The IB Diploma Programme as an Option for Gifted Learners

Natalie Beals

George Mason University
Abstract

Gifted education is a growing area of study, but gifted education programs in the United States tend to exercise their largest sphere of influence in elementary school and seem to cease altogether after middle school. Most high school students identified as gifted have the same advanced curricular options open to all students, including honors classes, Advanced Placement classes, dual-enrollment courses, and, depending on the school or school district, the International Baccalaureate (IB). Though the IB is not a gifted education program, it presents a rigorous and globally recognized curriculum of study for gifted and non-gifted students alike.

This paper examines how the IB programs offered to high school students address specific educational needs of gifted learners and even fills gaps that exist in many gifted programs. The study is viewed through three lenses relevant to gifted learners: the academic and cognitive needs of gifted learners, affective and social needs of gifted learners, and the multiculturalism (or lack thereof) in gifted education.
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The 21st century has brought increased attention to the individual learner. Traditional, factory-like education, intent on mass-producing graduates educated within the same curricular framework, is giving way to a focus on individual learner needs and interests. Students are organized according to culture, language proficiency, socio-economic status, aptitude, and a multitude of other labels that educators use to help understand their specific learning needs. One of these labels which garners much attention is that of gifted. Since the 1970s, when a definition of giftedness was first put out by the United States government, gifted programs have expanded so that the number of gifted learners in the U.S. ranges between three and five million (National Association for Gifted Children, 2014; National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, as cited in Yeung, 2014).

Specific programs designed to meet the needs of these learners are most commonly seen at the elementary and middle school levels. Once students reach the high school level, however, specialized gifted programs drop off sharply (Callahan, Moon, & Oh, 2014). Two ways in which high schools have attempted to address the needs of gifted learners are through Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the International Baccalaureate (IB) (Balfazan, 2009; Callahan et al., 2014). Neither of these programs are designed specifically for gifted learners. Most educators believe that AP courses are appropriate for all learners (Callahan et al., 2014), and the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) actively seeks to avoid academic elitism by making its academic programs widely accessible and making room within the curricular framework for diverse learners (IBO, 2010).

While there are limited options for gifted learners to receive specialized education at the
high school level, the IB’s Diploma Programme (DP)—intended for sixteen to nineteen year-olds, or eleventh and twelfth graders—is unique in its appeal to multiple facets of the gifted learner. While providing a challenging curriculum that meets the cognitive needs of gifted learners, the DP also address needs related to gifted learners’ emotional and social well-being and provides a multicultural approach to what is usually a culturally deficient realm in education. These three areas of gifted education make the DP a viable, if not preferable, educational option for gifted high school students.

**Academic and Cognitive Needs of Gifted Learners**

Though definitions of what constitutes a gifted learner will vary, most definitions acknowledge that a gifted individual exhibits some special talent or talents, harnessed to create products or performances that are ahead of those of the individual’s peers. Though few educators hold to the strict “top 1%” that Terman (as cited in Renzulli, 2011, p. 82) suggested in 1926, excellence, or being exceptionally good at something, still dominates the gifted conversation. In addition to excellence, however, other aspects of giftedness include the degree to which an individual excels above his or her peers, whether an individual can demonstrate the giftedness through assessment or the creation of some product, and whether the talent in question is of value to society (Sternberg & Zhang, 1995). Renzulli (2011) described the manifestation of giftedness as a “three-ring” concept, demonstrated in above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity (p. 83). Originally published in 1978, Renzulli’s theory on what makes giftedness has become the guiding standard for many gifted programs’ identification processes.

In 1971, the U.S. Office of Education sponsored a study that would define giftedness and determine the unique educational needs of the gifted population. The report stated that because
gifted children have above-average ability and are “capable of high performance,” these children require additions to the curriculum that specifically address these abilities (Marland, 1971, p. 8). These additions range from accommodations in the general education classroom to separate programs exclusively for gifted students. Tookey (1999) calls for an appropriate level of difficulty in the curriculum, in addition to the development of work habits and study skills. Renzulli (2011) argues that because gifted students have above-average ability, they should be in a program of study that challenges these abilities. These areas of study should be addressed in creative ways, encouraging personal inquiry and requiring students to extend their thinking beyond simple comprehension or limited application (Renzulli, 2011; Wood, 2010). Flint (2014) states that opportunities for creativity within a curriculum allow students of all levels to achieve their “personal best” (p. 66). For gifted students, this striving would allow them to flex their abilities that may be underachieved in traditional assessments.

Though the IB is not a program for the gifted, it meets many of the academic needs of gifted learners. There is little debate that the DP is an academically challenging program. DP students study six subjects at the same time, with courses spanning six content area groups—primary language, secondary language, social sciences (labeled “individuals and societies”), experimental sciences, mathematics and computer science, and the arts (IBO, 2009b, p. 5). In allowing for some specialization, students are expected to take three—with the possibility of four—courses at a “higher level,” rather than the “standard level” (IBO, 2009b, p. 5). In addition to academic disciplines, DP students complete the curricular core, including at least 100 instructional hours in Theory of Knowledge (TOK), two-year involvement in creativity, action, service (CAS), and completion of the extended essay requirement.
DP AS AN OPTION FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

The DP also aims to develop the “higher order thinking” necessary to challenge gifted learners (IBO, 2009b, p. 8). Critical, creative, and reflective thinking pervade the DP. As critical thinkers, DP learners examine concepts from multiple perspectives and make “reasoned, ethical decisions” based on their study (IBO, 2008a, p. 5). As creative thinkers and inquirers, DP learners independently pursue questions relevant to their own interests and curiosity (IBO, 2008a, 2009b). As reflective thinkers, DP learners examine their own learning processes in order that they may better understand how they and others think (IBO, 2009a, 2009b). In short, the DP provides a learning environment that offers “tangible positive consequences for excellence, rigor, asking penetrating questions and hard work”—an environment that is particularly conducive to the gifted learner (Tookey, 1999, Benefits of an IB Diploma Program, para. 5).

One way in which the DP sets itself apart from other advanced high school programs is through its support of interdisciplinary understanding. While it is important for students seeking higher education to build disciplinary knowledge, the DP forges “connections between academic disciplines” (IBO, 2009b, p. 6). Gifted students, are often identified by the creative tendency to see the big picture, making unique connections among concepts, content areas, and ideas (Flint, 2014; Renzulli, 2011). The DP focuses on viewing multiple perspectives and exploring how the content relates to “individual, local, national and world issues” (IBO, 2010, p. 23). One way of fostering interdisciplinary learning that is unique to the DP is the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) core component. The purpose of the TOK course is to explore “how we know what we claim to know” (IBO, 2013b, p. 8). Through examination of the ways of knowing and branches of knowledge, DP learners bridge the gaps among areas of their study, creating context and
relevance necessary to a balanced and complex approach to understanding.

Another way in which the DP appeals to the academic needs of gifted learners is through its inquiry-based teaching and learning. Inquiry, the process of seeking answers to questions through research and experimentation, serves as the basis for DP classes, making the students responsible for the direction of their learning and the teacher the facilitator of that learning. Inquiry is a key way in which the DP infuses the curriculum with creativity and creative thinking, aiming to produce inquiring, open-minded individuals who explore problems from multiple perspectives and take risks in attempting to solve these problems (IBO, 2008a, 2009b). Flint (2014) argues that opportunities for creativity within a curriculum allow students of all ability levels to achieve their “personal best” (p. 66). For gifted students, this striving allows them to flex abilities that may be underachieved in traditional teacher-directed learning. A unique way in which the DP fosters creativity through inquiry is through the extended essay. The extended essay is a 4,000 word product based on independent student research in an area of the student’s own choosing. The purpose of the extended essay, in addition to preparing for research writing at the university level, is for students to employ “creative and critical thinking” skills toward exploring a topic that is personally significant (IBO, 2013a, p. 6).

**Affective and Social Needs of Gifted Learners**

In addition to specific academic needs, gifted learners also have non-academic needs related to socio-emotional development. As early as the 1920s, Hollingworth (as cited in Silverman, 1990) researched the social and emotional well-being of the gifted child. She observed that gifted children often played alone more than other children and that they seemed to have trouble relating to their peers in social settings. She both feared for and was often amazed
by the adjustment of these gifted individuals who seemed to have so many social hurdles to
overcome. Decades later, affective and social needs are still a concern for the gifted child.

Though the stereotype of the bullied nerd may not ring true for all gifted learners, gifted
individuals may have difficulty finding a like-minded social group due to asynchronous
cognitive development and fewer peers with abilities similar to their own (Barber & Mueller,
2011; Wood, 2010). This difficulty could lead them to deny or hide their giftedness in order to
fit in socially (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010) or could lead to other affective issues like depression
(Mueller, 2009). In addition to social difficulties, gifted individuals often experience difficulty
in managing their own giftedness, struggling with both overachievement—or a propensity for
posits the concern that if left unchecked, the same affective issues that plague gifted individuals
in school can persist into their professional careers.

The DP is meant to be a holistic learning experience: it seeks to educate the whole
student, rather than place an emphasis on any one facet of the students’ being. The DP
acknowledges that cognitive, affective, and social experiences of the individual work together to
influence learning, and one of the characteristics of an IB learner is that he or she is balanced
(IBO, 2008a, 2009b). Personal growth should be evidenced in all areas of the DP learner’s
education, and teachers are expected to teach the whole child, rather than focus simply on the
academic side of the student (IBO, 2009b). Because of this overall emphasis on holistic
learning, affective issues unique to gifted learners can and are expected to be addressed on an
individual student basis.

CAS is one area of the DP which is specifically dedicated toward developing more than
the cognitive functions of the DP student. *Creativity* is meant to personally challenge the individual in an artistic or inventive way—to take them beyond their academic coursework into an area for in which they desire to excel. *Action* refers to physical activity and challenges students to develop their physical self in addition to their academic self. *Service* develops the DP learner’s sense of social responsibility and explores the global and local effects of collaboration for the betterment of society (IBO, 2006a). CAS is specifically designed to be a “counterbalance to the academic pressures of the rest of the Diploma Programme,” further emphasizing education of the whole student (IBO, 2006a, p. 3).

The holistic aims of the DP are meant for all learners, but studies have shown that they also address affective needs specific to gifted learners. Concerning the need for gifted learners to have a social circle, DP students are usually surrounded by “equally bright age-peers” who desire an advanced and rigorous academic program (Tookey, 1999, Conclusions, para. 2). Shaunessy et al. (2006a) found that while the gifted and non-identified DP learners in their study responded similarly to questions about social and emotional distress, their responses were different from those of their general education peers. In particular, the DP students exhibited lower levels of “internalizing problems,” such as anxiety and depression, and fewer instances of “externalizing symptoms,” such as inappropriate or hostile behavior (p. 85). Shaunessy and Suldo (2010) found that DP students tend to cope with stress in similar ways, many reporting that “despite the often challenging IB demands, their IB classes, teachers, and peers provide satisfying educational and emotional connections that sustain them throughout their IB years” (p. 128). These studies further illustrate specific ways in which gifted learners in DP programs are having their affective needs met.
Multiculturalism in Gifted Programs

Cognitive and affective considerations are relevant to the gifted learner, but the DP also address a deficit observed in many different gifted programs. A frequent complaint about gifted programs in the United States is their pervasive lack of multiculturalism. Some of this cultural one-sidedness comes from the cultural makeup of gifted programs. Cultural bias often plays a role in the identification of the gifted; thus, students outside the majority in cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic background are often underrepresented in gifted programs (Ford, 1995; Herr, Castro, & Canty, 2012). Sternberg and Zhang’s (1995) research reveals that people’s concept of giftedness is based in, among other areas, whether it is demonstrated through assessment and whether or not the area in which one is gifted is valued by society. Because assessments used to determine giftedness tend to be culturally biased (Herr et al., 2012) and teachers are not always versed in how to recognize giftedness in students from other cultures (Ford, 1995), minority students are frequently overlooked in gifted identification.

In addition to lower rates of identification, cultural diversity in the curricula of gifted programs tends to be shallow at best and one-sided at worst. Ford & Grantham (1996) argue that U.S. curriculum, in general, falls short in its use of English as the only language of instruction or assessment; in its inadvertent, yet still present, stereotyping of different cultures; and in its limiting of multicultural content to specific holidays or months. “Tokenization” of multicultural content, or including it for the sake of its contrast to the dominant culture, rather than for its value to the concepts presented in the curriculum, adds to the multicultural deficits (Ford & Grantham, 1996, Characteristics of Multicultural Education, para. 12).

Because of these identification- and curricular-related shortcomings, gifted programs in
the U.S. are composed predominantly of White, English-speaking individuals, isolating gifted students outside this dominant culture. Compound this isolation with a culturally biased curriculum, and gifted minority students can begin to question the relevance of what they are learning or compartmentalize their education, behaving one way in school and another in their communities (Herr et al., 2012, p. 12). Ford, Moore, and Harmon (2005) argue that a multicultural education can benefit any student, no matter their culture or academic ability, but that it is of particular benefit in a gifted classroom, where students of color are in the minority. While such a curriculum provides White students with “windows to look into the world and see people from other cultures,” it gives students of color “mirrors to see themselves reflected in gifted education” (Ford et al., 2005, p. 136).

The DP’s approach to multicultural curriculum is in the form of international-mindedness. The content of the DP curriculum aims to develop a cultural awareness in students and to develop learners who will “help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect” (IBO, 2008b). This “intercultural understanding” involves a full understanding of one’s own perspective, through critical reflection, in order to better understand the perspectives of others. It encourages the entire IB community “to explore human commonality, diversity and interconnection” (IBO, 2013c, p. 6). A commitment to international-mindedness is further illuminated in the IB Learner Profile (IBO, 2008a), which states that an IB learner must be “knowledgeable,” “open-minded,” and “balanced” (p. 5). The DP’s breadth of academic content furnishes a rich source of knowledge, the range of cultural content encourages a spirit of open-mindedness, and the focus on personal cultural identity in addition to multiculturalism offers balance.
The IB has also taken steps to make the DP more accessible to all students. One of the IBO’s goals is to increase student access to the DP, “enabling more students to experience and benefit from an IB education regardless of personal circumstances” (IBO, 2006b, p. 4). In admitting students to the DP, the IB encourages schools to admit students based on merit, rather than on their “ability to pay,” and to make sure that students from cultural groups “who have been historically underrepresented” do not feel marginalized (IBO, 2009b, p. 20, 21).

Continuing this endeavor, DP teachers and administrators are expected to assist students whose language background is different from the primary language of instruction (IBO, 2006b, 2009b). The IB also increases program accessibility by employing and developing what Ford & Grantham (1996) call “culturally competent educators” (Key to Successful Multicultural Education, para. 1). These educators understand that expressions of giftedness often depend on culture and can recognize context-dependent indicators of giftedness. Professional development in the IB is considered to be “an on-going commitment by teachers” (IBO, 2009b, p. 9, 40), and IB teachers are committed to improving their teaching practice to benefit all learners.

**Conclusion**

Gifted learners present a unique population with specialized learning needs that range beyond the classroom and its curricular content. While many high school course offerings are limited in their academic options for gifted learners, the DP presents an educational option that extends beyond academic extensions and addresses the multiple facets of the gifted learner. As a rigorous academic program, requiring students to think critically, creatively, and reflectively, the DP stretches all learners, including those with above-average ability in academics. The DP’s holistic focus on the individual learner addresses social and emotional needs common to gifted
learners, such as finding a like-minded peer group and balancing a rigorous academic curriculum with other areas of interest. In addition to providing academic challenge and affective support to students, the DP also provides a multicultural view of learning that is so often lacking in gifted programs. It is the combination of these three features that makes the DP an ideal choice for gifted high school learners, outshining the competition with its multi-sided approach to student learning.

**Reflection**

In undertaking this study, I knew from the beginning that I wanted to study the options that the DP presents to gifted learners. In exploring gifted options present in my own school district I observed that very little is offered for high school students. Elementary schools present entirely separate programs for the gifted, and middle schools offer honors level classes that include both gifted and non-identified learners, but the chief options available to gifted high school students are AP courses. Out of concern for this lack of high school gifted options, I wanted to explore where the DP addressed specific needs of the gifted learner. My initial research revealed that gifted learners have specific cognitive, affective, and social needs that, while catered to at the elementary and middle school levels, are often overlooked completely at the high school level. My early research also revealed the dearth of multiculturalism in gifted programs in the U.S. This finding was unsurprising. My own honors course includes 20 students, 18 of whom are White, middle class, English-speaking Americans.

I knew after submitting my annotated bibliography that I would need to explore more research related to the needs of gifted learners, particularly since two of the studies that I cited in the annotated bibliography did not particularly apply to my topic: one focused specifically on
gifted students in Israeli schools and the other did not focus on gifted learners at all. This new foray into research was overwhelming. The more content I found, the more I understood just how broad my topic was. Limiting my findings to what is in this paper was a difficult process that involved cutting a great deal of painstakingly crafted writing. For example, I originally intended to write about post-high school plans and career-counseling needs of gifted learners, but this simply became too much for one paper.

One positive outcome of my extensive research was that it allowed me to read more about the practices and program standards of the DP. As a middle school teacher, most of my graduate study in the IB concentration has revolved around the Middle Years Programme, and I had only made cursory scans of DP documents. As I plodded through these documents, I came to a better understanding of the curricular components specific to the DP and how these components fit within the broad scope of the IB continuum. Having never spent too much time reading about TOK, CAS, or the extended essay, the reading that I did for this paper allowed me to more fully comprehend the holistic view of learning undertaken by the DP and other programs within the IB.

Overall, my understanding of gifted learning has broadened over the course of researching for and writing this paper. For my own professional development, I am particularly interested in using this new understanding to reach my gifted learners. I am constantly struggling to find the healthy line at which point students are appropriately challenged but not overwhelmed. IB readings reminded me to refocus my attention on the learners themselves, rather than on curricular goals or imagined ideas of how the ideal classroom is conducted. This study has also made me more aware of the affective needs of gifted learners. While I was aware
of stereotypes related to social and emotional needs of gifted learners, I had never taken much
time to research these needs for myself. I now feel that I have a better understanding of the
thought processes and emotional reactions that I experience from my gifted learners. Finally, the
attention that my research drew to the lack of multiculturalism in gifted programs has renewed
my desire to incorporate international-mindedness into my teaching practices. Though my
curriculum is largely laid out by the state of Virginia, I have been reminded to use what freedom
I have to expand my students cultural awareness and global perspectives.
References


