

*Some Challenges with Opportunities of Introducing International Baccalaureate Programmes into Japanese Schools*

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The Asian Conference on Education 2018  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The rapid changes in our world today mean that education must now serve an increasingly complex set of purposes. The Japanese government has recognized the need for changes in the traditional educational system, and the necessity to internationalize so as to develop human resources for a competitive globalized world. The introduction of International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes into article 1 schools is intended to generate deep change. In liaison with this initiative, the University of Tsukuba has inaugurated since 2016, a Master's in International Education program that provides students with the opportunity to obtain an IB Educator' Certificate while at the same time conducting research within the field of international education. The program is of significance in that it brings together perspectives from Japanese educators, from educators in other national systems and also those from international educational backgrounds. The IB is an international education that has built its reputation in international schools. How then can it help internationalize the traditional Japanese national system? The Japan Association of Research into IB Education (JARIBE) was established in 2015 to promote and collate research nationwide to answer such questions about the introduction of IB programmes into Japanese schools. Input from the two cohorts of students on the Master's in International Education Program at the University of Tsukuba, and from presentations and discussion forums from three JARIBE annual conferences have been collated in this paper to consider the broad challenges and opportunities arising from the introduction of IB programmes into Japanese national schools so far.

Keywords: internationalization, education, international baccalaureate, pedagogy, inquiry

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## **Introduction**

The Japanese national educational system is built around a transmission model of teaching and learning. Typically, canonical knowledge in text books is memorized for standardized tests. Classes are large with around forty students sitting in rows of desks with the teacher at the front of the class. Today however, inquiry based learning is considered to be a more relevant way of teaching and learning for our present times and in order to implement such a model in the Japanese context various school change initiatives have been introduced by the government. The introduction of International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes is one such initiative. There are challenges involved in implementing such changes but at the same time they provide opportunities for revitalization. These will be considered here.

## **The Challenges**

The two major challenges of introducing IB programmes into Japanese national contexts are concerned with first, how the programmes are conceptualized, and secondly how the programme pedagogies can be implemented. Each of these will be considered separately.

Other practical challenges will also be considered.

### **1. Conceptualizing IB**

When a board of education, or a school or a governmental body is considering the introduction of IB and is involved in various discussions about its nature and the necessary processes, then being clear about shared understandings of the nature of IB programmes is crucial. Otherwise, as so often happens, there may appear to be conflicts and confusions which on closer examination turn out to be based on different assumptions and interpretations of key concepts. Considering how the IB is being conceptualized in terms of purpose can help clarify understandings of shared intent and subsequent possibilities of implementation. For example, depending on experiences and knowledge about the IB Diploma Programme (DP) which is a two year university preparation programme, the ideas of what it may offer can vary quite considerably. The DP may be seen, for example, as follows:

- *as an elite qualification for entry to prestigious universities*
- *as an incentive to save time and money in university*
- *as an inclusive programme to raise national standards*
- *to transform national education for the twenty first century*
- *as an international programme that develops high level English skills*
- *as an education to make the world a better and more peaceful place*

Let us consider some of these conceptualizations in more detail.

#### ***The IBDP as an elite qualification for entry to prestigious universities***

For many parties interested in the IB diploma programme there is an idea that it is an elite education for students who will be well prepared to enter prestigious universities. The background to this image and understanding of the IBDP is that, as the first IB

programme launched fifty years ago, it was well suited to the developing phenomena of international schools which flourished worldwide in the wake of World War 2. Geneva International school was the first to offer the IBDP and Yokohama International School the second. Such schools served the children of well off, middle class, ambitious parents. Classes were small and well resourced. The IBDP qualification was recognized by universities in the countries that international school graduates wished to attend. There was a perfect congruence of many factors for success. The reputation of the programme was assured, but there is little doubt that it was very much due to the international school context. Nonetheless, this is not always considered carefully and it is easily assumed that the IBDP will generate similar results in other contexts, including national schools. But this can be a challenge, especially if classes are large and resources limited.

One solution to this challenge is to target students who show early promise of success. Such a solution has been successful in a national context in the UK in Sevenoaks School for example. This is a flagship IB school where all students are highly successful in the DP. The students are meticulously screened for ability and motivation at entrance and consequently most succeed. The school's reputation for success attracts those with high capabilities in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The limitation of such an approach, of course, is the narrow focus on academic prowess as displayed through examination success.

But there is absolutely no necessity to conceive of the IBDP as being for an academic elite. The IBDP has always emphasized academic rigour but not elitism. Creating a context for the success of the IBDP in schools which want to be more inclusive although a major challenge has been attempted in various ways.

### **The IBDP as an incentive to save time and money in university**

In some places, such as Canada, a DP subject certificate model is popular. This model allows students in IB accredited world schools to study individual DP subjects for a certificate rather than take the full six subjects and core courses required for a full diploma. Universities recognize the subject certificates as high level study and so count them towards credits for undergraduate courses. This saves the students time as well as money in university. Of course students tend to select the IB subjects compatible with those that they will pursue at university so the holistic nature of the DP is compromised as other subjects are omitted. Although some schools insist that the core of the DP is compulsory in such models, not all do. So actually in some cases it is possible to do IB subjects without studying Theory of Knowledge (TOK) or participating in Creativity, Activity and Creativity (CAS) or writing the Extended Essay (EE). These three areas are the core of the DP and are so named because that is exactly what they are. They are considered central to the development of international mindedness which is the major goal of the IB mission and it has been argued that an IB education without them neglects the mission. But certainly if the core is offered along with subject choices this model goes a long way to provide IB opportunities to a wider range of students.

### **The IBDP as an inclusive programme to raise national standards**

In the USA, in 2010, the IB entered into a project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to expand access to the IB programmes for under-represented students. The project sought to expose low-income and minority students to challenging and rigorous educational opportunities in years 9 and 10, leading up to the IB DP. The project recognized the potential effectiveness of the rigour of the IB pedagogy for everyone to improve standards. Success was measured by improvement rather than high scores.

### **The IBDP to transform national education for the twenty first century**

In Ecuador, the national education system was completely reformed at the high school level with the implementation of the DP which replaced the previous national curriculum and became the general graduation certification for all. Such a radical approach means that the complexities of grafting a new system onto the old, which is indeed a complicated task in the case of Japan and the IB, can be avoided. But there is a place for real concern about losing traditions which are an integral part of cultural identity.

### **The IBDP as an international programme that develops high level English skills**

International Education is a general term that covers a vast field of theories, practices, and ideologies. Nonetheless as a general term it has become increasingly associated with a positive status and with suggestions that it is an education that promises well for the future of students. Schools as businesses for profit making have promoted these ideas and many offer IB programmes in English in non-English speaking national contexts such as in China. English, as the major global language, is of course seen as an important aspect of international education. Developing communicative English skills in Japanese schools teaching the IB in Japanese is a particular challenge, in terms of available time as well as the development of teacher resources who understand communicative pedagogies.

The various examples described so far illustrate that the IB programme frameworks are adaptable for different purposes. In actual fact they have been deliberately designed to be flexible to suit various cultural contexts. This is a great advantage as models are developed to suit the particular purposes of Japanese contexts so that they can provide opportunities to maximize student potential.

## **2. Implementing IB pedagogy**

Whichever model a Japanese school chooses in implementing IB programmes it must consider how to incorporate the IB pedagogy. Fundamentally this involves a paradigm shift from a transmission model of teaching and learning to an inquiry based model of teaching and learning. Some of the differences between these two models are shown in figure 1. The differences are considerable and call for investment in teacher training and development as well as whole school changes such as library resourcing and IT provision. The role of the teacher in an inquiry based model of learning is that of a mentor and facilitator rather than a transmitter of canonical knowledge from set text books. Developing the students' research skills and higher

order thinking skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis are important. Concepts that enable the transfer of learning become core to learning. Assessment, as an integral part of the learning process is criteria based and transparent.

It is the IB pedagogy which develops the various skills, knowledge and dispositions which are considered crucial for the twenty-first century context of globalization. But these require a particularly careful consideration with regards to Japanese contexts since they have been manifested so far in a western cultural context. Separating the skills from the particular cultural context in which they have grown, so that they can be applied effectively and appropriately in another very different culture is a difficult and perhaps sometimes delicate matter. For instance, it is often claimed that Japanese students do not question or contradict the teacher's viewpoint out of a sense of respect for the teacher and because they value harmony. Surely respect and harmony are two values that have not only been endorsed throughout time but are currently encompassed in the IB mission to make the world a more peaceful place. In many schools outside Japan these two very important values remain aspirational even though students may be skillful in debating and critical thinking. Introducing an IB pedagogy into a Japanese context requires careful thought about how to maintain well established worthy values while allowing for the development of other skills deemed relevant for today. This is certainly one of the major challenges in implementing IB programmes in Japanese schools and calls for scrupulous attention.

<b>INQUIRY APPROACH to LEARNING</b>	<b>TRANSMISSION MODEL of LEARNING</b>
<b>Curriculum driven by questioning knowledge construction. No set text</b>	<b>Set texts of knowledge drive the curriculum</b>
<b>Library &amp; research skills essential for learning Academic integrity integral to inquiry</b>	<b>Library and research skills not essential for learning Academic 'honesty' more appropriate</b>
<b>Higher order thinking skills (HOTs) important: critical, creative, reflective thinking</b>	<b>Lower order thinking skills often suffice (LOTs): information questions within the text</b>
<b>Conceptual understandings developed as cognitive tools for HOTs</b>	<b>Factual canonical content <u>memorised</u></b>
<b>Small group work, discussions, collaboration. Teacher facilitates.</b>	<b>Large single classes. Teacher at the front as information provider</b>
<b>Criteria based, transparent assessment</b>	<b>Correct/incorrect answers are marked</b>

Figure 1. Differences between an inquiry model of learning and a transmission approach

### 3. Other challenges

The development of the IBDP was informed by the UK educational system whereby between the ages of approximately 16 to 18 students study advanced levels in a limited number of subjects for two years in preparation for university. This does not fit with other systems that have a junior high school system and high school system with different time frames. For instance, Japanese high school is three years not two. The academic school year in Europe is from September until June. The IBDP examinations are therefore in May. There are also examinations in November to accommodate the Southern Hemisphere where the academic year is reversed. There is no accommodation for the Japanese academic year which begins in April however. Because of IB regulations designed around Western time zones of Northern

and Southern hemispheres Japanese IB students may be under extra pressure from time constraints. Are there creative solutions for this?

### **The Opportunities**

There is no doubt that the IB programmes develop skills and attributes that are pertinent to our times. And their flexibility for adaptation to various contexts reflects the vision of international education as recognizing and honouring multiple perspectives and their commitment to a value of diversity. Diversity provides opportunities for creative synergies.

The IB programmes develop a critical thinking mind set. This is essential in a world where media power must be negotiated. They aspire to develop skills and understandings for peaceful recognition of difference and inclusion. Again, these are arguably essential skills in a world that so easily has access to diverse world views.

The IB programmes are rigorous and their implementation requires attention to the detailed Programme Standards and Practices. The challenges of meeting these standards and practices are an excellent opportunity for pertinent questioning, dialogue, analysis and consideration of what is considered to be a proper path forward with regard to reform in the Japanese educational system. What should be changed? What should be retained?

The considerations are wider than the implementation of the IB programmes. The IB programmes however, can provide a framework or scaffold that can serve to contain important discussions about the purpose of education in Japan in the twenty first century.

There are opportunities within these discussions for a purposeful renewal and revitalization of skills, traditions and values indigenous to Japanese culture that have become hidden but which are actually just as pertinent to present day contexts as critical thinking and valuing multiple perspectives. Respect and harmony have already been highlighted. There is also a deep sense of ecology in every day Japanese culture, where nature is appreciated, and where waste is avoided. Social mores that seek to not cause others discomfort are well established. The opportunities for creative synergies between traditions in Japanese culture and ideas brought from IB programmes are rife. With careful consideration and research there are exciting possibilities for new models of learning that may benefit not just Japan but other countries that are seeking change in their educational systems.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to students on the Master's in International Education at the University of Tsukuba and JARIBE members who have shared their thoughts and observations about IB programmes in Japanese contexts.

## **Resources**

International Baccalaureate public website, [www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org)

Japan Association for Research into IB Education [www.jaribe.org](http://www.jaribe.org)

Sevenoaks School <https://www.sevenoaksschool.org>

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)

IB in Equador [www.ibo.org/globalassets/publications/ib-research/ecuadorsummary\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ibo.org/globalassets/publications/ib-research/ecuadorsummary_eng.pdf)