

Effects of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme on Student Performance in Low-performing Schools

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Academic achievement is the foundation of all instructional activities in public school systems. For the last decade, the U.S. public school system has struggled to make significant gains academically, as student performance became a challenging and overwhelming odyssey for all stakeholders. In an attempt to meet academic challenges faced by students in public schools, various programs have been implemented in schools to supplement and strengthen instructional activities in the classroom. The International Baccalaureate Program is one of the many approaches used in several public school institutions to improve academic achievement. This paper reviews literature in regards to the effects of the IB Primary Years Program on academic achievement, focusing on its implementation in low-performing schools. This analysis argues that fidelity to all components of the IB program results in substantial improvement on student performance in low-performing schools.

The IB philosophy practices a student-centered approach that is geared toward self-discovery as well as the appreciation for diverse cultures, languages and ideas. IB programs have fundamentally influenced the culture of schools, infusing in students and teachers a broader sense of responsibility to connect with the world around them. According to the IB Learner's Profile Document, the IB Primary Years Program is designed to develop learners aged 3 to 12 as inquirers, independent, reflective and caring members of society; providing them with values and experiences to address their academic, social, emotional and intellectual well-being while exercising global awareness and international mindedness (IB Learners' Profile Document, 2013, P.1). In essence, IB programs ignite success in school communities by promoting the active participation of all stakeholders in the learning process. Effective implementation of IB programs entails best practices in teaching and learning as

well as a deeper understanding of schools as learning communities.

IB PYP at a Glance

The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme in US schools serves children in kindergarten through grade 5. It focuses on the formation of principles and values that are supported on the practice of attitudes such as: respect, responsibility and curiosity. The curriculum framework requires a transdisciplinary structure, which suggests the teaching of a particular theme across various disciplines. Teachers must prepare six units of inquiry that align with six transdisciplinary themes: who we are, where we are in place and time, how we express ourselves, how the world works, how we organize ourselves and sharing the planet. For a school to become an IB authorized school, it must undergo a rigorous process for candidacy. Once the school has been accepted as a candidate school, its authorization process begins and is completed in six months.

The IB programs demand a more proactive approach to leading change. The implementation of an IB program requires fidelity to its core values even when it comes to the administrative aspects of a school. In other words, IB programs are all about community, collaboration and cross-disciplinary alignment. Leadership is inclusive. School administrators must become facilitators, and they must be actively involved in the planning and delivery of an IB base instructional format. Lee, Hallinger and Walker (2012) explained, "Successful implementation of these cross-level programs had not resulted from strong instructional leadership exercised by the principals. Instead, these were stories of distributed instructional leadership that was deployed through a web of interactions among multiple players, including but not limited to, formal leaders" (p. 685). IB schools experience success when they hold all stakeholders accountable

for the appropriate optimization and activation of the IB philosophy and its resources in a school. In other words, a well-designed IB program empowers people, and it allows for continuous collaboration.

IB, Teaching and Learning

One of the most important aspects of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme is instruction. The IB PYP is only successful if teaching and learning ascribe to the methodology and approaches suggested by the IB model. Professional development is paramount in the implementation of a successful IB program. Teachers usually struggle to integrate state standards and transdisciplinary themes into their daily lessons. Fidelity to the IB philosophy and best teaching practices urge school divisions to train teachers before implementing IB in the classrooms. Getchell (2010) stated, “IBPYP implementation appeared to influence support staff and specialist teachers in regard to their excitement for teaching. This may be explained by the emphasis that IB places in cross-curricular planning and articulation, resulting in more included and involved specials classes in the overall curriculum” (p. 59). Training is indispensable in terms of reliability and accountability. The effectiveness of an IB program especially at the elementary school level relies on the effectiveness of teachers.

The teaching and learning environment of the IB programs is built upon a practice of inquiry, action and reflection. To this end, an IB authorized school operates under constructivist and student-centered learning approaches, which are paramount in the accomplishment of educational objectives. Tobin and Tippins (1993) stated,

Constructivism is a set of beliefs about knowing and knowledge that can be used to analyze the learning potential of any situation. In this way, it becomes a tool for critical reflection, a referent for deciding whether teacher and learner roles are likely to be more productive in given situations. Constructivism provides a different way of thinking about education. (p. 4)

A student-centered approach makes emphasis on opportunities for learners to become independent and active participants in the learning

process. The employment of constructivism in the classroom awakens students’ intrinsic motivation to learn, which results in significant academic achievement gains. Hence, the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills equip students with tools to construct knowledge based on their experience and understanding of the world in relation to the context of a given lesson.

Teachers can experience a certain degree of frustration when participating in the implementation of the IB approach in their classrooms. IB is more than just a title for a school; it entails the integration of skills, worldviews, discipline and educational approaches that can challenge educators in various ways. Both experience and dedication to the teaching field are important elements of IB schools. Getchell (2010) further explained,

It is evident that implementation of the IB primary years programme influenced teachers, especially those with more years experience, IB training, and who are older. One explanation may be that they have had more time to experience change and that newer teachers coming into the profession are already familiar with IB philosophies and practices, even if those are not labeled as IB. (p. 59)

A well-planned IB program must adhere to quality professional development for teachers, in order to have a significant impact on student achievement. Moreover, IB teachers must be exceptional learners and motivated instructors if they want to bring a real world-class education to children. IB teachers must exhibit the attitudes that are promoted by the IB philosophy. IB has a greater effect on student performance when it becomes part of the culture of the school.

In spite of the large number of school systems offering IB programs in public schools, teacher preparation programs for educators interested in joining the IB community are pretty much non-existent. Ryan, Heineke and Steindam (2014) indicated, “Considering the established demand for school personnel to teach global awareness to today’s students, there is an evident need for more attention to the development of internationally minded teacher education programs that support candidates in examining globalization

and its domestic and international effects” (p. 42). Academic achievement can only occur if all favorable factors are aligned, which includes: teacher effectiveness, cultural awareness and cross-disciplinary practices in the classroom. The lack of support for teachers who are currently teaching IB programs can hinder schools, attempting to make a conscious shift into IB.

The implementation of any program must be grounded on instructional support. Low-performing schools require strong leaders and educators to turn a school around. While IB programs might be full of resourceful ways to enhance teaching and learning in schools, they do rely on the commitment of all stakeholders. Twigg (2010) explained that the implementation of a new program in schools does not ensure teachers effectiveness in the classroom (p. 55). The IB PYP curriculum framework requires teachers with a growth mindset. The curriculum framework is intentionally designed to evoke their creativity to make lessons that are meaningful to students and relevant to their world and everyday life situations. Moreover, IB programs are subject to ongoing supervision, so that teachers and administrators engage in an exchange of ideas and continuous feedback to enhance instruction.

Adopting IB PYP at the elementary school level has the potential to redesign instructional operations in the classroom. Teachers with a strong sense of disposition for change usually understand that the IB philosophy serves as the catalyst for innovation in the school. Kauffman (2005) indicated, “the IB PYP is not based on content or disciplinary knowledge but is rather an approach to curriculum organization and teaching and learning.” (p. 247). The curriculum framework of IB programs does not restrict teachers or schools to the use of specific standards or content. Standards of learning as well as IB transdisciplinary themes can be connected to enrich the context of the lessons and the learning activities. Essentially, IB is not about reinventing the wheel, but creating logical steps toward experiential learning.

The trajectory of IB programs can be seen as one of evolution into various educational fields. There are still several misconceptions about IB in atypical academic settings. Jamaal (2016) stated, “If gaining legitimacy from the IB is the primary

purpose of adopting the IBPYP, schools may implement the programme in a superficial manner, neglecting fundamental aspects such as intercultural education” (p.29). Organically, IB programs view education as an ongoing transformation of individuals, which does not take place in isolation. IB programs consider education as the driving force of society and community.

IB programs cannot be effective in institutions where learning is not communal, consistent with current issues in the world and in tune with globalization. Our current public school system faces academic challenges because it is designed to inform rather than to transform individuals. Academically, teachers and students are burdened with measures of performance, which do not grant any value to the hard work of teachers and students in the classroom. Competitiveness has driven the U.S. public school system to an era of shame and disillusion. IB programs remind school systems that education is not about test scores; it is about the joy for learning.

The implementation of IB PYP demands fidelity of implementation, as it is not just simply a program to measure academic success in quantifiable ways; but more importantly, IB PYP offers results that are founded on the basis of rigor, creativity, and discipline. Korsmo, Barrett, Friesen and Finnley (2012) stated the following:

The suggestion of aligning rhetoric and reality in terms of bringing congruence between the missions and actions of schools is rudimentary. Some may argue it is indeed too simplistic of a consideration when determining how to provide the education our children need. We argue, however that our children deserve precisely what is often expected of them in their schooling: authenticity, honesty, integrity and accountability. (p. 38)

Many public schools fail to conceptualize the IB program as a mean to advance efficacy in the teaching and learning process. In other words, IB should not become just a label to differentiate one school from others. The nature of the program must be visible and tangible in the mission, vision and actions of the school community.

IB programs have a powerful and uplifting transformational connotation attached to them; however, it will not happen, unless stakeholders align goals with actions that ensure the success of the program as a tool to improve academic achievement in schools. Orr, Berg, Shore & Meier (2008) found the following:

Many efforts to strengthen persistently low-performing schools introduce new curricular frameworks and stress student-centered instructional practices. These strategies are important, as we found, but will not gain traction unless accompanied by significant attention to these five interrelated areas. Working simultaneously to develop leadership and organizational capacity for change can transform a school's values, culture, and capacity for improvement; establish productive systems and routines; and integrate instructional leadership practices and organizational learning. (p. 690)

IB PYP does not operate on its own precepts. This cannot become the norm for school divisions that seek to reform the quality of education that is provided in their schools. Student performance and academic achievement cannot be jeopardized by the lack of consistency and ownership to new initiatives. Therefore, the key to the implementation of any kind of program in a school is fidelity to its ideologies and systematic approach.

IB and the Achievement Gap

Many US public schools struggle to meet standards of accreditation due to various factors: economic limitations, quality of instruction affected by teacher turnover rates and lack of parental engagement in the learning process, especially at the elementary level where teachers and learners urge to have a strong support from parents, so that students may develop the skills they need to succeed in higher levels. Standardized testing places an excessive amount of pressure on schools that have for the longest time experienced difficulty to adequately serve the needs of their students.

The IB Primary Years Program seems to be a viable option to accomplish the goal of school

divisions to close the achievement gap by giving teachers and learners an opportunity to be part of a student-centered philosophy that maximizes the potential of all participating actors within a classroom setting. Borman, Hewes, Overman and Brown (2003) said, "school-wide efforts to turn-around low-performing schools should address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of all students." The IB philosophy is centered in the idea of bringing together school leaders, teachers and parents to work in tandem, so that they can build a culture of excellence and success in schools. The negative impact of the socioeconomic demographics of a school carries over many aspects of the school culture. In essence, many urban schools are demoralized because of the stigma attached to them due to poverty, geographical location and racial make-up of the student population.

At the edge of a social, economic and political crisis, student performance continues to be compromised, which poses a challenge to administrators, teachers and parents to find solutions that they can support in the best interest of all students. The adoption of an IB program requires a serious financial commitment that cannot be undertaken by many schools due to their lack of resources. PTAs and other associations that recognize the need for change in public institutions support a large number of IB programs in public schools. The Primary Year IB program has been implemented in many elementary schools all over the world in an effort to maximize young learners' ability to think critically, become active inquirers within and beyond the classroom and develop a sense of social and cultural competence that is mirrored through a caring attitude.

IB programs strengthen school divisions' measures to eliminate the achievement gap by employing research-based tools to ensure the success of all students. Chiang (2009) stated, "The threat of sanctions on low-performing public schools has become a dominant form of incentive by which policymakers seek to raise student achievement. In the United States, penalties for repeated failure to meet performance standards have become universally established in all states as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

(NCLB)” (p. x). Current accountability trends practice by the US public education system can isolate schools under extreme labels that hinder their morale. A focus on the emotional and individual well being of students is priority when academic achievement is at stake.

IB and Underprivileged Groups

The International Baccalaureate Program is well known for its association with gifted and talented students as well as international schools, which are generally private schools that establish some kind of reciprocity with prestigious universities all over the world. Urban public school districts utilize the esteemed reputation of IB programs to provide their students with a world-class education that affords them the opportunity to become part of an elite group of students that enjoy of a more rigorous instruction in the classroom. A peculiar characteristic of the Primary Years IB Programme is its all-inclusive nature. The IB PYP reaches all students regardless their socioeconomic status, intellectual and physical disabilities or religious affiliation.

The adoption of IB programs among various school communities such as low-performing urban and rural title I schools, clearly communicates that the divisions believe in sustaining a learning environment in which success is communicated at all levels. An IB program does not only comply with the needs of gifted and talented students, but more importantly, it can enrich and inspire students, who have lost hope in the public school education system. Hill (2012) said,

The IB programme gives students from the poorest neighborhoods in our city the opportunity to have the same academic experiences as those students who attend the most elite schools in the world. It levels the playing field for students who may live in poverty, yet at the same time it also challenges the most gifted students in our schools. It offers hope to many; but more importantly, it shows that our students can compete academically on a global stage. (p. 5)

The social and economic status of students influences their performance in schools. Students,

who live in poverty or face continuous danger in their homes, cannot focus on achieving academically; for this reason, the school division leadership must think out of the box to reach their students. The value of IB programs in regards to student achievement in low performing schools can be attributed to the program’s approach to instill in students, concern and responsibility for themselves and others. When students are empowered; their attitudes are shaped and their capabilities are maximized. IB programs provide students with four basic attitudes that determine their success in any type of educational setting: interdependence, shaping attitudes, an international perspective, and relevance (Hill, 2012, p.18).

Conclusion

There are multiple ways of achieving academic success in schools. The IB Primary Years Programme has been recognized as one of the most effective ways to bring about change in the culture and delivery of instruction in schools. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that the success of IB PYP is merely the result of dedicated teachers, active leadership, the promotion and practice of values that together ignite positive change in schools. Low performing public schools can only achieve academic success when students, teachers and administrators believe in moving forward together toward greater goals that build excellence in schools.

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