

Five Myths about the International Baccalaureate

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The International Baccalaureate Organization (IB) has been in existence for almost 50 years, and is well-respected in developing educational programmes for students from Kindergarten to senior school graduation. However, there are many misunderstandings about IB that have influenced opinions regarding its appropriateness for all learners. While “IB has a hard-earned reputation for high standards of teaching, pedagogical leadership and student achievement”¹ some believe these attributes are not applicable for all learners or some kinds of schools. This article will address five myths about IB, and hopefully, will provide the reader with a better understanding of this exceptional program.

Myth #1: *IB is just a university prep program*

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) is beneficial for students going to university, and also provides preparation for students attending all post-secondary institutions. More important are the lifelong benefits to IB including marketable job skills, career opportunities, flexible thinking skills, adaptability and informed citizenship. Furthermore, this myth is perpetrated by those who are not familiar with other IB programmes such as the Primary Years Programme (PYP) for students aged 3 to 11, and the Middle Years Programme (MYP) for students aged 12 to 16. IB is one of most effective programs in preparing students for the 21st Century. Extensive research has identified the following essential 21st century skills for today's students²: collaboration and teamwork, creativity and imagination, critical thinking and problem solving. These skills are all addressed in all IB programmes supporting students and teachers starting in Kindergarten.

Myth #2: *IB is only for the brightest and best students*

There is a claim IB is an elitist program intended for just the ‘brightest and best’ students. This claim is usually found in North America because many public schools use the IB diploma as a program for the gifted. International Baccalaureate never intended for its programmes to be for a select group of students; rather, they have always supported an inclusive approach for all students: “The DP is open to any student aged 16 to 19, at schools that have been authorized to implement the programme.”³ All students can do the IBDP if they are given enough time and support to learn. Most public schools in North America construct a timetable that limits instructional time based on government regulations of minimal hours expected, and requiring equal time for each class to facilitate the collective agreement of preparation time for teachers. For example, most public secondary schools provide students with eight classes per year or 12.5% instructional time per class. This matches the usual requirement of 12.5% preparation

¹ <http://www.ibo.org/about-the-ib/>

² <http://www.envisionexperience.com/plan-your-future/blog-articles/13-essential-21st-century-skills-for-todays-students>, January 9, 2014 by Barry Lawrence

³ <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/>

time for teachers.⁴ If instructional time is limited, as it is in public schools, then it is fair to assume only the brightest and best students are able to successfully obtain the IB diploma. Private and independent schools can be more flexible in developing timetables with more instructional time which can support all students learning the IB, including students with special assessment needs.⁵

Throughout North America, school systems have recognized IBDP courses as equivalent to government courses. For example, IBDP English is a two-year course, and when completed the government will recognize IBDP English as equivalent to its own English 11 and English 12 courses. This means students will first receive credits toward the government graduation diploma, and then work toward the IB diploma, if all the necessary requirements for the IBDP are met. It is very possible an IBDP student would not meet the IB diploma requirements, but still graduate with the government diploma. Regardless, the IB approach to learning better prepares students for any post-secondary experience.

It should also be noted the PYP and the MYP must be provided to all students in the school for authorization to implement the programmes.

Myth #3: *IB is a challenging and difficult program*

The IBDP is a challenging program, but expectations are not higher than government standards, just different. The IB approaches to learning encourage students to develop competencies rather than just content. Assessment in the IBDP is also different as students are evaluated using a 7-point scale, and post-secondary institutions believe IBDP scores are more reliable because of its standardized testing. For example, students take exams at the end of the two-year course that are the same exams written by IBDP students all over the world. Universities also convert the IBDP score to a percentage that indicates respect for students learning through the IBDP. For example, the University of British Columbia will assign percentages and convert IB scores as follows: **7** - 96% - 100%; **6** - 90% - 95%; **5** - 86% - 89%; **4** - 76% - 85%; **3** - 70% - 75%.⁶

The following descriptions of the PYP and MYP also address these programmes as suitable for all learners:

“By choosing to implement the PYP, schools will develop students’ academic, social and emotional wellbeing, focusing on international-mindedness and strong personal values. The PYP nurtures independent learning skills, encouraging every student to take responsibility for their learning. The PYP incorporates local and global issues into the curriculum, asking students to look at six related, transdisciplinary themes and to consider the links between them. The themes include ‘who we are’, ‘where we are in place and time’ and ‘how the world works’.⁷ It prepares students for the intellectual challenges of further education and their future careers,

⁴ Relates to British Columbia public school contract agreements with teacher unions.

⁵ IBDP Candidates with Special Needs Assessment document, May 2011

⁶ UBC Entrance requirements

⁷ <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/primary-years-programme/what-is-the-pyp/>

focusing on the development of the whole child as an inquirer, both in the classroom and in the world outside.”⁸

“The MYP is a challenging framework that encourages students to make practical connections between their studies and the real world. The MYP is inclusive by design; students of all interests and academic abilities can benefit from their participation. Implementation of the MYP is a whole-school endeavour, although the programme can accommodate academically-selective models.”⁹

Myth #4: *IB is only for students*

While all students clearly benefit from an IB education, there is another group who value the opportunity to be involved – the teachers. IB offers quality professional development and many teachers believe it transforms their pedagogical skills. There are few, if any, other programs that get full support and backing from all teachers. Authorization of an IB programme is also conditional on all teachers supporting IB through training and its development in the school. “The IB supports schools and teachers to provide a rigorous, high-quality education, offering professional development that improves pedagogy and leadership.”¹⁰

Collaboration is another important element for IB teachers. “A collaborative culture is at the core of many IB World Schools. It’s not just about students working together, fostering a community of experience and learning, but also includes teachers and staff. Research and case studies suggest that by forming a network of resources, support, and guidance, teachers feel more comfortable in their roles, which subsequently has a positive effect on students.”¹¹

Myth #5: *IB is not a good fit for Christian schools*

There are only a few Christian schools offering IB programmes, probably because of some of the myths above, and many Christian schools believe it is inconsistent with a Christian worldview. However, there have been recent changes in IB to be more inclusive with faith-based schools. Also, faith-based schools need to understand how IB can better prepare their students for the future, and the IB approaches to learning need not be inconsistent with the school’s core purpose and values. “The IB learner profile describes a broad range of human capacities and responsibilities that go beyond academic success, and is considered the core of all IB programmes.”¹² The IB learner profile represents 10 attributes valued by IB World Schools. It is believed these attributes, and others like them, can help individuals and groups become responsible members of local, national and global communities.¹³ One of the attributes is ‘risk-takers’, and schools can now replace this attribute with ‘courageous’, which might better reflect the Christian perspective, and schools can also add other attributes which

⁸ <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/primary-years-programme/what-is-the-pyp/>

⁹ <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/middle-years-programme/>

¹⁰ <http://www.ibo.org/>

¹¹ <http://blogs.ibo.org/blog/2015/07/30/collaborative-teaching-transforms-the-classroom/>

¹² <http://www.ibo.org/benefits/learner-profile/>

¹³ The IB learner profile

describe learners in the school. Also, another attribute called ‘balanced’ gives schools the opportunity to add the word ‘spiritual’ to the description of this attribute: “We understand the importance of balancing different aspects of our lives— intellectual, physical, emotional and **spiritual**—to achieve well-being for ourselves and others. We recognize our interdependence with other people and with the world in which we live.”¹⁴ Some Christian schools offering IB programmes also interpret learner profile attributes through a Christian perspective. For example, the ‘Inquirers’ attribute is described by IB as follows: We nurture our curiosity, developing skills for inquiry and research. We know how to learn independently and with others. We learn with enthusiasm and sustain our love of learning throughout life.¹⁵ White Rock Christian Academy has provided a Christian perspective of this attribute as follows: We distinguish and recognize truth based on Biblical principles and are acquiring wisdom and discernment to recognize and understand the purpose and inherent order that God created in this world. Through exploring and discovering God’s created world, we find ourselves renewed and refreshed.

Unique to IB is its educational philosophy of international-mindedness. “An IB education creates learning communities in which students can increase their understanding of language and culture, developing as successful communicators with the skills needed for intercultural dialogue and global engagement. Students, teachers, and leaders in the IB school communities have a range of perspectives, values, and traditions. The concept of international-mindedness builds on these diverse perspectives to generate a sense of common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet.”¹⁶ IB has always supported service learning and built the concept into all of its programmes, and Christian schools can use IB’s service learning as a means of further developing and providing a deeper understanding of faith-based mission and service learning.

Final thoughts

Myths are ideas widely held but can be false or a misinterpretation. It is unfortunate IB is sometimes seen as an educational program appropriate for only few members of school communities. IB has always represented ‘best practice’ in teaching and learning, and many school systems are now recognizing and being influenced by the importance of teaching inquiry, competencies over content, global understanding, and helping to prepare students for an ever-changing future in both local and global communities.

¹⁴ IB learner profile

¹⁵ IB learner profile

¹⁶ <http://blogs.ibo.org/blog/2014/12/01/ten-perspectives-on-international-mindedness/>