

Research summary

Social and emotional well-being in International Baccalaureate World Schools

Summary developed by the IB Research department, based on a report prepared by:

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Background

The social and emotional well-being of students and staff is a barometer of a healthy school, and thus is fundamental to ensuring a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. This study explored the social and emotional well-being of students (ages 3–19) in International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools, and examined how well-being is manifested in the curriculum and enacted in school practices. The researchers drew upon a student survey and interviews with school administrators, teachers, counsellors and students.

Research design

Survey

In total, 2,668 students from 10 schools participated in the survey. The survey was used with students from 10 to 19 years of age. As part of the survey, the researchers included two well-being measures: the EPOCH measure of adolescent well-being (Seligman, 2011) and the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) (Huebner, 1994). Researchers also utilized the Teacher Support scales from the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) (Malecki and Demaray, 2002) to assess the level of support provided by educators to students in IB programmes. The complete survey for "Social and emotional well-being in IB World Schools" is shown in Appendix 5 of the full report.

School visits

The qualitative phase of data collection was carried out in five IB World Schools offering the Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP), Diploma Programme (DP) and in most cases the Career-related Programme (CP), as shown in Table 1.

School	Location	IB programmes offered
School A	Asia-Pacific	PYP, MYP, DP, CP (candidate school)
School B	Europe	PYP, MYP, DP, CP
School C	Asia-Pacific	PYP, MYP, DP
School D	Americas	PYP, MYP, DP, CP
School E	Americas	PYP, MYP, DP, CP

Table 1. Locations of schools visited for qualitative data collection

The aim of the interviews was to generate a detailed understanding of how well-being was conceptualized, understood and promoted within schools. In total, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 75 individuals were conducted.

Findings

Defining social and emotional well-being

Social and emotional well-being describes the positive effect resulting from strong social relationships and good psychological health. The model used in this study comprised six age-appropriate elements, and was drawn from the literature (Diener et al., 2010; Hone, Jarden, Schofield and Duncan, 2014; Huebner, 1994; Keyes, 2002, 2006; Malecki and Demaray, 2002; Seligman, 2011). The six elements include:

1. engagement
2. perseverance
3. optimism
4. connectedness– with family, friends and teachers
5. happiness
6. satisfaction
 - a. with self
 - b. with living environment
 - c. with school.

Well-being of the student sample

The median scores on the EPOCH and MSLSS scales show that social and emotional well-being was medium to high in the sample student population. On the EPOCH scale, students scored highest on the “connectedness” and “happiness” domains, and lowest on the “engagement” domains. On the MSLSS scale, overall satisfaction with life was good, especially on the domains of “friends” and “family”, but marginally less so with “school”.

Across both EPOCH and MSLSS measures of well-being, there were no significant differences between males and females. In contrast, for the EPOCH scale, survey respondents in the younger age ranges scored significantly higher than respondents in the upper age ranges (14–19 years old). Ten-year-old students scored significantly more highly than students of any other age. Similarly, on both measures of social and emotional well-being, students in the PYP scored most highly, followed by students in the MYP and the DP.

Teacher support of students

Researchers used median scores on the CASSS Teacher Support scales (frequency and importance) to assess the support provided by teachers to students in IB programmes. The frequency of teacher support in all schools was high. Furthermore, the frequency of teacher support across all programmes was high, with the highest frequencies of teacher support reported in the PYP. The importance of teacher support reported by the student respondents

was medium to high. These results indicate that IB World School teachers provide high levels of support to their students in terms of care, treatment and academics.

Interpretation and significance of well-being in schools

In all five schools, the development of well-being was considered significant and an important role for the school. Schools were proud of their innovations in this area, keen to share and learn from others, and interested in understanding more about how well-being could be better supported and developed. The positive well-being of students was regarded as an indicator of a healthy school climate and as a precursor for academic success. Comments from many of the interviewees suggested that social and emotional well-being was an area that was receiving attention within the school on a daily basis.

“Well-being is a very important part of growing up I would suggest. It is part of our learner profile attributes and our attitudes as well and it is something that we look at every day ...”

School C, PYP Curriculum Coordinator

Overall, IB World School leaders and teachers consider students who are secure, comfortable, happy, resilient and get along well with others as demonstrating social and emotional well-being. It is understood that such factors are intrinsically related to academic success, as one principal explained:

“I think that overall well-being is kind of a balance between having an academic drive along with a personal drive [...] if you are not a well-adjusted, happy child to at least the minimum extent it is going to affect your learning obviously—you can’t intake information, you can’t focus, you have other things on your mind ...” School D, MYP

Principal

Similarly, physical health also has an impact on social and emotional well-being, both in terms of basic physical needs and structured physical activity. IB World School leaders and teachers attached great significance to the development of well-being, and seemed to prioritize well-being as much as providing academic support to students.

Supporting student well-being through the curriculum

Official curriculum

In terms of the official curriculum, school leaders and curriculum coordinators spoke of the affordances offered by the design of the programmes in constructing a curriculum that supported well-being. The holistic nature of the programmes, the emphasis on inquiry-driven learning and the learner profile all contributed to the sense that schools could and should make well-being a priority. Rather than identifying specific components or documents from the curriculum, interviewees felt that it was the ethos of the IB and the way the programmes had been conceptualized that allows schools to focus on social and emotional well-being.

Additionally, the learner profile, approaches to learning (ATL), creativity, activity, service (CAS) and the Career-related Programme (CP) were described as specific ways in which the official

curriculum supports the development of social and emotional well-being. In particular, the learner profile was considered a key tool for providing the language to help students and teachers engage with ideas connected to social and emotional well-being. The CP was welcomed as a way of expanding student choice and thus supporting student social and emotional development, particularly given concerns about the workload required by the DP.

Researchers also analysed the content of four IB curriculum documents in terms of well-being:

- *The Primary Years Programme: A basis for practice* (IBO, 2009a)
- *MYP: From principles into practice* (IBO, 2014)
- *Diploma Programme: From principles into practice* (IBO, 2009b)
- *Career-related Programme: From principles into practice* (IBO, 2015)

The results indicate that, in these four key publications, well-being is given only minimal attention. One of the two instances of the term “well-being” in the PYP document, and the only instance in the DP document, was the inclusion of the term in the definition of the learner profile attribute “balanced”. The document analysis and the fact that very few documents were mentioned during the school visits suggests that IB documents contribute only minimally to creating an atmosphere favourable to well-being.

Taught and hidden curriculum

The taught curriculum describes what is taking place in the classroom. Educators tended to perceive social and emotional well-being as a holistic aspect of the taught curriculum and not as the responsibility of any single curriculum subject. However, opportunities exist to include it within many curriculum areas, from physical education to science and the humanities.

Hidden curriculum refers to what is learned outside of the formal curriculum. In the five schools, the hidden curriculum had an important role to play in developing social and emotional well-being, whether in conscious and deliberate ways, such as hosting families for social events in the school, or less consciously through providing a safe, secure and happy environment in which young people can learn.

Counselling programmes, advisory programmes and structured extracurricular programmes such as school trips play an important role in creating an atmosphere favourable to well-being. The evidence from the school visits suggests that these programmes are one of the main ways in which social and emotional well-being is directly supported in schools. Although these were, ostensibly, outside the formal curriculum, curricular elements such as the learner profile provided a shared understanding for these programmes.

Challenges to achieving well-being

The challenges to well-being came mostly from factors external to and outside the control of both IB World Schools and the IB. These factors included, for example, cultural attitudes towards inclusion, the impact of frequent movement on students’ lives within an international school

environment and the academic pressures that students experience due to university entrance procedures. The pressures of social media and technology were also a key challenge to well-being, as a number of students felt these factors were having a negative impact on engagement with their academic studies and interactions with others.

Recommendations

In light of the findings in this study, the research team proposed the following recommendations for the IB and IB World Schools.

1. Be “well-being aware”. Social and emotional well-being is important, and needs to be prioritized in schools, regarded as equal to other, academic objectives. By becoming “well-being aware” schools would make social and emotional well-being an explicit goal for all students and staff.
2. Mobilize the curriculum. There are many opportunities to focus on well-being through the curriculum, but these need to be emphasized. The learner profile, specifically the attributes “balanced” and “caring”, ATL and CAS all offer ways of enacting social and emotional well-being.
3. Ensure there is balance across the curriculum in terms of extracurricular activities and the opportunity for “down time”.
4. Develop common understandings of what is meant by social and emotional well-being and how it can be prioritized. Find time to talk (staff to staff/staff to students/students to students/staff to parents) about how social and emotional well-being can become a key concern for every stakeholder in the school.
5. Look for “all through” coherence, focus on transition problems (which are anxiety inducing) and recognize the need for age appropriateness. Ways of supporting transitions through the curriculum could be explored. (For example, how does the PYP exhibition support the transition to the MYP?)
6. Recognize the distinctive needs of transient students in international schools and provide for these whenever possible.
7. Develop a social media policy that is sensitive to both the threat and affordances of technology to well-being. It is recommended that such policies be developed in collaboration with students.
8. Help parents to understand and support the distinctive approaches of a holistic IB education by developing appropriate resources.

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This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at ibo.org/en/about-the-ib/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

To cite the full report, please use the following:

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