

Research summary

Curriculum development in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

Extracted from a research report prepared for the IB by:

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Executive summary

This report examines the development and revision of curriculum in countries, regions and jurisdictions around the world. In addition, it provides examples to further inform the International Baccalaureate's (IB) own curriculum development of the Diploma Programme (DP). The researchers identified thirteen countries and jurisdictions that would serve as productive locations for learning in relation to curriculum development and reform: Finland; Massachusetts, USA; Scotland; Ontario, Canada; Netherlands; Mexico; Germany; England; Chile; Singapore; New Zealand; Victoria, Australia; and Queensland, Australia. The first phase of the study involved the collection of information about the characteristics of curriculum reform in these sites. In the second phase, the researchers investigated the characteristics of the IB's own curriculum development in relation to curriculum development in the selected locations. Data sources included government documents, books and academic and professional journal articles. The researchers collected information about a wide range of issues, from the organization of schooling in the different sites, to the aims and purposes of the curriculum and arrangements for delivery and assessment.

Findings

1. Review cycles

With the exception of Ontario, most mass systems of education do not have established curriculum review cycles. Curriculum reviews tend to be ad hoc, unplanned, dependent on the political cycle, and responses by governments to particular problems. The IB, on the other hand, uses a strongly defined and structured seven-year process of curriculum review in relation to its programmes.

2. Flow of reform

The point of entry for reform in most countries is at the apex of the power structure. The general direction of flow is fragmented and multi-directional. Reforms generally lose their shape, structure and contents during the exploration, development, re-contextualization, implementation and institutionalization phases of the reform process. In most countries institutionalizing processes are underdeveloped. In contrast, the IB's curriculum reform processes demonstrate coherence across all parts of the organization, although this may in some cases be compromised by an inconsistent uptake of continuing professional development by IB teachers, perhaps due to cost considerations.

3. Curriculum aims

Most reforms of education systems emphasize assessment driven, goal directed and fact-based forms of learning. In addition, most education systems have similar curriculum standards or curriculum aims/objectives, and are driven by summative processes of assessment, which appear to be influenced by the imposition of external tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). There is a risk that the emphasis on high stakes assessment at the end of the DP may affect the integrity of some of the pedagogical approaches adopted by the IB, particularly when schools have not had face-to-face visits since the initial authorization.

4. Subjects and forms of knowledge

In all sites, there is a curricular emphasis on language (literacy), mathematics and science. Although most of the countries the authors sampled do not use text books written by government agencies, most nevertheless preserve traditional modes of teaching and strong insulations between subjects in school curriculum. In contrast, in addition to an emphasis on language, mathematics and science, the IB specifically “aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.” (IBO, 2014).

5. Modes of progression

Most countries start formal schooling as early as possible, often between the ages of 4-5. Generally they use progression models, which prioritize educational extension rather than increasing the complexity of, and deepening, learning. Knowledge is therefore expressed in terms of lower and higher domain-levels, with the former having to be taught before the latter, and sequenced correctly. This is similar to the DP, particularly with some courses offered at a higher level (HL). However, the extended essay and other elements of the curriculum may help to deepen learning.

6. Curriculum reviews

As a supra-national organization, the IB is in a unique position within education internationally. Its privileged position allows it to set the tone for contemporary curriculum review. Currently there is a coherent system of review in place that appears to be operating across all parts of the organization, and this is a positive aspect of the IB’s work. However, caution is recommended here, despite the ostensibly thorough framework for review. Although carefully drafted guidelines for the review process were intended to serve as a useful project planning tool, the process underpinning curriculum review tends to be overly complex and detailed, which may result in a form of “guideline exhaustion”. This runs the risk of trivializing certain aspects of the reform process, making it into a tick box exercise for some participants.

Recommendations

The IB should consider:

- Developing strategies for enhancing the uptake of professional development courses in relation to curriculum review. For example, the IB could investigate the likely impact of reducing the cost of professional development courses, or introducing a credit system with minimum requirements for teacher reaccreditation (or a combination thereof).
- Increasing the number of quality assurance visits rather than relying on paper-based verifications after initial authorization. These could be conducted at standard or irregular intervals, depending on the availability of resources and other practical considerations.
- Undertaking an empirical study to investigate the current alignment between the IB’s intended curriculum and its implementation in schools.
- Limiting the number of reviews a draft curriculum may undergo, in order to simplify the process.

- Ensuring teacher involvement and action research at various stages to ensure teachers' experience and knowledge are taken into account, and that the process is suitably democratic and pluralist.
- Developing the role of the teacher as an embedded researcher, with implications for professional development practices and the curriculum development and review process.
- Streamlining the review guidelines and making them less detailed and prescriptive, although there should continue to be an emphasis on their value as a project planning tool.

References

International Baccalaureate Organization (2014). IB Mission and Strategy. Retrieved on March 7, 2014 from <http://www.ibo.org/mission/>

This summary was extracted by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at <http://www.ibo.org/research>. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

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