

The Future is International : the IB Diploma

A personal view by Peter MacKenzie, Director of Windhoek International School

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Fifty years ago the International Baccalaureate Organization was founded in Geneva, Switzerland. It was the brainchild of a number of academics and educationalists, many of whom were associated with the International School of Geneva. The men – and in the 1960s it was, I’m afraid, mostly men – whose vision became the IB Diploma were motivated by a mixture of the idealistic and the pragmatic. And this combination of idealism and pragmatism has characterized the IB ever since.

The pragmatic problem these founders of the IB were trying to address was that of the need for a school-leaving qualification which would be recognized for university entrance all around the world. Alec Peterson, who was the first Director General of the IB, has written of visiting the International School of Geneva and finding a final year Physics class where the poor teacher was trying to prepare students for the Swiss *maturité*, the French *baccalauréat*, English A-Levels and American College Board Advanced Placement exams. In other words, four different *national* exams.

This hapless Physics teacher’s problem existed because these students needed to take and pass examinations which would be recognized for university entrance in their own countries. An American school in Tokyo, a British school in Rome or a French school in San Francisco faced no such problem. They taught their national curriculum – and taught it, naturally, in their own language – and students graduated and matriculated just as they would have done had the schools been located in New York, London or Paris. But an international school – an ‘authentic’ international school such as the

International School of Geneva - couldn't be expected to offer the national curriculums of fifty countries.

Nor, of course, did it want to.

By the 1950s the International School of Geneva was not unique but it was still one of only a few schools around the world established in order to educate children from a wide diversity of countries. Yokohama International School was also founded in 1924 just a few weeks after Geneva and a handful of other schools followed, but until the mid-1950s the number of schools describing themselves as 'international' was still tiny.

That began to change very dramatically in the late '50s and early '60s. My own career - which is not exceptional - illustrates this. The first international school I worked in - in Switzerland - was founded in 1960. I later worked in excellent international schools in Japan (founded in 1962) and in Tanzania (founded in 1963). Three schools in three countries on three continents all calling themselves 'international' and all founded within a few years of each other. And there are many other examples.

It was in this context that that the IB Diploma was born. (The PYP and MYP did not follow until the 1990s and for many years the Diploma was known simply as "the IB".) By 1967 the International Baccalaureate Organization had an office in Geneva. In 1968 the first IB Diploma courses were offered and in 1970 the first IB graduates - just 29 of them - gained entry to university on the basis of their IB exams.

What has happened since then has been a remarkable record of annual growth and expansion. Just seven schools in six countries participated in the first trial IB exams

forty years ago. The first time I heard of the IB was in 1992 when there were 380 IB schools in the world. By 1998 when WIS became the first IB school in Namibia, there were around 780. When my school in Japan gained authorization in 2005 it was one of 1,300 schools. And at the start of this month, when I last checked the IB website, the worldwide number of schools offering the IB Diploma was 3,230.

So the IB has grown – in every single year – since it was founded and its rate of growth is accelerating. There are now IB Diploma schools in more than 120 countries.

What has driven this growth? It is certainly not advertising. The IB is a non-profit making organization and is proud to boast that it has never spent any money on advertising. Its reputation has been spread entirely by word of mouth.

So, what is its appeal? What is so special about the IB?

I think there are two key elements.

I mentioned earlier that the IB was born out of a mixture of pragmatism and idealism. The founders had to create something which would be accepted, respected and recognized by leading universities in many different countries. That demanded pragmatism.

But they also set out to create a curriculum which would not only meet the needs of students and families whose lives were increasingly international, but which would actively promote international mindedness. This was the idealism.

In their eyes, a school with teachers from a dozen countries and students from more than fifty wasn't a problem, it was an opportunity. The creation of an international curriculum which would be accepted by Harvard, Oxford, the Sorbonne and hundreds of other universities in scores of countries wasn't a chore, it was a chance to break away from the inward-looking education delivered by national systems. The founders of the IB were men who had all lived and worked in countries other than their own. They each spoke two or three languages. They moved with ease across national and cultural boundaries and they had the perception and vision to see that such skills would be ever more important in the future.

The founders of the IB were looking outwards, not inwards; forwards, not backwards. Their influence has lived on in the IB for over five decades and its success has absolutely validated the visionary educational model they created in the 1960s.

It was a model which initially appealed to the small number of international schools for whom a national curriculum was inappropriate or undesirable or both. But it has come to appeal to parents, teachers, schools and even education ministries as they look for an educational experience which is relevant for the 21st century.

Let me now say a little about the content of an IB Diploma education. Again, let me take you back to those meetings in Geneva and elsewhere during the 1960s where the shape and design of the IB were hammered out.

Those who took the lead in the creation of the IB Diploma were very largely from Western Europe, the UK and the USA. I should at once acknowledge that this has often been perceived as a bit of a problem by some. The IB isn't so much 'international', they

say, as a vehicle for the promotion of western, liberal values. And, to be honest, I think they probably have a point. The IB does genuinely value all cultures, races, traditions, and beliefs and it aims to spread understanding and tolerance. But, from an intellectual standpoint, the IB is rooted in the continental European, British and North American traditions in which its founders had themselves been educated.

It should also be recognized that these three traditions, whatever their commonalities, were – and still are – remarkably different.

For example, I was born and educated in England. From the earliest age I understood that entrance to university would depend almost entirely on my performance in national examinations which I would take at the age of eighteen. These examinations would assess my knowledge and understanding of just three subjects which I would study for my final two years of schooling. This seemed to me at the time to be nothing more than the natural order of things. It now seems to me to be rather extraordinary.

Here is a system which not only encouraged but required students to drop almost all academic subjects at the age of 16 and specialize on just three. And I do mean specialize. My best friend at school spent his final two years from the age of sixteen to eighteen studying just German, French and Russian. No Mathematics. No English. No Science. No creative subject such as Art or Music. No History, Geography or any other social science. Other friends chose as their three subjects just Physics, Mathematics and ... more Mathematics.

Compare this to my wife's education. My wife is Swiss and was educated in Zurich. She also knew that important terminal examinations awaited at the age of 18 or 19 but the

route she took to get there was very different from mine. I studied three subjects concurrently over two years. She took more than a dozen subjects over 4½ years. My education was extremely narrow. Hers was very broad. She was preparing for the Swiss *Matura*. Nearby in Germany students were working towards something very similar – the *Abitur*. And just over the border from Geneva, French students were studying for their *baccalauréat*.

Thus, many continental Europeans – and certainly most of those who were involved in the creation of the IB Diploma – valued an education that was broad. An education which required students to study a range of subjects from a variety of disciplines: the sciences, the arts, mathematics, culture and so on. The English, by contrast, saw little wrong with allowing students to concentrate on what they were good at. It meant that engineering students at university who had studied double Mathematics and Physics for two years started their undergraduate courses with an already advanced understanding of their subject.

There was another very significant difference between the two. The examinations I took in England in 1974 had very little to do with each other. You could pass two subjects with ease but fail the third. But the continental European model – the Baccalaureate model – required students to achieve a respectable minimum grade in each and every of their many subjects. Being brilliant at two or three subjects but hopeless at most others – perfectly acceptable in England – was simply not allowed on the continent.

The English and the European models were, in truth, very different but it was out of this tension between the two that the features of the IB Diploma which are now so familiar

to us were born.

The IB Diploma is a 'baccalaureate'. The Europeans won that one. Students must pass all aspects of it or they fail the whole thing. (And some do. The annual worldwide Diploma pass rate is around 80%.)

But the British managed to retain the concept of a course which lasted for two years and where learning is concurrent. In other words, the IB is not a 'credit'-based system. You cannot take Biology in Grade 11 and Chemistry in Grade 12, German one year and English the next.

And on the question of breadth, the answer that was agreed upon was a rather elegant compromise which appears to have stood the test of time. Students must study six subjects – not five, not seven, but six – and these subjects must include mathematics, two languages, at least one experimental science, at least one social science, and then one more subject which might be a third language, a second science or something else. Thus, the Europeans retained the concept of a broad, multi-disciple education which did not permit too much specialization.

But students can – and must – specialize to a degree. Three of their six subjects must be taken at what is called Standard Level but the other three are taken at Higher Level. Students spend more time studying their Higher Level subjects and they study them in greater depth.

Had my old school friend in 1972 been attending an IB school, he might have taken three languages at Higher Level – i.e. he would have been able to specialize. But he

would also have taken Mathematics, History and Biology – or something similar – as Standard Level subjects.

Balancing the curriculum to allow for breadth and specialization was one thing. But what about the content? Physics is Physics whether you study it in Moscow or Melbourne but whose History do IB schools teach? Whose literature do students study? Whose story do IB schools tell?

Here, perhaps, is where the IB earns the right to put the word ‘international’ in its name. My own background is as a History teacher. I began teaching IB History in the early 1990s. I taught the Cold War to classes containing Americans and Russians. I taught Apartheid to white South Africans sitting next to black Africans. I taught the Middle East to Arabs and Jews. I taught Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Hiroshima to Japanese and Americans. There is only one place to stand in these circumstances. And that is a place beyond nationalism, isolationism and parochialism.

The IB is not telling a national story through its History curriculum. It is telling *our* story. The same is true in the study of literature where students must read works from authors writing in different languages and living in different cultures. National schools – sometimes knowingly, sometimes subconsciously, and usually, though not always, with good intentions – inevitably tell their national story. And through this story children learn how to think, what to think, what to value, how to act. They learn what makes us ‘us’. And what makes them ‘them’.

And this is what makes the IB so different – so special. I’m often asked, ‘What is an international school?’ and ‘What is an international education?’ These are good

questions to which there are no easy answers. But I can suggest one. An international school is not a national school and an international education is not a national education. That may seem to be stating the obvious but the more you think about it, the more the implications become enormous. In much the same way, an IB education is an education for international mindedness. It can be no other.

I've talked about the origins, the design and the content of the IB Diploma. But what about its pedagogy? How do IB teachers teach? How do IB students learn? Is there anything special there? I believe there is.

The teaching method is Socratic, dialectical. Teachers give students problems, not answers. Enquiry is encouraged. Critical thinking is valued over memorizing. Understanding is more important than knowing. Students are encouraged to be active, argumentative even!

Perhaps I can illustrate this with a brief and true anecdote. When I was Principal of an IB school in East Africa a father of a teenage girl came to see me to make a complaint. He was a decent man and a caring father but his cultural background was very conservative. Therein lay his complaint. He had come to tell me that he was contemplating withdrawing his daughter from the school. Why? "Because she has started to think for herself..."

The IB will indeed encourage students to think for themselves. It will encourage them to question, to challenge, to doubt. It will encourage them to make their own minds up rather than just accept what they have been told. I happen to think this is rather a good thing.

My chosen title above is 'The Future is International' and it is something I believe strongly. I have lived in eight countries and worked in seven. I have taught, worked with, and learned from people of all nationalities and cultures. I have travelled to almost sixty countries on every continent. And my life has been greatly enriched by each and every one of these experiences.

A generation or two ago my story would have been exceptional. Now it is commonplace. It is the future that lies ahead of many young people today and they will be the better for it.

The IB is about to enter its 6th decade. What was an ambitious idea in the 1960s has now become a wildly successful reality. And what was advantageous a generation ago has now become essential.

The young people who will best manage an international future are those who are best prepared for it. For such a future I know of no better preparation than the IB Diploma.

