International Education and the IB

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The following paper defends the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) as a leader in international education. It defines international education as requiring an internationally-minded curriculum and a multicultural environment, and employs personal teaching experience as a means of explaining this definition. Finally, it analyzes how and to what extent the IB provides this type of education to its students.
As the world becomes smaller and nations grow more interdependent, there intensifies a need to prepare future generations to participate and lead in the international arena. The sphere of international education is rapidly expanding to include more schools in more countries. The International Baccalaureate (IB) programs serve as a model for this type of education and are thriving in schools worldwide. Since its creation of the Diploma Programme (DP) in 1962 and its additions of the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and the Primary Years Programme (PYP) in the 1990s, the IB has reached students in over 3500 schools and has emerged as a frontrunner in international education (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], 2013). What I believe has elevated the IB to this role of leader is its commitment to “international-mindedness” and its many opportunities for multicultural interaction. This paper first clarifies the meaning of international education as both a curricular approach and a learning environment, then discusses the IB’s fulfillment of these qualifications.

The term “international education” is used frequently among educators, but its meaning often varies depending on personal perspectives. One suggestion is a travel approach to education, in which students attend school abroad with the intention of returning to their home country after a set period of time. There are obvious benefits to this type of education. It offers the participants a view of a culture outside their own, and being immersed in the culture, they have the opportunity to experience that which a textbook could never have supplied. I would suggest, however, that travel—or “cosmopolitanism,” as Richard Harwood and Katharine Bailey (2012, p. 79) label it—cannot be the sole criterion of an international education. While studying abroad can afford students the setting in which to acquire new perspectives and a greater
understanding of diversity, the physical movement does not elicit these revelations; such growth is achieved through an attitude of “international-mindedness.”

This idea of being internationally-minded pervades educational writing. Harwood and Bailey (2012) emphasize “global consciousness” as a key characteristic of international-mindedness and define the term as “a phrase used to capture a set of skills, understanding, awareness and actions thought to be necessary for being a good national and international citizen” (p. 78). The internationally-minded individual acknowledges that the world is so much more than any one person’s experience and that through an appreciation of and a commitment to diversity, one becomes a better caretaker of the world and the relationships of its inhabitants.

Charles Gellar (as cited in Hayden, Thompson, & Walker, 2002) argues that a school committed to international-mindedness will employ a curriculum that emphasizes this global awareness, but will also make “universal values” (p. 31) a vital part of the students’ international instruction. This concept has been further expounded by Ian Hill (as cited in Hayden et al, 2002), whose writing on an internationally-minded curriculum focuses on the content, skills, and attitudes presented in the curriculum. The content presents knowledge from a “global perspective” (Hayden et al., 2002, p. 26), the skills taught are those critical thinking skills needed to evaluate and utilize the information, and the attitudes establish the ethical purpose of using this knowledge for the betterment of the world and humankind.

If an international education is contingent upon a curriculum that fosters international-mindedness, could students in a national school receive an international education? To help answer this question, I have considered my own experience teaching at the sixth grade level in rural Virginia. Using the curriculum framework required by the county and still complying with
the state learning standards, I believe that the students may be taught from an international perspective. Global issues are currently addressed in the science curriculum in topics such as watersheds, climate change, and energy. In language arts, students are already expected to read fiction and nonfiction from around the world, so curricular focus on understanding these different cultures would not only promote a more international mindset but would probably enhance reading comprehension and an understanding of the author’s point of view. Class discussions and writing, while enhancing specific language skills, would center on world concerns. Even the history curriculum, which covers American history from 1865 to present, can be taught with particular attention to the United States as a participant in world affairs.

With the increased globalization of our world, all education should be preparing students to be internationally-minded. Does that then grant them an international education? Ian Hill (as cited in Hayden et al, 2002) contends that not only should an international education make students aware of other cultures and how their own culture is connected to them, but it should also engage students of various cultures in educational activities, thereby laying the groundwork for a peace among nations based on respect. An internationally-minded curriculum can help prepare students for world citizenship, but an international education allows them to implement these skills while in school. Multicultural interaction is what advances international education a step beyond international-mindedness; thus, student demographics, which can hamper the amount of interaction with varying cultures, become a factor in qualifying international education. Again referencing my own professional experience, the school where I teach enrolls approximately five hundred students, with nearly eighty percent of these students being white. Most of the students come from upper-middle or working class families, and many of these
families have lived in the surrounding area for a hundred years. No matter how their school
curriculum prepares them to be internationally-minded, the homogenous nature of the student
body has precluded a true international education.

International education, therefore, involves two parts: an internationally-minded
curriculum and a multicultural experience for the students enrolled. As a leader in international
education, the IB fulfills both requirements. Referring back to Hill’s (as cited in Hayden et al,
2002) description, the international-mindedness of a curriculum is displayed in its content, skills,
and attitudes. The content of the IB curriculum encompasses a broad range of topics and aims to
develop a cultural awareness in students (IBO, 2002). A commitment to this content is further
illuminated in the IB learner profile (IBO, 2008), which states that an IB learner must be
“knowledgeable,” “open-minded,” and “balanced” (p. 5). The amount of content furnishes a rich
source of knowledge, the range of content encourages a spirit of open-mindedness, and the focus
on personal cultural identity in addition to multiculturalism offers balance.

The IB curriculum also maintains a philosophy of international-mindedness in that it
cultivates the skills needed to function in an increasingly globalized world. A Continuum of
International Education (IBO, 2002) highlights the need for “flexibility and adaptability in
students as learners” (p. 11). Because IB students garner knowledge from a multitude of sources
and perspectives, they must have the critical thinking skills needed to analyze and apply this
knowledge. Critical thinking in the PYP focuses on transdisciplinary topics—such as “sharing
the planet” and “how the world works” (IBO, 2002, p. 5)—that can be addressed in any of the
required school subjects. The MYP approaches the various content areas from an
interdisciplinary perspective: using critical thinking skills, the students investigate how the
content areas are interconnected. The DP provides an in-depth approach to the educational disciplines, culminating in the completion of an extended essay. This focus on critical thinking skills is echoed in the IB learner profile (IBO, 2008) in its assertion that students should be “communicators” and “risk-takers” (p. 5) who will employ the knowledge gained through inquiry and reflection in beneficial, practical ways.

Many schools provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to live successfully, but international-mindedness also professes an ideology that steers the attitudes of learners toward empathy and respect for people of varying cultures and creeds, and toward responsibility for the improvement of the planet. The IB learner profile (IBO, 2008) expects that students be “caring” and “principled” (p. 5) in their stewardship of the planet and in their treatment of those that inhabit it. The IB curriculum, in addition, recognizes the existence of “universal human rights” (IBO, 2002, p. 10) and is dedicated to community service on a local and global scale.

Since the IB programs were developed with the goal of nurturing world citizens, the IB supplies a model for implementing international-mindedness seamlessly into a curriculum. In their commitment to the content, skills, and attitudes of international-mindedness, IB schools have become magnets for students and teachers from many walks of life. This attraction has developed the second crucial element of an international education, a multicultural experience. The IBO (2002) offers an “international community . . . in which anyone, anywhere . . . may be encouraged by all to grow individually, and with an understanding of others” (p. 7). IB schools operate in 145 different countries and attract more than a million students from around the globe (IBO, 2013), creating what Hill (as cited in Hayden et al, 2002) calls a “diverse cultural mix” (p. 27). For students in IB schools, engaging with other cultures is not just an educational
In the face of a shrinking world, connected by transportation and communication as it has never been before, the demand for international education will only increase. There is a need for schools from which internationally-minded individuals may emerge prepared to engage the world as global citizens. This type of education, achieved through a globalized mindset and a diverse population, has been expertly modeled by the IB. With its emphasis on international-mindedness and its multicultural environment, IB schools will continue to play a vital role in international education.
References


