

RESEARCH SUMMARY



International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme: Student social-emotional well-being and school success practices

Based on a research report prepared for the IB by:

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August 2014

Background

This research by Flinders University explored the well-being of International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP) students. Generally defined, individuals can be said to possess a state of well-being when they have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, Sanders 2012).

The philosophy underpinning the IB, which encompasses a holistic view of education, has deep connections with the ideas behind not only personal achievement in the academic sphere, but also social and emotional learning. More particularly, social and emotional learning is considered to play a key role in the MYP curriculum to develop knowledgeable, balanced and caring students.

Research suggests that supporting the social-emotional development of students in the middle years enhances academic and social outcomes for individuals, not only during schooling, but also later in life (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger 2011). However, studies undertaken to assess levels of social-emotional well-being among students completing IB programmes (Tan, Bibby 2011) are sparse. To contribute further knowledge to this important area, the current study used validated and commonly used instruments to measure the well-being of students enrolled in the MYP.

Research design

The objective of the study was to assess the social, emotional and psychological well-being of MYP students. A mixed method design was used to address the research questions, including measures that provide an indication of students' flourishing; social, emotional and psychological well-being; mental ill-health; empathy; global self-concept; reflection; resilience; relationships; and school satisfaction.

Due to the broad conceptualization of well-being in the academic community, three different, but complementary, measures were selected to determine the well-being of MYP students. Diener et al's (2009) Flourishing Scale and Keyes's (2006) Mental Health Continuum enabled two separate measures of **flourishing**, each using different indicators. Meanwhile Keyes's Mental Health Continuum and Liddle and Carter's (2010) Stirling Children's Well-being Scale enabled measures of **languishing** and **poor mental health**. The latter two scales also allowed for measures of moderate mental health (a state of well-being where individuals are considered to be functioning satisfactorily), positive outlook and the emotional states of respondents.

Measures of these constructs were combined into the 144 item Well-being Questionnaire (WBQ). This questionnaire was administered to students in term 3 of 2013, following a small pilot study used to refine the survey, for example, by ensuring questions were suitable for Australian adolescents. The average age of questionnaire participants was 13.9 years (SD=1.3).

Measure		Total Proportion	Males	Females
Flourishing Scale (Diener et al)	Flourishing (FloS)	55.3%	59.8%	50.9%
Mental Health Continuum (Keyes) (Composite measure)	Flourishing (MentHC)	54.1%	59.7%	47.8%
	Moderate Mental Health (MentHC)	39.7%	36.0%	44.0%
	Languishing (MentHC)	6.1%	4.4%	8.1%
Stirling Children's Well-being Scale (Liddle, Carter)	Poor mental health (StirCWB)	8.4%	5.2%	12.0%
	Positive Emotional State (StirCWB) - always	52.4%	58.3%	45.8%
	- sometimes	32.2%	27.6%	37.4%
	Positive Outlook (StirCWB) - always	60.1%	66.9%	52.4%
	- sometimes	35.6%	33.1%	38.4%

Table 1. Summary of well-being findings

Staff interviews (n=13) and student focus groups (n=49) were also conducted. In total 1,930 MYP students and 13 staff from 8 South Australian MYP schools (2 Catholic, 3 government and 3 independent schools) participated in the study. Statistical methods, consisting of parametric and non-parametric tests, were employed to analyse data collected from the WBQ. These included confirmatory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, effect size, multiple indicators multiple causes (MIMIC) and structural equation modelling (SEM).

Findings

Taken together, the findings suggest that MYP schools are helping to build the empathy, global self-concept, peer relationships, school relationships, self-reflection, resilience and confidence of MYP students. Only a small proportion of MYP students showed poor levels of well-being.

MYP students classified as flourishing, moderately mentally healthy and languishing

According to the researchers, more than half of the MYP students were flourishing using Diener et al's (2009) Flourishing Scale ("flourishing" involves functioning effectively and feeling good about oneself). Results from this scale indicated that 55.3% of MYP students were flourishing, using an assigned cut-off score of 40. In addition, a composite measure using selected items from Keyes's (2006) Mental Health

Continuum (MHC) classified 54.1% MYP students as flourishing, indicating that the results from the two measures were consistent on this concept. Keyes's MHC also showed that nearly two in five (39.7%) MYP students could be described as having moderate mental health. Overall, 54–55% of MYP students were flourishing and a total of 92–94% had moderate well-being or were flourishing (see Table 1). A similar study by Keyes's (2006) of 1,234 American young people aged 12–18, found that 38% were flourishing, 6% were languishing and the remainder (56%) were moderately mentally healthy. Results from Keyes's MHC and the Stirling Children's Well-being Scale suggest that approximately 6–8% of MYP students in the study could be identified as languishing.

Positive outlook and positive emotional state

Liddle and Carter's (2010) Stirling Children's Well-being Scale includes two subscales which measure positive outlook and positive emotional state. Analysis of these subscales on the WBQ found that over half (60.1%) of MYP students were experiencing a positive outlook and just over half (52.4%) were experiencing a positive emotional state "quite a lot" or "all of the time". Furthermore, an additional 32.2% and 35.6% of MYP students were experiencing a positive outlook or positive emotional state respectively "sometimes" (see Table 1). Overall, the well-being of 91.6% of MYP students was above the cut-off level of poor mental health.

Mental ill-health and gender differences

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 1997) was used as a screening instrument on the WBQ to identify indicators of mental ill-health among students. When males and females were divided into age groups, a comparison with Australian norm data found that, with one exception (specifically females aged 14–16), MYP students' SDQ scores fell within the normal range of mental health. However, for a small group of females in the upper years of MYP, emotional symptoms and total SDQ scores were "of concern" as these scores fell outside of one standard deviation from the Australian means for this age group of females. Indeed, male and female MYP students were found to differ on nearly all measures included in the WBQ, with males' self-reported scores generally higher than that of females. Males were more likely than females to flourish, to have a positive outlook and a positive emotional state, while females were more likely to languish or have moderate mental health. These findings are consistent with a growing body of research indicating that adolescent females nationally and internationally are reporting more mental health challenges than boys. The study suggests that the social and emotional disposition of females should be monitored, particularly across the upper years of the MYP, and appropriate interventions initiated when necessary.

Student ratings of empathy, self-concept, reflection and resilience

Student attributes considered to be associated with well-being were also examined in the study. These included cognitive and affective empathy, global self-concept, self-reflection, relationships and resilience. Overall, nearly one quarter of MYP students indicated high levels of empathy. Affective empathy¹ was present in just over half of the MYP students.

Other results concerning student self-concept, reflection and resilience showed that:

- just over half (52.2%) of MYP students reported that the descriptors of affective empathy were "very" or "fairly" like them

- nearly two in five (39.4%) MYP students reported that indicators of cognitive empathy were "very" or "fairly" like them
- more than half (61.0%) of MYP students reported a positive sense of global self-concept "always" or "most of the time"; moreover, the proportion was 90.5% when including students who report a positive global self-concept "sometimes" (29.5%)
- nearly three-quarters (74.6%) of MYP students in the sample indicated that they were engaging in self-reflection
- just over half (53.3%) of MYP students reported that they felt resilient "often" or "nearly all the time". The resilience levels of MYP students were comparable with those found by Lim et al (2011) in 190 adolescents, aged 12–16, from a public mainstream secondary school in Singapore.

Student satisfaction with school

Measures of student satisfaction included on the WBQ indicated that most MYP students were happy (approximately 70%) and satisfied (approximately 80%) with school. The researchers found that most MYP students reported that they enjoyed school (72%), enjoyed learning (69.7%), felt supported by their school (70.8%) and had a sense of fellowship at school (80.1%). Nearly one in five (19.2%) MYP students reported being bullied once a week or more often. This number was slightly lower than the 22.7% of South Australian students of similar age reported in a study by Slee (2005).

An open-ended question on the WBQ asked students to draw a picture or write about how their school helps them to be successful. Of the responses, just over four in five (82.2%) provided positive comments about the school, while 6.2% were negative, and 11.0% were pictures or remarks which could not be classified as positive or negative, but were considered "mixed". These results were reinforced in focus groups with students where, as the following quote illustrates, it was generally acknowledged that schools and teachers make an effort to support students:

¹ According to Van der Graaff et al, (2013) "cognitive empathy, or perspective taking, can be defined as the awareness and understanding of another's emotion" (p. 1), while affective empathy is associated with vicarious experiences that are consistent with what another person is feeling.

There's teachers such as you know, particular teachers at school that if they see you looking unhappy or sad or just unwell, they'll ask are you OK? Do you need to talk? ... and many teachers are like that. If they think there is something wrong they will almost always jump in to check. (Female, year 9)

Nonetheless, while students felt that most teachers were supportive and caring, they also noted that not all teachers matched this profile. Moreover, despite the schools' efforts, some students, particularly males in the upper years, felt reluctant to make use of the social and emotional support that was available to them.

School well-being programmes and approaches

Interviews with MYP staff undertaken at each of the eight participating schools provided a valuable opportunity to investigate the well-being programmes and approaches being implemented by MYP schools. These indicated that student well-being was considered important and was being actively addressed by IB schools. School personnel revealed that a variety of well-being programmes were delivered, including whole year-level approaches, such as orientation and transition programmes for year 6 or year 8 students that aimed to assist students in developing friendships and social skills. Staff also reported that there were times when programmes were used to support different groups of students within year levels. For instance, at one school males and females were separated for some sessions:

Sometimes we split them into girls and boys separately. So for example this year the year 8 and 9 girls were separate for a period of four lessons, where they looked at the sexualisation of girls in the media, and how media considers what is beautiful. And the boys did a four-week session called "Revved Up For Boys", and so they were looking at how they can manage their anger when their anger starts to become overwhelming, so what is it that they need to do to make sure that they don't explode. (MYP coordinator)

Additionally, other programmes were provided for students needing extra support. These programmes were generally voluntary, although as one participant pointed out, particular students were invited and encouraged to participate:

... two programmes are voluntary programmes, so they're run after school, so students have to opt in basically, but on occasions we might recommend to students' parents that some students might benefit from being involved as well. (Head of Middle School)

School success practices

Finally, qualitative interviews with staff were used to identify a number of enablers of success in MYP schools. Success practices described by staff included providing a safe and secure environment, attending to student well-being, ensuring good relationships with students and parents, empowering students, building student skills, possessing a culture of success, having a collaborative staff and supporting students with resources. Staff generally attributed external factors, such as parent and student characteristics and expectations, as barriers to success.

Summary

Overall, this exploratory study has provided a wealth of information about MYP students' well-being in association with a range of indicators, including global self-concept, resilience and relationships. While, on the whole, the results indicate that MYP students are faring well, the study shows that female students, and particularly those in the upper years of the MYP, warrant special attention if their social and emotional needs are to be addressed. The findings from this research can be used to inform future MYP initiatives aimed at enhancing student social-emotional well-being. Furthermore, this study was conducted prior to the introduction of MYP: The next chapter, which has an enhanced focus on student social and emotional outcomes. The present study therefore also provides a baseline for comparative purposes.

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This summary was developed 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.

To cite the full report, please use the following:

Skrzypiec, G, Askill-Williams, H, Slee, P and Rudzinski, A. 2014. *International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme: Student social-emotional well-being and school success practices*. Bethesda, MD, USA. International Baccalaureate Organization.