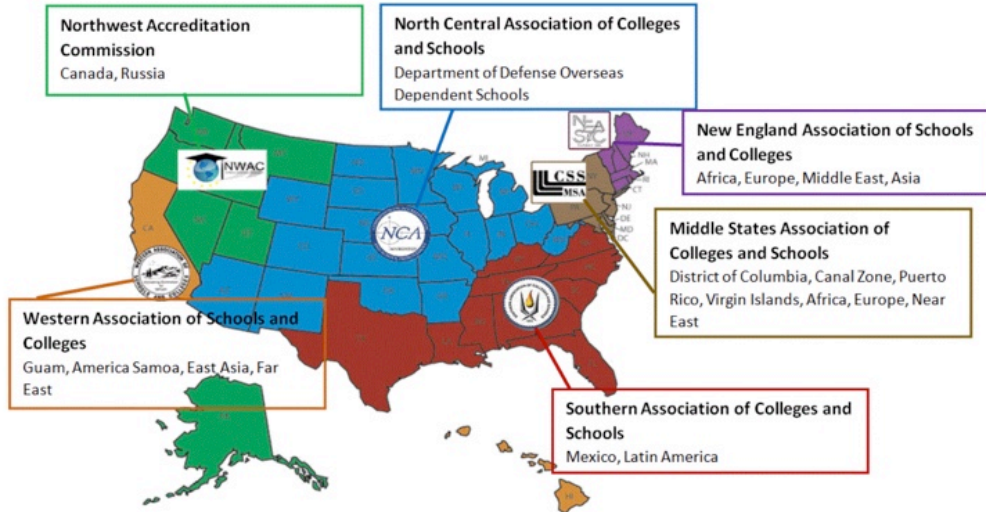
Source: Texas Education Agency (n.d.).

Figure 2

The Accreditation Agencies with the Cognia Consortium Subsidiaries, 2020
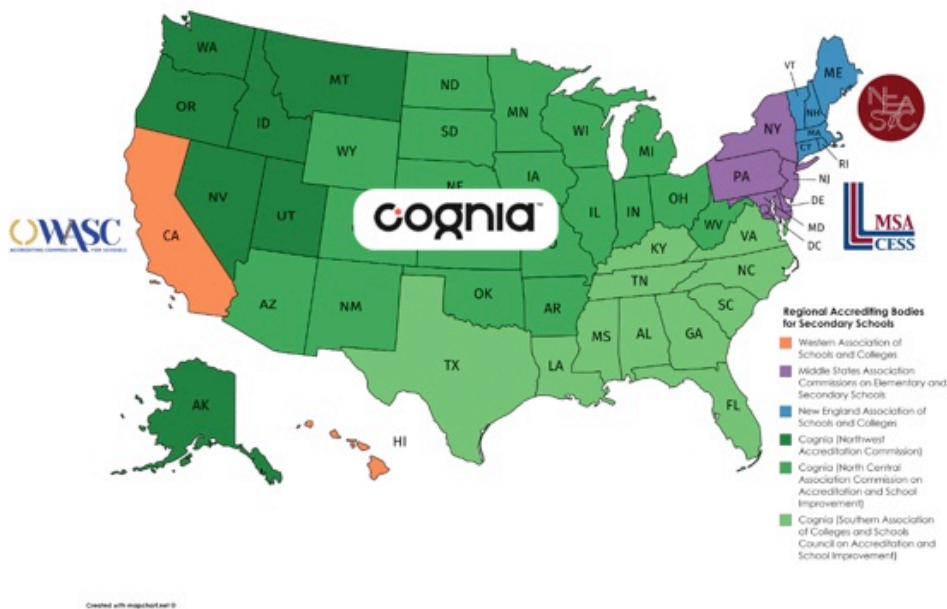
Source: Anjilee Stevens, Mountain Point Academy, 2020.

Most colleges and universities in the United States require that students have graduated from an accredited school; however, this is not always the case for students who study at international schools (Groves & George, 2022). In this case, an international school is defined as international because it is outside the borders of the United States and is not a Department of Defense school. If a student applies to a university with a high school transcript from a non-accredited school, it is up to the university admissions office to determine whether the courses on the student's transcript are acceptable or not.

WASC Accreditation

As of April 2023, WASC had accredited 5,223 schools, 560 of which were international schools (*Accrediting Commission*, n.d.). The WASC 60-year history has seen accreditation evolve from one that measures square footage against the number of enrolled students as a measure of success, to one that allows schools the opportunity to participate in a reflective self-study process. Accreditation exists to ensure that all students can learn; although, what "all" means is being debated. Thus, current WASC leaders believe that the accreditation process has, in fact, evolved into one that goes well beyond educational semantics and that truly allows the accreditation process to change schools fundamentally for the betterment of children's education (Groves and George, 2022, p. 3).

WASC does have its own Mission, which offers insight into their purpose and expectations for schools. It reads:

> ACS WASC advances and validates quality ongoing school improvement by supporting its private and public elementary, secondary, and post-secondary member institutions to engage in a rigorous and relevant self-evaluation and peer review process that focuses on student learning. (ACS WASC Overview, 2020, n.p.)

Currently, the goals of the WASC self-study process for an individual school includes: revising the Mission, Vision, and School-wide Learner Outcomes; identifying areas for growth; and developing an Action Plan. The Action Plan details how the school will work towards its self-identified goals throughout the entire self-study cycle. A visiting committee of trained volunteers from within the education field then reviews the provided report and visits the school for three days (Groves & George, 2022). Everyone from superintendents to students can participate on a visiting committee. In 2021-2022, WASC had 5,229 volunteers serve on a visiting committee (*Accrediting Commission*, n.d.). The goal of the visiting committee is to validate the school's report and make a recommendation regarding the terms of accreditation to the Commission, which has the final say in awarding accreditation (Groves & George, 2022). The goal of the visiting committee is not to investigate what the school is doing wrong or prescribe explicit changes, but to provide feedback on the school's Action Plan and recommend a feasible term of accreditation.

Costs for all schools (domestic and international) involve yearly membership fees, fees to submit various applications, hosting a visiting committee, training administrators and coordinators, and a possible stipend or salary for the site coordinator. Paying the site coordinator is not a WASC requirement, thus schools approach such compensation in a variety of ways: stipends, hourly pay, reduced teaching load so the work fits within the workday, etc. It is up to each school to decide who the site coordinator will be and how they will be compensated (if compensation applies). The cost of hosting a visiting committee includes all food, housing, and transportation. Transportation for international visits includes the cost of international flights and any visa fees. If a substitute teacher is required to cover the teacher's classes because the teacher is serving on a WASC visiting committee, then that cost is covered by the visiting committee

member's school. When a person volunteers for a visiting committee, it is with their principal's permission, and that permission includes a willingness to cover the cost of a substitute teacher. According to Indeed.com the average daily rate for a substitute teacher in California is $183, with a range from $60 to $360 (*Substitute teacher salary,* 2023).

Internationally, WASC provides an international consultant (IC) to provide more personalized and customized one-on-one training for any aspect of the WASC process. This could include training on how to work with boards and trustees, strategies for getting all stakeholders involved, understanding the verbiage required to be successful, and so on. The ICs can also provide small group trainings to governing boards, senior leadership, teachers, staff, etc. In addition, WASC trainings are offered virtually or in-person and are free.

This study explored the WASC accreditation of international K-12 schools. Currently, on the homepage of their website, WASC claims that over 560 international schools have sought out WASC accreditation (*Accrediting Commission*, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, an international school had to meet three requirements to be considered. First, it had to be located outside the borders of the United States and its territories. Second, it had to serve an international population of students, meaning not just its own population of local students. The third requirement was that it had to serve within a K-12 population.

This study also explored why these schools pursued WASC accreditation and if the process was worth the considerable time and expense involved. WASC defines accreditation as: "A self-renewal and reflection and a collaborative self-evaluation of the school's program and its impact on student learning and well-being" (Groves & George, 2022, p. 9). The WASC Focus on Learning (FOL) self-study process is an elaborate, 15 to 18-month process that a school undertakes to earn accreditation status. For international K-12 schools, WASC requires that the

work be done in English and the visit is conducted primarily in English, although, the school may provide translators if needed. International schools procure accreditation every six years, and a mid-term report and visit are required. (Domestically, schools typically get accredited every seven years with the mid-term visit being required only if needed.) If done earnestly, the self-study report is meant to reflect an honest assessment of various aspects of the school, including areas of success and areas for growth. Visiting committee members are trained to validate the report's findings and not necessarily to find flaws or missing information, although that can sometimes happen. Overall, the process is meant to help a school continuously reflect and improve, which is generally considered an exemplary academic practice. This research has helped to determine that earning WASC accreditation is worth the time and cost involved for international K-12 schools.

Researcher Experience

I have been involved with WASC in several capacities over the last 15 years of my secondary teaching career. The two high schools I have worked at have been through three full self-study cycles. From 2016 to 2020, I was the WASC coordinator at my public school site in northern California and was responsible for involving all stakeholders in the self-study process. This included writing the full report, seeking School Board approval, and then organizing and hosting a four-day visiting committee. Three years later, I followed a similar process involving a shorter mid-term report and virtual visit (a pandemic shift). In fact, my library was used to film part of the WASC promotional video featuring some of our administrators (ACS WASC, 2021). I have also served on nine visiting committees to various schools that included full self-study reports, mid-term reports, a substantial change visit, and a preliminary visit. These included public high schools, a public school for the Deaf, and private K-12 schools. Through these visits,

I learned about migrant education and services, bilingual education (American Sign Language and English, and Spanish and English), religious-based instruction (Mennonite), as well as the scope of district policies and politics that exist in the greater northern California region. I have been on teams that have recommended to the Commission a variety of accreditation statuses. However, I have not yet served on an international school accreditation visit.

Throughout the graduate program in International Education at SIT, I have produced several posts and small assignments in which I reflected on the scope of my accreditation work. The work I produced for SIT around accreditation has allowed me to realize that this could be a future career path. I have always enjoyed the work of accreditation and have been quoted many times stating that "Serving on a WASC visiting committee is the best professional development out there." In my experience, administrators are typically supportive of their staff serving on WASC visiting committees to other regional schools because it is useful to have knowledgeable staff to help with their own school's next report. In addition, visiting committee members are exposed to a variety of school routines and philosophies that expand their own practice and that they can share with their own school sites.

The research question asked: To what extent do international K-12 schools define and find value in seeking accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, a U.S.-based organization, considering the work, cost, and intercultural contexts involved?

The theoretical framework applied to the research was institutional theory, which was based on the work of Bunnell et al., (2016), who were inspired by the work of W. Richard Scott (2014). The theory they developed posited that "the need to remain competitive as more students go to 'international' schools [require that] the schools need to be legitimate" (Bunnell, et al., p. 413). With more students being drawn to international schools, and hundreds of new

international schools opening, the question of legitimacy became paramount: "The notion of legitimacy brings with it a sense of an acceptance and an alignment between an institution's mores and the institution's practices and the expectations of those in the institution's environment and context in which it is located" (Bunnell, et al., p. 413). Yemini et al., (2022) concurred noting, "Only recently has the expansion of international schooling and its implications come under scrutiny" (p. 3), which paved a pathway for accreditation agencies to thrive. Accreditation, such as that offered by WASC, allows schools to achieve this legitimacy through their evidence-based self-study process in an international education forum. "Institutions calling themselves 'schools' should actively provide evidence to justify their continued existence and to support and establish their legitimacy" (Bunnell, et al., p. 413). The evidence necessary to establish legitimacy is clearly outlined in the WASC self-study process; therefore, if a school adheres to the WASC process it should be able to prove its legitimacy and be able to compete for enrollment more effectively. Ultimately, accreditation is a form of legitimacy. In their 2017 study of WASC, Davis and Fultz explained: "Accreditation is an empirically-grounded process for guiding and facilitating ongoing organizational renewal, transformation, and development that is aligned with a school's core values, mission, vision, schoolwide learner outcomes with the ultimate goal to provide powerful learning and teaching for every student" (p. 11). More on institutional theory will be presented later in the theoretical framework section.

Groves and George (2022) recognized that "there is a clear need for more thorough research and resulting actions to support what is the inherent power for transformation through the accrediting process" (p. 21). Therefore, this research is one of the first to qualitatively examine why international K-12 schools seek out WASC accreditation when they have several accreditation bodies from which to choose. Significant time and money are involved in

successfully seeking accreditation, and it is cyclical, so the commitment is ongoing. What value is there for the school? How are schools defining value? This study examined the reasons why international K-12 schools are choosing to earn WASC accreditation at higher rates every year, and potentially help other schools determine if WASC accreditation is appropriate for them.

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Literature Review

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This literature review focused on three topics: accreditation and evaluation, international K-12 schools, and global citizenship. Each had a specific and unique value. WASC has not conducted research specific to international K-12 schools.

Accreditation and Evaluation

Understanding how accreditation and evaluation are defined, as well as how they do (or do not) work together, is the seminal foundation for this project. Weiss (1998) explored several themes associated with accreditation. Weiss began by setting the scene, which defined evaluation extensively, addressed what, exactly, is being evaluated during an evaluation, an overview of outcomes and processes, a historical primer, and a comparison outlining some differences and similarities among the evaluation cannon. Her early work helped to clarify the work of Kenney (2020) who interviewed several current and past superintendents in California regarding their experiences with WASC. Kenney mentioned that the superintendents stated that WASC helps schools remain relevant and puts students at the center of the work, thereby identifying key players in the process. The notion of relevance has also become important to school leadership. Huang et al. (2016) discovered that international school leaders will take the initiative to discern their schools from others. To do so, "they take some or all of the following actions: securing accreditation from recognized organizations, for example U.S. regional accrediting agencies; offering specialized curricula such as the International Baccalaureate; and hiring highly qualified

credentialed teachers" (p. 6). Exploring how different schools define and see value in the WASC process was critical to understanding why they chose to go through it at all, particularly since there are other evaluation agencies available.

To measure the efficacy of these evaluative processes it is vital to understand the core purposes of evaluation and what organizations seek to gain by means of their participation. Weiss (1998) defined what type of organization seeks out evaluations by examining both overt and covert purposes behind evaluation (p. 20). She explained conditions that are unfavorable for evaluations, how to use evaluations to inform organizations in a multitude of ways, the differences between formative and summative evaluations, how evaluations are commissioned, and the key actors involved. The explanations served as a compass for future work with evaluation and accreditation. Weiss noted:

> The question for the evaluator to keep in mind is: Do the conditions that led to evaluation
>
> hold promise that people will give considered attention to the findings, either now or in
>
> the future? If there's a chance of it, and the resources are adequate, let's do it. (p. 28)

These questions complimented the research by Blanco Ramirez and Luu (2018), who noted that animosity can arise between administration, the site WASC coordinator, and the staff, during the accreditation process. Understanding the purpose behind a school's decision to seek accreditation could potentially help curb potential animosities, but only if all parties agree regarding purpose. When considering the commitment over time, the authors noted: "One important takeaway from this study is the acknowledgment that decisions about assessment and accreditation…are not discrete episodes but they are long processes with long-term implications" (p. 999). The long-term implications of accreditation on a school and a school culture need to be further studied and analyzed, especially in terms of perceived and experienced animosity.

Lastly, Weiss (1998) laid out the steps necessary for planning the evaluation (p. 72). Weiss discussed the right time to evaluate, types of evaluation questions, nuanced decisions in the planning period, deciding which questions to pursue, how and why to specify questions, differences between quantitative and qualitative studies, designing the evaluation, practical plans and ideas, as well as ethical issues to consider**.**

One example of an ethical consideration, which is also a necessary step for earning accreditation, concerns the debate around English language policies. Lehman and Welch (2020) discussed language policies and how they are used at international schools (or not used). The presence of language policies, their potential usefulness, and the knowledge a staff may (or may not) have regarding such a policy within a school can help or hinder an accreditation process. Lehman and Welch (2020) noted that "some schools are submitting language policies as artifacts or evidence without ever implementing the policies…[and that] accreditation teams are not looking deep enough for proof of policy implementation" (p. 14).

A minimum of 50 percent of school instruction should be in English to qualify for WASC accreditation, according to WASC staff. In addition, all paperwork submitted to WASC must be in English. Visits are conducted in English; however, if a translator is needed the school must provide one. Considering "only 19% of all 'International Schools' are accredited (Fraser, 2019; [cited by Bunnell, 2022]) and only 30% belong to a regional association" such as WASC it begs the question of whether or not the English language requirement is a hinderance. Suspin & González (2020) followed an international school through its first full accreditation visit using in-depth, structured interviews, which were conducted in English. Their work crossed the divide between understanding the purpose of a language policy and the value that understanding could have when evaluating a school. Their findings addressed issues and challenges specific to their

school that arose and then compared those to the WASC reports of other international schools. Organization for student learning, curriculum development, academic and personal support, resource management and development, bilingual education standards, and professional development for boarding staff, were some of the areas identified for comparison and growth.

An additional critical consideration of accreditation is that of inadvertent homogeneity, especially when English language policies were in place, as was the case with WASC. Coutet (2022) defined institutional isomorphism as "the process of organizations becoming increasingly similar to each other as they become organized into a field" (p. 109). Coutet discovered that the accreditation process could have an isomorphic impact on a school. Additionally, Fertig (2007) noted that "the use of generic indicators has the potential to lead to international schools that are less diverse and more homogeneous" (p. 333). This conclusion regarding a loss of heterogeneity offered an insight worthy of further study since standards are typically intended to bring everyone into rubric-based/standards-based conformity. Meaning, as schools conformed to the accreditation rubric, and used English as their primary language, they lost a bit of their individuality. Thus, there is a concern that schools will become mere facsimiles of one another.

Groves and George (2022) explained that "through a system of regular self-evaluation and peer feedback, grounded in standards and practices developed and validated by educators, accreditation is an ongoing process for challenging, verifying, and updating current strategies for improved educational outcomes" (p. ix). Accreditation asks for an extraordinary amount of work from schools, but Groves and George clearly believe that the method WASC has developed is worth the work. Schools chose WASC because the WASC FOL method is different from other accreditation agencies due to more flexibility allowed throughout the process. It is less about checking boxes and supplying evidence and more about reflection and growth. This means

schools need to write more of a data-driven narrative of their process and philosophy. The authors also acknowledged that there is little research available regarding high school accreditation, especially internationally, noting, "We found few peer-reviewed articles, studies, or dissertations on accreditation, especially accreditation of high schools" (p. 11). Notably, none of the research they cited applied to international schools, despite having over 560 international schools as members of WASC. Consequently, they noted that "more research into the efficacy of accreditation would be a significant asset to the field" (p. 90). The possibilities for future research are identified by Groves and George (2022) throughout their analysis.

International Schools

The history of international schooling is lengthy; therefore, for the purposes of this study, the 1960s has been selected as the starting point because WASC received its official charter in January of 1962. "All regional associations had begun accrediting American/International schools" with one exception in the 1960s (Groves and George, pp. 14-15). Bunnell (2022) cited a study by Leach (1969), who, in the 1960s, "had calculated there were a total of about 400 'International Schools' worldwide, of which just 76 were in Asia (including 15 in the Middle East) educating approximately 80,000 children" (p.44). Additionally, "Brummitt and Keeling (2013) calculated that 30 years ago 80 per cent of international school places were filled by expatriate children and 20 per cent by local children" (Morris, 2022, p. 152). By 2019, during part of an era labeled by Machin (2017) and cited by Bunnell (2022) as the "Great Asian Gold-Rush" (p. 44) international school growth was significant. "In Dubai, there [were] 309 schools, whilst Shanghai [had] 168 and Abu Dhabi [had] 164. Next, Beijing [had] 151 and Doha [had] 144" (Bunnell, pp. 43-44). Clearly, the data shows that international schools have an established foothold in the world and the sheer volume and rapid increase of their presence warrants

consideration for the future.

When looking at the future of international schools, Bunnell (2022) cites research from the *2019 Global Opportunities Report: Looking to the Future*, produced by ISC Research. According to that report, the number of international schools "had increased more than fourfold between 2000 and 2019, from 2,500 (employing 90,000 teachers) to 12,000 schools" (pp. 39-40). He goes on to explain that student enrollment went from "1.0 million in 2000, to 4.3 million in 2015, and 6.0 million in 2020" and it is expected that by 2029 "the number of International Schools globally [will] have reached 19,000…[student enrollment will] have reached 10.6 million, and the number of teachers should have reached one million" (p. 40).

Research was found that explored the challenges for implementing U.S. accreditation abroad. Blanco Ramirez and Luu (2018) revealed that "increased workload, resulting from the accreditation demands, became a source of disagreement between academics and administrators" (p. 989). This disgruntlement had the potential to lead to staff taking a new job elsewhere. Bunnell (2022) elaborated: "Although the bodies of International Schools are well-documented, in practice as organisations, for its micro-politics, high turn-over, and workplace insecurity (Caffy, 2010), the overall role and existence of these organizations has rarely been questioned" (p. 41). When there is a lack of questioning within an organization, there lies a need for accreditation. While there is a need for a standardized accreditation agency, there are concerns about outside agencies as well because "the entry of International Schools in any nation now also involves the discrete and indirect introduction of external agents [like WASC], bringing forward a set of values and funding that might otherwise be opposed" (Bunnell, 2022, p. 47).

Barrett et al. (2019) looked specifically at administrators' experiences with U.S. accreditation including their perceptions of value. One such value included the positive

perception having U.S. accreditation carries in the larger international academic community. These explorations of why administrators made the choice to undergo accreditation provided some insights. There are clear positives and clear negatives that various administrators in different countries have experienced because of seeking U.S. accreditation.

Global Citizenship

The term "global citizenship" and the synonyms used by other individuals and organizations is ubiquitous in scholarship on international schools. Morris (2015) laid the foundation for a globally accepted definition explaining that, "the promulgation of the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations (UN) in 2015," which "identified the promotion of 'global citizenship' as one of its educational goals has resulted in a marked increase in interest in global citizenship and how it can be promoted in schools and measured" (Morris, p. 155). Therefore, the UN definition is the one that will be used for the context of this research. The UN defines global citizenship as:

> Global citizenship is the umbrella term for social, political, environmental, and economic actions of globally minded individuals and communities on a worldwide scale. The term can refer to the belief that individuals are members of multiple, diverse, local and non-local networks rather than single actors affecting isolated societies. Promoting global citizenship in sustainable development will allow individuals to embrace their social responsibility to act for the benefit of all societies, not just their own…By 2030, the international community has agreed to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including global citizenship.
>
> (*Academic Impact*, United Nations, n.d.)

The definition and the assurances mentioned by the UN are precisely the indicators accreditation looks for, and WASC is no exception since they ask schools to create an Action Plan with measurable goals. Bunnell (2022) determined a more practical application regarding one normative view within international schools that has become prevalent, noting that schools are "well-placed to facilitate global peace and sustainability. In this context, any growth of the arena ought in theory to be welcomed and encouraged, acting as a potential benevolent force for good, and counteracting growing nationalism and parochialism within the world" (pp. 40-41). Much of accreditation is focused on areas for growth, such as creating sustainable practices within a school community that will positively serve all students; therefore, research that supported the positive implications of global citizenship abounded.

The research presented a dark side to global citizenship as well. As Howard (2022) explained: "The dominant understanding is that students must go to the west to advance their privilege and power. The skills, knowledge and competencies fostered through global citizenship practices are seen as essential for such outward mobility" (p. 19). In his research, Howard interviewed dozens of school leaders, teachers, alumni, and students at six elite international schools in six countries on five continents (North America and Antarctica were not included) about the Global Citizenship Education (GCE) they received (or provided) and its impact on their lives. He found "at each school, nearly all students plan to migrate to wealthier nations for higher education, mostly to the U.S. and European countries"; noting later that very few students actually returned to their home country after attending university abroad (pp. 18-19). Howard was not the only researcher to uncover frustration. Wu and Koh (2022) also discovered that some schools were too focused on getting students into top colleges and less focused on the learning itself, in part because of fee-paying parents' expectations. One teacher they interviewed stated

that "Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) requiring every G12 homeroom teacher to 'ensure all students in the class be admitted to Top 100 US universities'" (p. 65) put undue stress on teachers to inflate grades and "rescore" papers to see if anything was overlooked. The study published by Wu and Koh (2022) had sundry examples of this nature.

Ultimately, the debate around global citizenship can be summed up by Morris (2022) who explained that by claiming that one's international school develops global citizens, international schools can then distinguish themselves from mainstream schools, which is an important distinction when marketing since marketing is becoming a more significant practice in today's competitive market. Morris explained that the way to create global citizens is "by providing an educational experience which is variously described as international, cosmopolitan, or global. Whilst these terms are used interchangeably, they are polysemous and can embody very difference conceptions" (p. 155). Thus, global citizenship is indeed an easily manipulated term and one needs to approach the term cautiously when coming across it in research.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory

In his 2014 book *Institutions and Organizations- Ideas, Interests, and Identities*, W. Richard Scott reflected that "I continue to believe that institutional theory provides the most promising and productive lens for viewing organizations (as well as other aspects of contemporary life) in modern society" (p. ix). To understand institutional theory, one must familiarize themselves with the key lexicon required. Ultimately, institutional theory helped to identify what, exactly, schools had done to consider themselves internationally legitimate.

It would be fair to say that there is not one universally agreed upon definition of institutional theory because, as a field, it has changed and grown tremendously over the last five

decades (Scott, 2014). Institutional theory has branched into many fields, but for these purposes, the sociological branch of institutional theory will be used to examine organizations (i.e.-WASC) and institutions (i.e.- international K-12 schools) and the diverse ways they each respond to various pressures (Barrett, et al., 2019, p. 622). A definition by Suddaby (2013) that grounds this research states:

> Institutional theory is an approach to understanding organizations and management practices as the product of social rather than economic pressures. It has become a popular perspective within management theory because of its ability to explain organizational behaviors that defy economic rationality…The explanation, according to institutional theory, is based on the key idea that the adoption and retention of many organizational practices are often more dependent on social pressures for conformity and legitimacy than on technical pressures for economic performance. (n.p.)

This definition allows the sociological aspects of accreditation to be included when evaluating a school as an institution. Examples of sociological aspects would include safety/child protection, social-emotional well-being, creating a particular school culture according to established beliefs, etc. This is significant because schools are competing to get students enrolled and their sociological and institutional practices are scrutinized by prospective families.

Furthermore, because of the evolution of the definition of institutional theory, Scott (2014) has updated his earlier work on institutional theory. He has identified seven new and distinctive features, which collectively describe and define institutional theory. They include:

- Institutionalists eschew a totalistic or monolithic view of organizational and societal structures and processes.

- Institutionalists emphasize that even innovative actions make use of preexisting materials and enter into existing contexts which affect them and to which they must adjust.

- Institutionalists insist on the importance of nonlocal, as well as local, forces shaping organizations.

- Institutionalists have rediscovered the important role played by ideas, specifically, and symbolic elements, generally, in the functioning of organizations.

- Institutionalists accord more attention to types of effects occurring over longer time periods.

- Closely related to this concern with time, institutionalists also accord more attention to an examination of social mechanisms.

- Institutionalists embrace research design that supports attention to examining the interdependence of factors operating at multiple levels to affect the outcomes of interest. (Scott, pp. 262-265)

Elements of these features present themselves in a variety of ways in the research below. The notion, process, and attitude towards the accreditation self-study process, and thus towards WASC itself, connect to each of these elements differently. Institutional theorists have worked on the development of their theory over time, and in 2014, Scott reflected on the maturation of the work. He wrote "during the past few decades, we have moved":

From looser to tighter conceptualizations of institutions and their distinctive features; From determinant to interactive arguments; From assertions to evidence; From organization-centric to field-level approaches; From institutional stability to institutional

change; and from institutions as irrational influences to institutions as frame-works for

rational action. (pp. 266-268)

Additionally, Bunnell et al., (2016) introduced the terms institutional legitimacy and

"institutionalization theory" based on the groundwork laid by institutional theorists, such as W.

Richard Scott of Stanford University. This work resulted in the creation of a classification

system for international schools. Currently, there are three types of international schools: Type A

Traditional and Type B Ideological, and now there is a third, Type C Non-Traditional (Bunnell,

et al., 2016; Scott, 2014; Coutet, 2022). This classification was an important factor when

analyzing data.

A Type A Traditional international school is defined as one that is often funded privately

by fee-paying parents, and largely caters to children of expatriates, executives of multi-national

companies, or diplomats. Parents are often involved and sometimes even part owner of the

school. They typically provide an international curriculum (like the International Baccalaureate)

with English as the primary language used.

Type B Ideological international schools usually seek out students from diverse

backgrounds with the hope of promoting the ideologies of global peace and understanding. They

tend to have a progressive pedagogy that often includes the IB curriculum, but not necessarily.

They are mostly non-profit, and fees are collected. English is the main language.

Lastly, Type C Non-Traditional international schools are typically for-profit schools who

have an increasing amount of local (indigenous) students attending from the host country's elite

population. The lack of student diversity at an international school could undermine the

conventional idea that international schools have international students as part of its core value.

Type C schools challenge this traditional definition. Accordingly, some Type C schools are part

of a chain of managed for-profit schools. It is the alarming growth of Type C schools, many of whom are self-designating themselves as an international school, that has brought concerns around the legitimacy of such schools. This concern is why establishing institutional legitimacy is vital. Successfully earning WASC accreditation adds to that legitimacy (Bunnell, et al., 2016; Scott, 2014; Coutet, 2022).

Research Design

This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were followed by a thorough coded data analysis. Saldana (2022) wrote that qualitative evaluation research is "an approach that collects and analyzes participant and programmatic data to assess merit, worth, effectiveness, quality, value, etc." (p. 375), which is what this research study sought to do with international K-12 schools that pursued accreditation as a form of evaluation.

Sample/Population: Convenience sampling was used since access to the *Directory of Schools* is available freely on the WASC website (Cresswell, 2007). Samples were purposely selected from a geographical variety of schools and not just a cluster within a certain region. The goal was to find participants from several geographical locations that WASC served. Ultimately, participants from China, South Korea, Myanmar, Italy, Bahrain, Taiwan, and South Africa were found to interview. Unfortunately, the person from South Africa had to withdraw because their calendar did not permit time for an interview. To find participants I researched school-by-school, and checked their websites to see if anyone was listed as a WASC coordinator. If no such person existed, I reached out to assorted people in leadership positions. This included Heads of School, Principals, Directors of Curriculum and Instruction, and others. In many cases, schools did not list individual email addresses, so emails were sent to admissions offices. This data was collected on a spreadsheet I created.

Once email addresses were acquired, I then emailed each of the schools with a brief statement about the project and an invitation to participate in a 45-minute semi-structured, in-depth interview with me. The email contained a link to a Google Form that collected information about the potential participant to see if they were qualified to participate. To qualify, the participant had to have been an active member of the WASC process at their current and/or previous school, worked at a K-12 international school, speak and understand English, and be willing to sign the Informed Consent. Ultimately, only four participants responded to my initial email request, one of which resulted in a successful interview. It was then that I turned to snowball sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). One of the WASC staff people I interviewed agreed to email people who they thought might be willing to participate on my behalf. To maintain high ethical standards, we agreed that email addresses would be blind copied, with my email added in the carbon copy line. It was left up to the email recipients to decide if they wanted to email me or not. Ten people replied to me because of this snowball sampling, and of those ten, seven resulted in successful interviews. In total, eight school staff interviews were secured.

I also emailed the staff at WASC to see if they would be willing to be interviewed to gain their perspective on the value of international K-12 schools seeking WASC accreditation. Some WASC staff were located in California, where WASC is headquartered, and the rest were abroad in various locations. WASC staff needed to be willing to sign the Informed Consent. I initially emailed eight staff members from WASC and secured three interviews. One other WASC staff person heard about my research from their colleague and reached out to me independently, which resulted in a fourth interview.

Both recruitment emails to potential participants were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which ensured they accurately and professionally aligned with the purpose

of the research. Saldana (2022) cited Strauss & Corbin (1998) who wrote: "At least 10 interviews or observations with detailed coding are necessary for building a grounded theory" (p. 302). To secure at least 10 interviews, I sent a second email two weeks after the first for anyone who had yet to reply. In total, I interviewed eight people from schools, and four WASC staff members, for a total of 12 participants. All signed Informed Consent forms have been collected and verbal consent has been recorded on the audio recording.

Data Collection Methods: Once participants were identified, each person was then scheduled for one 45-minute semi-structured interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The purpose of using a semi-structured interview method was so that the core questions would be identical between the interviewees, but there was also room to ask unique follow-up questions that arose because of the interview. During the interview, I took notes, and recorded the audio portion of the interview using the Otter app on my iPhone, both of which are password protected. Pseudonyms were created and assigned to protect participants' privacy. WASC staff were identified with the pseudonym WP and a number; for example, WP1, WP2, WP3, and WP4. School staff were identified with the pseudonym SP and a number; for example, SP1, SP2, SP3…to SP8. Transcripts were provided to all participants who wanted them via email, and they had two weeks to respond, if needed. Six participants asked to have their transcripts sent to them. Of those six, two replied and did not have any concerns or changes to request.

Data Analysis Methods: This qualitative study utilized the Grounded Theory method. According to Saldana (2022) Grounded Theory is defined as "a systematic methodological approach to qualitative inquiry that generates theory 'grounded' in the data themselves" (p. 373). Charmaz (2003) explained the value of Grounded Theory, writing:

Grounded theory has considerable significance because it (a) provides explicit, sequential

guidelines for conducting qualitative research; (b) offers specific strategies for handling the analytic phases of inquiry; (c) streamlines and integrates data collection and analysis; (d) advances conceptual analysis of qualitative data; and (e) legitimizes qualitative research as scientific inquiry. (p. 251)

This study developed theories based on the data collected from participants using a systematic, methodological approach, which is described next.

After each interview, I used the Dedoose software platform to enter data to begin the coding process. Parent and child codes were established and employed. I constructed, formulated, created, and revised my codes throughout this process. School staff and WASC staff were analyzed separately using codes unique to their questions. Saldana (2022) reinforced this by explaining: "Coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretative act. Also, be aware that a code can sometimes summarize, distill, or condense data, not reduce them" (p. 7). With this caution in mind, I moved forward with descriptive codes, in vivo, and process codes.

Once trends and patterns emerged, they were analyzed using an inductive analysis approach, which allowed for theories and findings to develop that connected to Grounded Theory. I used Saldana's (2022) explanation regarding the characteristics of what makes a pattern, which involved:

Similarity (things happen in the same way), difference (they happen in predictably different ways), frequency (they happen often or seldom), sequence (they happen in a certain order), correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events), and causation (one appears to cause another). (p. 10)

Once trends and patterns were identified, they were analyzed in terms of value, connection to the research question, and through the lens of institutional theory. The results of this analysis is

included later in this report.

Credibility/Trustworthiness of Research: Vital to any valid research is well-established credibility and trustworthiness between researcher and participant. I ensured that procedures were followed, and that data was ethically maintained. As quickly as possible after each interview, I reviewed the Otter transcript and edited it for clarity and accuracy, without adding any personal comments or reflections. Participant privacy was maintained by using pseudonyms for both people and their schools.

Researcher Positionality: I am experienced with the WASC self-study cycle as a site coordinator, report author, and visiting committee member. I wrote from a position of familiarity since I knew how the process worked for domestic schools; however, I have not served on an international visit.

Ethics of Research: Prior to contacting possible participants this proposal was approved by the SIT IRB. The study posed very little risk to participants. I did not have relationships with any of the participants so there was no power differential. Participants were reminded of their rights, including the right to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time with zero consequences. Participants were not paid or remunerated for their time in any way, other than my profound gratitude. All participants requested a copy of my final report, which was shared with them via email. All parties signed an Informed Consent and participants have a copy. Verbal confirmation of their understanding of their rights was secured at the start of each interview as a second measure to ensure participants were aware of their rights. The Informed Consent was in English, which was needed to ensure ethical obligations were being met.

Limitations Inherent in the Research Design: No limitations were present in the implementation of this project.

Findings

The goal of this research was to understand why international K-12 schools seek out WASC accreditation, and then discover to what extent these schools find value in seeking accreditation considering the work, cost, and intercultural contexts involved. Ultimately, the participants unanimously agreed that despite its cost and the great effort involved, earning WASC accreditation was worth the investment and work. It should be noted that WASC accreditation does not result in any funding from the agency itself to member schools, accreditation by WASC can help schools procure funding from alumni, grants, etc. The three sections discussed below arose from the 12 interviews.

To begin, it should be noted, that every participant I interviewed has had multiple experiences with WASC and when they answered my questions, they often referred to experiences they had at a prior school, or while serving on a visiting committee. It became impossible to focus the interview exclusively on their current school because there is such a transient nature amongst international school staff, and people rarely spend their entire career in one school. Each school staff person I spoke to had worked in a minimum of three countries; many were married to people from a different country; and a few were raising their children as citizens of their current country. This was not a unique story amongst those I spoke to, and it needs to be acknowledged in these findings.

See tables on the next page.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

School Staff:	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4*+	SP5	SP6	SP7	SP8*
Overall years in education	23	14	19	28	18	30	14	30
Number of Years at current school	9	2	5	9	4	4	4	2
Upper-Level Management	X		X	X		X	X	X
Middle-Level Management		X			X			
Location	Asia	Asia	China	US, Middle East, Europe	China	Asia	China	US, Europe
Type A, B, or C school	C$	A	A	C	C$	A	C$	A

* Note that two participants claim two residences.
+ Note that one participant is moving jobs from the Middle East to Europe.
$ Denotes the school is for-profit.

WASC Staff:	WP1*	WP2	WP3	WP4
Overall years in education:	53	40	25	57
Number of years at WASC	15	5	25	36
Executive Role in WASC		X		X
International Consultant (IC) for WASC	X		X	
Resides in United States	X	X		X
Resides in Asia	X		X	

*Note that one participant claims two residences.

Discussion

The discussion that follows will be developed into several thematic categories, based on the way the interview questions were designed (see Appendix A and B). General information about the participants and their various educational and accreditation experiences was first. Next was an exploration of their histories with WASC and the accreditation process. The last section looked at making meaning of the WASC experience for the school and community. It should be noted that both sets of interviewees (school staff and WASC staff) contained the same three sections of questions; however, the quantity and questions did change. For example, school staff

received seven general questions while WASC staff received six. For their historical experience with accreditation, school staff addressed four questions, whereas WASC staff addressed seven. Lastly, school staff answered 12 meaning-making questions and WASC staff answered 10. As such, the two groups were analyzed separately.

General Information

At first glance, it may seem that the general information provided does not reveal much; however, that is not actually the case. For example, the eight school staff had a combined total of 176 years in education, averaging 22 years per person. In contrast, the four WASC staff combined have a total of 175 years in education between them, averaging 43.75 years per person. Nearly the same number of years in education for twice the population. School staff are younger in their careers than WASC staff (39 years versus 81 years, combined), and they have also been at their current job for far fewer years (an average of 4.875 years versus an average of 20.25 years) than WASC staff. This speaks to the itinerant nature of international education, which was a finding of this research from several school staff interviews. SP7 described this itinerant nature of staffing choices as a "mixed bag." SP7 then went on to explain "You get those who [say]… 'I'm going to do my three years and then I'm going to go see another school or country.' And they just keep leveling up" (SP7, personal communication, June 8, 2023). SP4 explained that people often move on and so having some sense of institutional knowledge and memory at each school becomes vital. Case in point, two of the school staff people interviewed switched schools this summer (SP4, personal communication, June 7, 2023, and SP7). WASC staff seemed to hold on to their positions longer, several participants having been with WASC for over a decade. Because these two distinct groups have clearly different mindsets towards jobsite loyalty, it is important for the accreditation process to honor and note this difference. To allow the

accreditation process to address the itinerant differences between those in the position of power (WASC accreditors) and those seeking accreditation and thus have a lower position of power.

In terms of general information, it should be noted that two school staff participants reside in Europe (one is moving this summer from the Middle East to Europe). The other five reside in Asia. No school staff interviewed were originally from the country their current country of employment. Asian countries, aside from China, were not broken down further because to do so would provide too great a risk as exposing participant anonymity. China is noted separately because of several issues that were brought to light in the interviews that are unique to China. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China was WASC's fastest growing region. Now it is Southeast Asia (WP1, WP2, WP4, personal communication, May 30, 31, and June 9, 2023). Over the course of the last three years, the growth of the international school market has caught the attention of the Chinese government, who is now interested in regulating international schools in China by mandating that their National Curriculum be taught at all schools within China (Wu and Koh, 2022). With every person I interviewed being familiar in some capacity with WASC accreditation in Chinese schools, it is notable that each had a different response to the political and cultural tensions between China and the United States. For example, WP2 noted, "The one place that's in flux is China. As their politics and their ability to tolerate Western education varies…[WASC] is just trying to maintain the schools that we have." WP3 echoed this sentiment as well (WP3, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Lastly, for this section, are the noted types of schools each person currently works at. This is using the Type A- Traditional, Type B- Ideological, and Type C- Non-Traditional international school ranking previously described in the institutional theory framework section. There were four Type A schools: SP2, SP3, SP6, and SP8. SP2 and SP3 were both non-profit

schools where funding was always a concern. SP2 had a board but struggled with language barriers (SP2, personal communication, June 6, 2023). SP3 had a local education bureau rather than a board, but the bureau oversees over 300 schools, so they have a lot of autonomy as a school (SP3, personal communication, June 6, 2023). SP6 was a small, non-profit international school, which had governing board that oversaw the organization (SP6, personal communication, June 7, 2023). For all three, instruction was almost exclusively in English, and they follow an American and/or international curriculum. SP8 was a cooperative in Europe, owned by parents with a traditional international population and curriculum mainly in English (SP8, personal communication, June 8, 2023).

There were zero Type B schools, which was a gap in the research.

There were four Type C schools. SP4 was in the Middle East and was an independent, national, non-profit, co-educational, bilingual school in Arabic and English. Even though it was non-profit, it was still non-traditional because it only served a minimal international population. SP1, SP5, and SP7 were all for-profit private schools with most of the instruction in English. SP1 is a proprietary school, with the board making a profit, but faces language barriers with the board (SP1, personal communication, June 6, 2023). SP5 has an owner is very wealthy and said to be friends with influential families around the world, such as the Bush family in America. They are currently collaborating with the Ministry of Education to spearhead a project that combines Chinese National Curriculum standards with those of WASC, IB, and others (SP5, personal communication, June 7, 2023). Lastly, SP7 is part of a larger organization of schools, all of whom are WASC accredited.

Throughout the analysis, when an institutional theory lens was applied to the Type A and Type C schools, the general information surrounding the participants became significant for

establishing the remainder of the analysis. Knowing what, exactly, the types of institutions the people interviewed worked at helped to understand the more subtle nuances of accreditation, as detailed in the next two sections.

History of Experience with WASC and the Accreditation Process

The second part of the interview provided questions about participants lived experiences with WASC and accreditation in general. Lived experiences are an important part of qualitative research as it allowed the researcher to gain nuanced insights into the unique, individual experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Only one participant (SP2) had zero experience with any other accreditation agencies, which made their experiences a bit more limited in scope, yet still valuable. All other participants, school staff and WASC staff alike, had experience with a variety of other agencies: NEASC, MSA, Council for International Schools (CIS), Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), as well as several local education agencies, to name a few. This familiarity with other agencies proved to be helpful when trying to understand their lived experiences with WASC compared to other agencies.

Every school staff and WASC staff participant found that their school chose WASC for several practical reasons. The most obvious practical reason was to get the "stamp on their transcripts" (WP3) showing that their school was WASC accredited. This was important; having a WASC seal of accreditation on a transcript allowed foreign students to apply to United States colleges and universities. WASC accreditation entitled schools to use the WASC logo and approved phrasing on transcripts, websites, and promotional materials. In some cases, it also allowed students to qualify for scholarships (SP1) and financial aid (WP4). And for itinerant students needing to transfer, it made the process infinitely easier (WP2, WP4). A diploma from an accredited school was also required to join the U.S. military (WP4). There was a lot of

competition amongst elite international schools to send their students to the top universities, and every school website for the school staff interviewed listed the colleges and universities their graduates attended. Being able to market acceptances into elite higher education institutes because of getting accreditation, was a key component in schools marketing plans. The practical reasons mentioned were true for all the international schools represented in these interviews.

A close second, in terms of practical reasons for seeking WASC accreditation, was that WASC was least expensive option for international schools, and the staff at WASC ensured that they were the most affordable option (WP4). This low cost was confirmed by SP1, SP2, SP3, SP6, SP7, WP2 and WP3 as well. The appreciation for cost considerations was cited by several school staff participants as well (SP2, SP3, and SP7), which was a positive correlation.

Another practical consideration for choosing WASC is its reputation, particularly in Asia. SP2 notes "there were other options, but we saw [WASC] as the most widely accepted and the one that we're seeing our peers do". SP5 and SP7 also agreed that because their schools send so many students to colleges and universities in California, where WASC is headquartered, the reputation of WASC mattered significantly. WP1 and WP3 both noted that, all things considered, the reputation of WASC in Asia was strong and important.

In terms of practicality, the more prescriptive standards that other agencies reportedly required made WASC's flexible standards appealing, which encouraged SP5 to prefer WASC over other options. Speaking candidly, SP3 noted that for their school, WASC was simply the easier choice because they were not prepared for the voluminous requirements needed for CIS accreditation. Similarly, SP7 said one of the schools they have worked at choose CIS over WASC because their emphasis on global citizenship and sustainable education was of more interested to the school. Interestingly, from a WASC staff perspective, WP4 pointed out that

WASC is "looking at environmental concerns" so perhaps there will be growth on WASC's part in the near future.

Earning WASC accreditation also had institutional applications. SP5 explained that the WASC process helped to "break the silos" that her current school was previously working within and helped to develop a more transparent and collaborative culture. While it took four years to do, the school community was eventually able to hear from more voices in meetings, which is needed for accreditation. WASC required that all stakeholders had a voice in the self-study process. The power of WASC to inform school-wide institutional change for the better is, once again, reinforced by SP3: "I very much believe in the power of the self-study process, in organizational transformation for the better."

When discussing the institutional value of accreditation, SP8 explained that "it gives you that roadmap for the children, the teachers, the parents, the whole community, so they know where you're headed". That roadmap is often referred to as an Action Plan in WASC. The Action Plan helped "propel our capacity as a school," (SP2). SP8 reiterated that they have seen how an Action Plan helped provide stability to a school because it helped to validate that their school was "doing the right thing for its students". WASC asked schools to look at tangible data and use that to help develop the Action Plan and school staff commented on its data-driven usefulness (SP1). One concern, however, is the loss of institutional knowledge that can depart with a staff person leaving who is also in charge of the Action Plan (S4). Subsequently, SP2 and SP5 also shared concerns about the future of WASC leadership and capacity knowing that several employees may be nearing retirement. Reassurances from WASC leadership that the structure and support will continue on, despite staffing changes, is needed.

Conversely, sometimes the weight of accreditation over a school led to less pleasant institutional outlooks. As SP2 expounded "it was kind of like- the clock is ticking as they were searching and going 'oh, these guys are going to graduate, and we've got to have something on the books for them'" when explaining how one start-up school they previously worked at approached WASC. SP1 distinguished that the direct impact on their community was minimal and only genuinely noticed during the self-study. WASC staff noted that "initially, [a school's view towards WASC] is not positive…often it's a top down, marketing-driven choice" (WP1). At some point, each school staff participant noted a somewhat negative outlook towards WASC, but then each of them also highlighted positive attributes received from going through WASC accreditation. The positives were more frequently cited than the negatives. This was consistent for all eight school staff interviews and was acknowledged, to some extent, with each WASC staff person interview. SP4 summed up the variety of outlooks by explaining that "it runs the gambit."

The last part of this section explores the various training provided by WASC to its participants. Every school staff person had participated in WASC training. The WASC international trainings that school staff mentioned attending included: initial school visit, mid-cycle visit, self-study visit, visiting committee member training, and visiting committee chair training. Seven of the eight participants were not overly enthusiastic about the WASC trainings they had attended; however, most did see the value. Some even found value in repeating the trainings. SP5 was the enthusiastic holdout, with only positive feedback regarding WASC training. As a result of participating in the trainings, SP3 was eventually won over, using "WASC evangelist" as a self-description (said with humor). From what was mentioned in the interviews, it appeared that six participants had attended at least one East Asia Regional Council

of Schools (EARCOS) in person training (SP1, SP3, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8). These are WASC trainings offered at yearly EARCOS conferences. Four participants have attended virtual trainings (SP3, SP6, SP7, SP8). SP2 has attended about 16 hours of training, but it was not clear if the training was in person or virtual. One participant (SP4) had attended in person WASC trainings, but said that overall, experience in the field had been the best training. For those who had attended both in-person and virtual trainings, all preferred in-person over virtual. When speaking with WASC staff about training, each mentioned some variety of always being open to improving their training programs and that they take the feedback they get from participants seriously. In addition, WP4 mentioned that with technology (like Zoom) there were more opportunities to interact with members to provide training and support. WASC is also in the process of developing a series of "mini-sessions" that will be recorded and available on-demand via the WASC website. WASC was finding that people today do not want long trainings, and WASC are trying to adapt to that changing need (WP4).

WASC also had five international consultants who got assigned to international schools and were available for coaching, training, and support. They were typically located abroad so they had experience with the cultural nuances in their region as well as convenient time-zone alignments (WP1). WP1 explained the role further noting that they have been tasked with establishing "relationships and build[ing] rapport to try and shift the mindset about the purpose of WASC, and what it is, and was accreditations means, compared with inspection." Inspections being what resembled visits from local governmental agencies. Furthermore, the ICs were typically involved in any pre-initial visits to schools (WP1). Every school staff participant interviewed commented on the value of their IC and praised the high-quality support they received from their IC. SP3 noted that their school would not have been able to complete the

WASC FOL process without their IC's support. SP2 expounded praise for the ICs, saying

"they've been just phenomenal at answering questions."

Remarkably, all of the support provided by the international consultants is at no

additional cost to schools. This was a noteworthy feature as other accreditation agencies would

charge for services (WP1 and WP3). Several examples of these free trainings included:

individualized two-hour training for school board trustees (WP1), school leadership training for

how to lead focus group training at one's site (WP1), a one-hour faculty training to understand

what to expect during their visit (WP3), and a planned full-day faculty training for an unexpected

300 participants (WP3). It should be noted that the ICs hired by WASC also had side-projects in

addition to their coaching work, like developing questionnaires and surveys to collect feedback

on the efficacy of their work, as well as developing new training materials, etc. Both ICs

interviewed mentioned enjoying their work very much, but wished their team were not stretched

so thin. While it is commendable that WASC operated on a tight budget, it might be worth

considering expanding the staffing for this role because schools so enthusiastically received their

coaching. Because schools were working hard to earn accreditation in order to establish

legitimacy within the competitive international K-12 school market, support from the ICs had

proved essential for Type A and Type C schools, alike.

Making Meaning of the WASC Experience for the School and Community

The final section of the interviews focused on the less tangible aspects of the WASC

accreditation process. Questions focused on the affect on all stakeholders, the nuanced attitudes

and feelings towards various aspects of the process, opinions regarding the cultural value of all

the work, and more. The goal was to begin each interview with more concrete questions in order

to establish a level of comfort that might encourage participants to be more willing to share in

the final section. It is the opinion of the researcher that this strategy worked with each interview as every participant provided thoughtful responses.

The WASC Focus on Learning (FOL) structure placed strong emphasis that *all* students should receive the best education possible at any given school. This emphasis is strongly embedded in the self-study process and is also a large focus for the visiting committee. It was described as a smart protocol that made sense to schools and their ability to focus on improving student learning as well as improving the student learning environment (SP1 and SP6). Similarly, SP3 explained that the FOL is a process their school was currently enjoying reaping the benefits from in the form of improved school retention and expulsion rates. WP4 described the FOL succinctly, postulating: "Here's my ultimate burning question: What will be different for students one year, two years, three years from now and how will you know it? And no matter what goal you have, how does it ultimately impact student learning?" These were precisely the types of sociological questions institutional theory sought to explore and refine, especially with Type A, B, and C schools.

WASC was referred to as an acronym that stands for "We Are Student Centered" (SP8). While not an official acronym of WASC, it certainly helped schools align their work to be student centered. SP8 elaborated on this, explaining:

> We Are Student Centered (is the [unofficial] acronym for WASC) …sometimes, unfortunately, for many reasons we get away from that… Especially if a school is for-profit, and it's a business, right? It's easy to get sidetracked by a school board, by parents, …you've got to think about why we are there and who are we supporting? And how are we doing as a school? And so WASC really forces that. It's embedded in everything.

When asked about their feelings towards the FOL format and its impact on their schools, school staff responded positively for the most part. All WASC staff interviewed felt very strongly that the FOL they have developed is working. "I think that the Focus on Learning protocol is highly detailed, and it gives coordinators and other leaders in the school a lot to work from." WASC revised their FOL in 2020 and it "has questions rather than statements as prompts. I think that helps a lot with schools, to actually think about how to be responding to these prompts" (WP3). SP7 made an interesting observation about extending the FOL to better include staff in terms of how they are treated and respected by other stakeholders. A few respondents noted that if school staff are being asked to follow this process, then their interests should play a larger part.

One school staff participant raised an interesting, ethical reaction to the FOL process (SP6). If a school is admitting students who are not likely to go to the coveted top universities, is the school still being inclusive of the learning needs of *all* students? By including all students in their Action Plan, it also forces their board to acknowledge that resources need to be provided to aid in their learning. Ultimately, this leveraging of their findings proved to be a positive experience at this school because more support staff were hired.

The capacity of schools to develop and maintain an Action Plan is often dependent on the support of site leadership, including the school boards/trustees/owners. (Some schools have school boards, others have trustees, and some have owners. For the purposes of this research, they will collectively be referred to as proprietors.) SP7 referred to the Action Plan as a "living document" that is designed to change over time as schools shift and grow and without an Action Plan, "you're going to see yourself in trouble". It is a document that can help facilitate smooth transitions of administrative or trustee leadership changes particularly if they are coming from a Type A, B, or C school structure. When given to new teachers, the Action Plan can help them

understand the culture of their new school better. However, this requires that a school actually revisit their Action Plan frequently. To do this, an institutional understanding of the process and support from site leadership and the proprietors was pivotal. SP5 described how their principal identified a concept called the Middle Path, conceived by Confucius. The Middle Path was ideal for getting a site that is culturally uncomfortable with discussing data collectively to work together for the betterment of all students. They found a Middle Path that brought together cultural considerations alongside organizational and institutional needs. With the right support a school can successfully develop, implement, and maintain an Action Plan.

Several staff participants noted tensions with site leaders and/or proprietors, including, not being familiar with the Action Plan, overstepping their boundaries, disagreements over budgets and how to use WASC to know where to allocate funds, etc. (SP1, SP4, SP6, SP7). Trying to establish clear boundaries between academics and operations/governance was a struggle for some (SP4 and SP6). Most school staff agreed that proprietors seemed to think they knew about WASC and its importance, but the participants did not feel that their proprietors had been adequately trained (or trained well) in the WASC FOL process. No proprietors were interviewed for this research, which is a gap, and a potential avenue for future research.

Interestingly, several school staff used the term "strategic planning" and how that is becoming more of a "cottage industry internationally" (SP4) with schools paying companies to develop their strategic plan. SP3 noted frustration at trying to align WASC, with IB, with their local governing authority and that, in the end, they developed all three into one strategic plan. SP3 also expressed concern for future young leaders who step into a WASC coordinator role of a similar nature. WASC staff were clear that Action Plan goals and strategic plans should be in

alignment with one another. In other words, use one to help the other. The growth of this strategic planning industry is a topic for future consideration.

Defining school culture, and the impact WASC has had on it, resulted in noteworthy findings. SP7 and SP8 both noted that younger schools (opened eight years or fewer) have successfully utilized the WASC process to help establish their school culture when just starting out. The protocols and frameworks provided by WASC were helpful when working with new schools to establish their Mission, Vision, and core values in order to lay a solid cultural foundation to build upon. Two school staff participants (SP1, SP7) were clear that they wanted school culture to extend further when including staff. There have been issues with staff housing like generator time being cut too early, no air conditioning, and poor Wi-Fi, despite needing all three to work at night. It is hard to recruit highly qualified staff to join a school where the culture is not as inclusive of its staff. Overall, every school staff participant was clear in their testimony that going through the WASC process does, in fact, help schools define their own culture.

One question asked of school staff was: Do you feel that the WASC process values your unique school culture? This question was designed to see if schools were suspecting that the process of seeking accreditation was leading towards developing homogenous schools around the world. SP5 provided a keen example of how WASC was, in fact, able to value a school's individual culture. They explained that during the pandemic they worked closely with their IC, who had inquired about an incomplete report and SP5 had to explain several cultural issues in China surrounding COVID. They were not able to get work done because vast numbers of people were in the hospital or home recovering. It is considered rude to ask someone when they will return to work, so they just had to wait. Once the cultural component of this situation was explained, WASC worked with SP5 to make accommodations for their overdue report that

honored the culture of the school and community. WASC staff reflected on this as well, recollecting: "It's amazing to see how things transform, while also respecting their cultural values, their cultural identity, and their cultural norms. It really is that idea of international mindedness or global competencies that WASC talks about…the process WASC does respect that" (WP1). While WASC seemed to respect individual heterogeneous school cultures, there were a couple examples where homogeneity amongst all schools could actually be useful.

Child protection and safeguarding have become a prevailing topic for schools and was mentioned by every participant, school and WASC staff alike. Several school staff participants noted that in some instances, like with child protection, a level of homogeneity was needed (SP7). SP3, who oversees child protection for their school, gave WASC partial credit for moving their school along in developing policies and practices that protect children. SP3 explained, "Now, every single person who interacts with a child in our school goes to training and signs a code of conduct." WASC staff agreed, with WP3 explaining: "Child protection being an area where it's less and less open ended. It's more and more prescriptive." Requiring child safeguarding polices of every school is an example of homogeneity working within institutions.

There was also a level of criticism aimed at WASC explaining how WASC staff have been slower to update the FOL to include critical language all schools need. If an organization like WASC is going to require that a major part of the instruction must be in English, and there is no formal policy in place within a school institution, creating one for the sake of WASC could be an exercise in futility. Several participants noted that CIS had embedded critical topics, like child safeguarding, several years before WASC (SP4, SP7). WASC seemed to be outmaneuvered here (SP7). This criticism was noted by several school staff when it came to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, Ability (DEIJ/A), and anti-racism language, too. However, there seems to be a

significant disconnect because WASC has studied DEI and applied it to accreditation (Groves and George, 2022, pp. 65-74). WASC staff (WP4), when explaining their attitude towards change, noted: "We're always on the move, but we have to make sure we're not stuck in a paradigm." WP4 further noted "you can't separate coherence from culture," meaning that the characteristics present for coherence are the same as those present for culture. While SP5 had detected the changes in the FOL idiolect, SP7 put it plainly, "WASC can do better." An interesting conundrum, indeed.

Flexibility is a concept that was vocalized often throughout the interviews as a positive characteristic, one which allowed WASC to stand out from other accreditation agencies. Every single person interviewed, in both groups, was clear that WASC allowed schools the flexibility to be their own, unique selves, and to demonstrate that in their self-studies. SP4 expressed an appreciation about WASC's flexibility, saying: "It's broad enough…It's not prescriptive…It's not telling you how to do anything. It's just saying 'have you reflected on this? Or where are you with this?'" WP1 adamantly noted that there are other agencies who emphasize compliance, or a "checking the box" approach to accreditation, but that WASC was not one of those agencies. WP4 reiterated WASC's flexibility as an organization, emphasizing:

> Why choose WASC? Because we're going to work with you personally. That personalized support to make the process meaningful, to support high quality learning and well-being in an ongoing way for your school, but we will not water down our basic guiding principles. (See Appendix C)

Part of why institutional theory has withstood the test of time is because it seeks to create sociologically acceptable practices, such as WASC believes it has done around flexibility, and which schools (as institutions) have certainly validated.

The final question, which was asked of every participant was: Overall, in your opinion, is the cost and effort of getting accredited worth the effort? Why or why not? Not one person hesitated when answering with a resounding yes. While there are areas for growth within WASC, all participants agreed that going through the WASC FOL self-study process had ultimately led to positive changes within their schools. SP8 wrapped it up, explaining: "We ask our children to reflect on their learning. We as our teachers to reflect on their learning. And, as a school, we should be doing the same thing. We should be a learning institution, and we should be reflecting on our learning." If institutions and organizations are to improve their systems to establish legitimacy within the field of international education, then applying to undertake the WASC FOL self-study process is a choice worth considering. However, the WASC FOL self-study process is not without faults, as organizations are wont to have since all humans are fallible. Therefore, should one choose to seek out WASC accreditation, it is best to be clear that the values of all parties align well enough to support one another over a sustained period. WASC is not a short-term fix for a long-term problem. WASC is an institution available to serve the needs of schools who are willing participants in a reflective process that helps to ensure that all students are safe, learning, and thriving.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there are two recommendations for international K-12 schools, and three recommendations for WASC. Following the recommendations for schools and WASC, are recommendations for further research. There is both room for growth and more gaps in the research needing the attention of future scholars.

Recommendations:

Schools Need to Dedicate Personnel to Serve as Site-based WASC Coordinators

One finding that arose from the research is the need to have a properly employed WASC coordinator on site. It was obvious from all school staff interviews that when a school had an employee whose job had adequate time built-in for coordination, the school staff had more positive attitudes and buy-in. WP3 validates this need, noting: "I think what you get out of it is what you put into it. And so, you can think of it as an exercise to get through…or you can use it as a tool for driving the school forward." Evidence has shown that the WASC FOL process is heavily reliant on an effective site-based coordinator. Dedicated staff who can put in the time will ultimately help make the school more successful.

Schools Need More Support Defining Global Citizenship

With global citizenship being such a nebulous term, schools were vocal in their request for a clear, sound, and rich definition from WASC. When one considers the amount of work that goes into accreditation, having clear definitions to work with would be helpful. A cursory search on the WASC website for global citizen/ship (with and without quotation marks) yielded zero results each time. This request for clarity, however, is also coupled with the need for WASC to define their terms a bit quicker than they do currently. Historically, explained WP4, "It used to be schools would say 'well, we're helping students develop their critical thinking skills.'" The terms of critical thinking skills have become a bit passe. The thinking has shifted to "How are we preparing students to be innovative thinkers? And so, it's not just what you know now, but how you continually grow and apply the learning to support worldwide, our society." WASC staff are researching vital topics. Both WP2 and WP4 highlighted that WASC is "research-based" in its decision-making and is careful to make changes assiduously, which does not always translate to swiftly. It is a paradigm that warrants addressing.

WASC Needs to Reevaluate and Expand the Role of the International Consultants

Every single school staff person interviewed affirmed the value of their work with the WASC international consultants (IC). Clearly, the addition of this job position proved beneficial to the success of international K-12 schools earning accreditation. The personalized service, and ease of access to the ICs was hailed as paramount in schools' ability to be successful. WASC staff acknowledged the value of the position, explaining: "That's why WASC has created these international consultant positions. For us to start to have relationships and build rapport. To try and shift the mindset about the purpose of WASC…compared with inspection" (WP1).

When reevaluating this role, WASC needs to reconsider the tools necessary to do the job well. The ICs interviewed were both adamant that WASC needed to get a statement and standards for bilingual education created straightaway. A keen example from WP3 explained: "Like Vietnam…there are a growing number of bilingual schools…If I were a Vietnamese speaker, I'd want my child to have strong Vietnamese. I would want a bilingual education for my child…but, we don't have any guidance on that." Why is there no guidance on bilingual education available for the ICs to use? Ultimately, this position is serving its purpose well for WASC as an organization and for schools as institutions; however, by being wonderful at their job, the demand for more is now being heralded. The excellent support provided by the ICs is in high demand from schools, so the future of their job is strong. However, WASC needs to consider expanding this role, so the ICs are not stretched too thin. Lastly, WASC needs to work with the IC staff to develop the definitions and materials they need to be even more supportive.

WASC Needs to Develop Training Specifically for School Boards/Trustees/Owners/Etc.

Training for boards, trustees, owners, etc. (proprietors), should be developed by WASC and made a requirement for accreditation. If the role of ICs could expand, they could provide

more support for helping WASC coordinators communicate more effectively with their site leadership and proprietors. There is a lack of consistency noticed among the school participants when it comes to relationships with their proprietors, ranging from overinvolved to only having ever seen them occasionally on a screen. Problems ranged from boards only meeting three times a year in one case, to having an owner who lives on another continent in another, to having one proprietor who is related to the Head of School, to having one involved in every aspect of the hiring process. Proprietor involvement runs the gamut, and because such, support for this dynamic is needed. WASC needs to rethink what they want the relationships between site coordinators, site leadership, and proprietors to look like because this is a mismanaged aspect of the self-study process.

WASC Needs to Clearly Define an International School

Throughout the interviews with all participants, it became clear that the term international school can mean different things to different people. This is problematic for several reasons. First, international school is a term that is ever-changing, as evidenced by labeling schools as Type A, B, or C. This labeling was a reaction to a need that was identified by the international education community to be able to know which schools are legitimately international and which are not.

Second, it quickly became clear that the term international school currently lacks legitimacy globally. Several participants echoed concerns that new schools are proclaiming themselves to be international, but many accredited schools are skeptical. This lack of legitimacy has the power to weaken the value of WASC accreditation. If WASC is helping every school that applies to eventually earn accreditation, then what is the real benefit to schools? It becomes a saturated market when every international school has WASC accreditation. There is likely folly

in this thinking by several school staff, because WP4 was clear that not every school who applies gets accepted for membership; however, that was not clear to all school participants.

Third, WASC needs to re-examine and possibly redefine what the requirements are to be able to be considered an international school in today's ever-changing international education context (see Appendix D). SP4 shared an experience where they explicitly asked, "What is the definition of an international school?" while at a WASC training and was told there is no definition. That was the experience on one person, but it is reflected in other, subtle ways throughout all the interviews.

Lastly, based on the statement of three participants, there are other accreditation agencies who have been ahead of the curve when it comes to change. WASC, it would seem, could do a better job of informing stakeholders about how they come to their decisions and why it seems to be lagging behind. Regardless, the conundrum around defining an international school needs to be addressed post haste.

Recommendations for Further Research:

There are several recommendations for further research. The first is that Type B schools need to be included in the research. That perspective was unintentionally left out of this research since no Type B schools were included. The second recommendation would be to understand how international K-12 schools define bilingual education and translanguaging. Additionally, how can accreditation support this work in its schools? The third possibility would be bringing in voices from geographic areas that were not represented such as Africa and South America. With the lines now blurred amongst accreditation agencies and their former territories the fourth recommendation, would be to interview proprietors to gain their insights and perspectives regarding accreditation for their schools. Lastly, one could study the trend regarding strategic

planning to understand the possible implications for WASC. Some schools have hired outside consultants to help with this (SP4), while some (SP3) have generated their own strategic plan in house.

This was a small qualitative analysis of the rationales of why international K-12 schools seek out WASC accreditation. A similar qualitative analysis could be applied to other accreditation agencies to create a comparative analysis between agencies.

In conclusion, the results of this research have filled a gap in scholarship. This research showed that international K-12 schools do find value in earning WASC accreditation, despite the costs, time, and cultural considerations involved. WASC is the most affordable option. WASC also provides training and excellent support via the International Consultants. The Focus On Learning process is thoughtfully developed, and schools report positive changes have been made as a result. However, there is still room for growth when it comes to defining terms and responding to new topics that arise. WASC is slower than other agencies to address pressing, current trends and concerns within the field. Institutional theory can help to establish a means to legitimize the rapidly growing market of international schools. Accreditation, particularly that of international K-12 schools, has room for future research that develops comparative data and includes more geographical regions. Future research has the potential to have great impact on student learning. After all, it is all about student learning.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for School Staff

Interview Questions- School Staff

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Date: Time:

General Information:
1. Informed Consent signed and reviewed: Yes   No
2. What is your job title:
3. Number of years at the current school:
4. Number of years in educational total:
5. Have you ever been involved with accreditation prior to your most recent experience, either with WASC or another accreditation agency?
    1. If yes, please elaborate on those experiences.
6. When was your last WASC report and visit?
7. What accreditation status was earned?

Part one: **History of experience with WASC and concrete examples of the accreditation process**

1. What was your role at your school during the last WASC cycle?
2. How much time did you spend on WASC?
    1. Were you compensated?
3. Have you received any formal training through WASC regarding the self-study process? If so, which one(s)?
    1. How did the training help you prepare for the process?
4. Why did your school choose WASC over other accreditation agencies?
    1. Who made the decision to go with WASC?
    2. Has there been any consideration for change since then?

Part two: **Making meaning of the WASC experience for the school and community**

1. What is the general attitude of your school towards accreditation?
2. Did the WASC process help bring improvements to your school? If so, what?
3. How did WASC affect the school community (parents, students, staff)?
4. Share how you feel that the WASC "Focus on Learning" format impacted your school.
5. One of the goals of WASC is to help a school develop and implement an Action Plan. Tell me about your school's process for developing, revising, implementing, and measuring your Action Plan.
6. What is your opinion regarding the impact of the Action Plan on your school?
7. What is your opinion regarding your school's capacity to maintain your Action Plan through the entire self-study cycle?

8. How would you define school culture?
    1. How has the WASC process impacted your school culture, if at all?
9. Do you feel that the WASC process values your school's culture? Why or why not?
10. What changes have you seen since your last WASC visit?
11. In your opinion, is the cost and effort of getting accredited worth the investment? Why or why not?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for WASC Staff

Interview Questions- WASC Staff

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Date: Time:

General Information:
1. Informed Consent signed and reviewed: Yes   No
2. Current job title:
3. Number of years at WASC:
4. Number of years in educational total:
5. Please describe your job within the WASC organization.
6. Have you worked for any other accreditation agency?
    1. If so, which ones, for how long, and in what capacities?

Part one: **History of experience with WASC and concrete examples of the accreditation process**

1. What has been your experience with K-12 international school accreditation?
2. Why do you think K-12 international schools choose WASC over other accreditation agencies?
3. In your opinion, what are the benefits K-12 international schools receive as a result of earning WASC accreditation?
4. Historically, how has WASC shifted to accommodate international schools?
5. How does WASC specifically help K-12 international schools prepare for the self-study process?
    1. In other words, what does WASC do differently for international schools versus domestic schools?
6. Am I correct in understanding that all international accreditation documentation must be in English?
    1. If not, what aspects of the process might a school be allowed to not use English?
7. Does WASC provide translation services for visiting committees? Why or why not?

Part two: **Making meaning of the WASC experience for the school and community**

1. In general, how would you describe the general attitude of K-12 international schools towards the WASC process?
2. How would you say WASC affects international school communities (parents, students, staff) versus domestic school communities?

3. In what ways do you feel that the WASC "Focus on Learning" format supports K-12 international schools?
4. Do you tend to see differences in how international schools approach their Action Plan versus domestic schools?
     1. Why might schools vary or share similarities?
5. How would you define school culture as a WASC staff member?
     1. How do you feel WASC honors individual school culture's, particularly international schools?
6. Do you feel that the WASC process values each individual school's culture? Why or why not?
7. There is research that examines the potential risk accreditation might have when it comes to maintaining individuality and heterogeneity among schools. The concern is that the rubrics required of accreditation agencies will ultimately homogeneity among schools because in order to earn accreditation, schools must conform to fit to the rubric. Are you familiar with this research? What are your thoughts on this?
8. In your opinion, is the cost and effort of getting accredited worth the investment? Why or why not?
9. If you could implement one new or different aspect of WASC accreditation, specifically for K-12 international schools, what would it be and why?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Appendix C

The WASC Guiding Principles

The WASC Guiding Principles are the foundation of the accreditation process and enable schools to:

- Ensure a culture of involvement, collaboration, and trust

- Ensure a culture supporting the well-being of all students

- Demonstrate that the shared purpose and schoolwide learner outcomes are understood and accomplished by all students

- Evaluate achievement of all students on academic standards/schoolwide learner outcomes

- Use multiple ways to analyze data and the impact on student learning

- Implement and monitor actions to support continuous improvement

- Align prioritized findings to a schoolwide action plan focusing on major student and school needs

- Evaluate program effectiveness.

Appendix D

WASC International Eligibility Guidelines

WASC International Eligibility Guidelines:

> International schools must meet the legal requirements of the jurisdiction for an
>
> international school [i.e., county (local and nationwide)] in which they are located in
>
> order for their application for ACS WASC accreditation to be considered. Based on the
>
> country, there may be restrictions to the type of passport held by the student
>
> enrolled. **Note:** ACS WASC does not accredit programs or divisions with a school;
>
> there must be evidence that a school located within a school has separate operations,
>
> leadership, budget, curriculum, etc. in order to be eligible for ACS WASC
>
> accreditation.