

RESEARCH SUMMARY

International Baccalaureate programmes: Longer-term outcomes

Based on a research report prepared for the IB by

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Background

This in-depth qualitative study investigated the longer-term outcomes of participation in International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes on the lives of former IB students. A qualitative life history approach was employed to generate rich narrative accounts of people's experiences of the IB and reflections on its lasting effects.

The central aim of the project was to explore perceptions of the long-term impact of participation in IB programmes in key areas of the lives of former IB students. These include their professional pathways, involvement in community service activities, attitudes towards lifelong learning, as well as the ways in which the IB may have shaped their personal values, beliefs about diversity and overall worldview.

Research design

A qualitative life history approach, informed by biographical and narrative methods, was adopted to provide the overarching methodological framework (McLeod and Thomson 2009; Plummer 2001; Roberts 2002). The life history approach generated detailed and rich insights into people's lived experience, and offered a productive means of investigating the enduring influence of the IB in the lives of IB alumni. The primary method of data collection was topic-focused, semi-structured interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 23 individuals, aged from 20 to 63, who participated in IB programmes in a range of school settings, including international, state sector and private schools, from the late 1960s to the early 2010s. Six people completed both the Diploma Programme (DP) and the Middle Years Programme (MYP); 14 completed only the DP; two people undertook IB subjects but did not complete the full DP; and one person was a student at

the International School of Geneva when examinations for the DP were initially trialled in 1968. Participants identified with more than 15 different ethnic and cultural groups and represented 13 different nationalities, along with schooling experiences in 14 countries.

Findings

The majority of former IB students in this study reported a multiplicity of outcomes from their participation in IB programmes, with some respondents experiencing profound and long-lasting effects. Examples of longer-term impacts include influences on academic and career trajectories, as well as dispositional orientations and social values. In broad terms, the findings from this study support previous research, which suggests the IB may produce a range of enduring student outcomes (Aulls and Peláez 2013; Culross and Tarver 2011; Taylor and Porath 2006). These include the development of international-mindedness and a broader perspective on the world, critical thinking, analytical and writing skills, and positive dispositions towards lifelong learning. More instrumental dimensions, notably advantages for university admission and earning advanced credits, were also frequently mentioned, as was the benefit of IB studies for university preparedness. Although the influence of the IB on alumni in this study was varied and multifaceted, a common thread that emerged from participant life stories was that the IB has the potential to powerfully shape the lives of students who participate in its programmes.

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International-mindedness and critical thinking

For most former students in this study, a major impact of the IB was the development of international-mindedness. Participants believed that the IB contributed to them developing a broader view of the world. IB alumni frequently cited curricular or programme aspects that fostered a global perspective, particularly through subjects such as language and literature, history and geography. Interviewees described how these subjects nurtured an understanding of complex perspectives on the world that went beyond a nationalistic view. One student, who attended a state sector high school in the United States, noted that his IB education gave him and his fellow students “the tools to understand the broader world”. He went on to provide examples:

I remember reading Heart of Darkness. That dealt with ... the colonization and expansion of European culture and it coming into contact with other cultures, and then we read Things Fall Apart, an African novel that kind of talked about some of the same things but from the other point of view, from the African point of view, and that's one example, but it just seemed like we were always learning to think about things from the other point of view.

Closely related to this, participants identified critical thinking as a core component of the IB. The development of the capacity for critical thought was regarded as a highly valued skill that has had a continuing influence on IB graduates' lives. Some of the older participants suggested that over time, they have come to understand the full impact of the IB in relation to their thought processes and orientations to the world, in ways that they did not appreciate when they were younger. This was particularly evident through reflections on the longer-term impact of theory of knowledge (TOK), which provide a contrast to insights reported in a recent study conducted by Cole and colleagues (2014). That study suggested that senior high school students had mixed views about the usefulness of TOK, as many were unsure about its impact on their skills of critical thinking. Interestingly, a number of participants in this study suggested that it was not until many years later that they were able to see the benefits of TOK. As one student commented on his DP experience in the mid-1970s:

You know, I benefited more from [TOK] after I did it than when I was doing it ... I think I was a bit immature from the academic perspective, I mean that was a very interesting subject, and I probably now get more out of

thinking about the things that were presented at that time than I did when I was a student there.

Summing up the views of others in this study, the following quote from a former IB student, who studied in China, describes how he perceives developing critical thinking to be a key component of an IB education:

I think the core value of IB is to create global citizens ... Another core value is to create critical thinkers. So I think those are the two main things, and to be a global citizen involves many, many things—there's tolerance, understanding, vision, [being] innovative; it embodies lots of things, and the critical thinking is a fundamental part of it because the breadth of the programme and different styles of teaching and the different styles of assessment means you critically analyse everything, whether it's art or history or science, whatever it is, you have to be a critical thinker, and not to take things on face value.

A broad worldview, the capacity for critical thinking and a deep understanding of the wider world were collectively noted by many as factors that helped them to become “a more rounded person”.

Educational engagement, academic rigour and lifelong learning

Another significant finding of this study was how IB programmes facilitate deep engagement with learning among students. For a number of participants, this reflected a stark contrast to earlier schooling experiences, with the IB representing a turning point in their engagement in education. As one former IB student from a state sector high school in Canada noted:

I went from sort of my failing grades in the regular high school programme to like, yeah, certainly straight As in the provincial thing and finished with a pretty good Diploma score and an extra certificate on top. So it was just like a night and day, sort of thing, in terms of the academic performance. It's like oh, I can do this. I'd never been an A student ... So that was a very positive transition for me I think.

Many described the IB as academically challenging. For some, the IB provided an opportunity to excel, promoting self-esteem and confidence; however, others described it as difficult and stressful. One student who participated in the DP in the UK reported that:

I struggled academically all the way through ... I found the work hard and voluminous. I mean there was really a lot of work. And also, it was a big surprise to me to find myself with students from other countries who were far, far brighter and better educated than I was, especially from Scandinavian countries for example. And so it wasn't easy at all, but I don't regret it.

Lastly, a commonly held view was that considerable long-term benefits were derived from the acquisition of research skills and the capacity for self-directed learning.

Higher education, vocational choice and working life

A further important finding from the study was that most participants reported that the IB provided them with considerable benefits with regard to tertiary studies. Many cited positive effects in relation to the ease of transition to university studies; this was particularly evident in the accounts provided by more recent graduates. One IB graduate from Mexico made the following observation:

The topics covered for each one of our courses were much more sophisticated than the regular topics that you would have in high school ... after I graduated and went to university, I found out some of the information that I was getting in the university, I already knew because of the IB programme.

Almost half of the participants reported receiving advanced credits for university subjects, most commonly reducing a typical four-year degree to three years. However, some early graduates described the IB as disadvantageous at a time of limited IB recognition. A number of people also described how they found university disappointing after experiencing the IB, insofar as it was less rigorous and engaging.

One of the core questions this research sought to address was the influence of the IB on people's vocational choices, employment pathways and their working lives more generally. While only a small number of participants identified the IB as having a direct impact on their career choice or university studies, many people noted that the IB had influenced and shaped their working lives considerably. This was evident in reflections on how the IB had provided them with particular skills or dispositions, such as understandings of cultural difference, the capacity for analytical and critical thinking, the development of high-level writing skills, and the acquisition of other languages. Participants highlighted these factors as

having directly and positively impacted their working lives. For example, one IB alumni, now an electrical engineer, reported how the skills gained through participation in an IB programme have influenced his career:

The history I got ... that was pretty intense. I did not like that at the time, and I actually think it was probably one of the more beneficial things about the programme—the ability to write well and to appreciate literature and other points of view. That was huge. And now I actually do paid technical writing, and I know I'm using what I learned in the IB and that I would have opted out if it had been an option when I was fifteen, but I'm glad I hadn't now.

Community service and social engagement

There was wide variation in the extent to which community service was emphasized in people's schooling experiences and in their lives beyond school. The majority of participants reported that creativity, action, service (CAS) was an important part of their IB experience, and a dimension of their schooling that has had a significant influence on their lives beyond school. For example, participants made clear links between their IB studies and their community sector work, volunteering or activism.

Interconnected influences

Many participants found it difficult to distinguish between the influence of the IB and the broader context of their schooling experience. This provides an interpretive challenge for research investigating educational impact, particularly in trying to disentangle the many influences that shape people's lives and worldviews. This was particularly evident for former students of international schools, especially in relation to issues such as intercultural understanding. For example, as one former IB student from an international school in Germany explained:

I think you can't separate the IB from the fact that it's an international school because I think they are what they are, they adopted the IB ... because it fit their mission statement. I remember it as sort of world peace and understanding and tolerance. It was a little island of people who had a made a conscious choice to go there, and I think that was also the case with the teachers.

The impact of particular aspects of the Diploma Programme, for instance the service component, on people's later orientation towards volunteering and community engagement was also an area in which

some people found it difficult to separate values derived from the IB or from family, cultural or religious beliefs. Additional research exploring these questions would further illuminate this topic.

Conclusions

The life history interviews generated detailed narrative accounts of the enduring influence of the IB on the lives of graduates. As the above discussion illustrates, perceived impacts of the IB were wide-ranging, with some aspects only becoming clear many years after the completion of IB studies. Overall, the majority of former IB students who took part in this study believe that the IB has had a lasting and positive impact on their lives. IB alumni reported that the IB provided them with a broader view of the world, including what many people described as an international or global view. Related to this, many participants identified the IB as fostering critical thinking.

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

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