

# IB Teacher's Professionalism in China and School Curriculum Reform: The Research on the Various Academic Background Teachers' Performances in IB Classroom\*

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This study explores the expansion of International Baccalaureate (IB) education focusing on teacher's professionalism in mainland China. The increase of IB schools over the past ten years results from strategies aimed at insertion of the IB into national education markets and its adaptation to different national systems. There is also an unintended percolation of the IB worldview and activities within national curricula and policies. These strategies and mechanisms are uncovered by tracking the embeddedness of the global IB in national education systems.

*Keywords:* International Baccalaureate (IB) education

## Background of the Study

As international schools and educational programs re-emerged in the big cities and coastal areas of China, after the Open Door Policy in 1978, the IB entered mainland China in 1991 (Wang, 2012). The number of International Baccalaureate (IB) schools worldwide has increased dramatically in recent years responding to burgeoning demand for both an internationally oriented education and an internationally validated path to higher education institutions. China is among a group of countries at the forefront of this trend with the number of schools adopting IB programs, and the International Baccalaureate schools in particular, growing at a seemingly exponential rate. Indeed, as of August 2021 there were 238 IB schools authorized to offer the IB curricular in China, representing a fourfold increase since 2013 (International Baccalaureate, 2013).

Different with some countries' public school system could accept the IB system, such as Canada, due to the emphasis on curricular as the state-issues in Chinese school system, IB school and curricular cannot be accepted by public school system (even some state-own public schools have their IB curriculum, which called as "international school within the schools"). Almost all of the respondents in my study indicated that they were foreigners (99.6%) in terms of nationality. This is because for mainland Chinese students, there is a legal restriction that prevents them from attending international schools. Data obtained from the IB, outlining the self-reported nationality of IBDP graduates in the 2019 and 2020 cohort, revealed that student nationalities

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included countries in East Asia (63% of students), Europe (15%), North America (14%), Australasia (4%), and others (4%). Looking at the East Asia data specifically, almost half (47% of student) of students reported their nationality as Chinese, this was followed by Korean (22% of students), Taiwanese (8%), Singaporean (8%), and others (15%) (International Baccalaureate, 2020).

Our qualitative data shed light on the high proportion of students self-reporting Chinese nationality, despite legal restrictions on Chinese nationals enrolling in international schools. First, in this multi-sited case study of five IBDP schools in China, administrators explained that many of their students were North American or Western European country passport holders of Chinese descent. Second, this point was reinforced by my online survey of IBDP graduates, which showed that 60.8% were U.S. or Western Europe passport holders and 28.1% held Asian country passports only. In other words, many of the IB school students self-reporting Chinese nationality were non-Chinese nationals of Chinese heritage. The researcher surmise, therefore, that a majority of IBDP students in China are nationals of other Asian countries or passport holders of Western countries of Asian descent.

Despite such fast growth (and by implication, popularity) of IB schools in China, empirical studies exploring the teachers' professionalism of the IB schools in China are practically non-existent. This paper has led to the current pioneering research, which sought data and analysis that illuminated the teachers' professionalism training systems the IB schools in China (Cambridge, 2010).

As a learner under pressure in IB schools, teachers who were involved in traditional teacher training system, and a practitioner of global thinking, There is insufficient cooperation and identification, lack of specificity and weak global problem-solving ability in some IB teachers' professional development in China. To respond to the challenges of some IB schools has established a good professional development foundation for their IB teachers through systematic pre-service training system, encouraging interdisciplinary teaching activities to help IB teachers break through the isolated situation of professional development so that they can participate in the international professional learning community network to enhance the global literacy of IB teachers. It provides the following practical implications for the professional development of IB teachers in China: improve the pre-service screening and training system for IB teachers, motivate teachers to become "distributed teaching leaders" (Robbins, et al., 2003), conduct demand-oriented professional guidance activities, and promote IB Teacher's cross-cultural understanding.

### **Research Method**

This study expands and elaborates upon results of the quantitative research by presenting major findings from qualitative case studies of five IB schools in China. Qualitative analysis of interview data from five case study IB schools (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For instance, using an iterative process of data collection from the five schools as a constant comparative method for cross-case analysis; semi-structured, focus group interviews with IB school teachers and their students, and individual interviews with IB school coordinators and headteachers (Little & Rubin, 1989).

The case study schools were selected based on their commonality. Firstly, each of the schools was relatively high achieving. For example, all of the participating schools attained significantly high averaged IBDP exam scores in 2021 that were above 38.4, which was 5.2 points above the average IBDP exam score of IBDP graduates

around the world in May 2021. Another commonality of these five schools was that they were DP-only schools. Given research showing different characteristics of IB schools in terms of whether or not they have a full continuum of IB programs, the researchers believe that there is a certain level of homogeneity among these DP-only schools in terms of curriculum implementation. Finally, all of the schools were located in metropolitan cities in China. At the same time, in school selection, we also considered diversity in terms of school size and IBDP cohort size in order to chart some possible variations across the schools.

In terms of school size, School 3 had the smallest student population while Schools 1 and 3 were relatively larger in student body. Schools 1 and 4 were schools with medium-sized student populations. The number of IBDP graduates in 2018 and 2019 cohorts generally accounted for one tenth of their total student population. Except School 5 which had a comparatively small proportion of IBDP graduates in 2018 and 2019 relative to its size because its students mainly participated in the AP program, which the school offered in parallel with the IBDP.

We collected data from interviews with administrators, teachers, and students in the IBDP program. In addition, key school documents from the five schools were collected for supplementary data purposes. For gathering interview data, in total, 27 teachers and administrators were interviewed. 17 students were also selected to be interviewed. The administrators, comprising headteachers and IBDP coordinators, were individually interviewed while the teachers and students were interviewed as separate focus groups. This approach generated two-fold advantages—i.e. while individual interviews with key administrators secured enough time to draw key information related to pedagogical issues for IBDP student, focus group interviews enabled teachers and students to share their common teaching and learning experiences related to the curriculum of IBDP.

After completing interviews with the first two schools (i.e. School 2 and School 3), we started looking for codes and themes related to our research. The researchers developed a coding scheme based on patterns emerging from the interviews and the results from the IB survey. Additionally, several efforts were made to address validity and reliability issues in our qualitative data analysis. Each of the interviewers coded the data independently and then checked the data coding with a partner. To better ensure coding reliability, inter-rater reliability (79%) was checked with 15 randomly selected interview files. By sharing the interview transcripts, we had the opportunity to discuss and confer about our interpretations of the meanings of the participant's responses. This feedback-solicitation process was significantly important for accommodating alternative interpretations of the same transcript, contributing to a better understanding of seemingly discrepant statements. Finally, all data were then analyzed using the NVivo program (NVivo 10), qualitative data analysis software. Additionally, Netminer 3, social network analysis software, was utilized for visualizing the thematic network.

### **Research Findings**

Compared with Teachers who teach traditional courses, IB teachers are characterized as “learners under high pressure”, “partial students in traditional teacher training” and “practitioners of global thinking”. These three roles are all facing different degrees of dilemma.

The IB curriculum requires teachers to have high-level thinking skills, application skills, and the ability to connect concepts (Lee, et al., 2012). They are able to adjust their teaching mode according to the update of the IB curriculum concept at any time. Therefore, although most of the teachers who are qualified to teach IB courses

have strong professional qualities, they still feel “under high pressure at all times” in the process of teaching IB courses (Paris, 2013). On the one hand, this pressure comes from the high requirements of the IB course itself, such as the preparation of the extended part of the course, the use of information technology, the interpretation of international culture, etc.; on the other hand, it comes from the relatively isolated professional development situation and the social environment that lacks recognition. Since IB courses are mostly carried out in the form of learning projects, the progress of each project is different, teachers are relatively isolated, and collective lesson preparation and discussion are rare. IB teachers often need to independently solve problems in curriculum research and classroom teaching practice (MacCallum, et al., 1996). At the same time, different from the “class responsibility system” of traditional teachers, many IB teachers are only responsible for short-term professors of a certain course project and cannot establish long-term relationships with students. Therefore, they cannot obtain sufficient social prestige and parental support.

(1) The IB teacher professional development system is characterized by the “distributed teachers” in School 3 and School 4. It focuses on deepening the professional understanding of IB teachers in pre-employment training, so as to reduce the pressure on their future professional development; focusing on interdisciplinary, Distributed teaching practice exploration to strengthen the cooperation between IB teachers and expand the form of professional development; focus on establishing contacts with IB educators from all over the world, deeply participate in the international IB teacher professional development community, and expand IB teachers in exchanges and interactions Global vision and enhance its professional level (Heineke, 2014).

(2) In School 4, Integrate IB teacher preparations into schools and communities, and deepen and expand schools in surrounding areas Partnership to strengthen the improvement of school pre-service teacher training programs is an important strategy for IB teacher pre-service training. By cooperating with stakeholders in the school and the community, it is possible to go beyond the teacher education activities within the school and link the school to the local context.

First, let the community and third-party members participate in the selection of teachers, understand the needs of local communities and tripartite members for education, and give them a full voice; second, improve the traditional pre-service training model and organize pre-service teachers in the community of different IB schools to observe and learn, and provide suggestions and experience to ensure the mutual benefit of all partners.

The main goal is to promote IB pre-service teachers to form an understanding of IB education according to the characteristics and needs of different students. In-depth understanding, promote cross-cultural understanding and respect, and respect the diverse and individual development needs of students. The second stage: Promote IB pre-service teachers' in-depth understanding of the elements of excellent IB educators, mainly including social justice, cooperative awareness, evidence-based, formative evaluation, policy understanding, teaching theory knowledge, student style recognition, literacy Ten elements of capability, environmental creation and global vision. The third stage: Promote IB pre-service teachers' in-depth understanding of the elements of IB teaching practice, including (1) integrating global issues into teaching practice, stimulating students' cross-cultural awareness and international awareness, and carrying out topic-based guidance to promote Case understanding of students on global issues; (2) Integrate students' mother tongue into classroom practice and promote the diversity of classroom language environments; (3) Focus on evaluating students in various aspects, including interpersonal communication, cross-cultural understanding and language ability And so on, and tap students' self-reflection

and self-assessment abilities on this basis; (4) Use interdisciplinary knowledge to integrate teaching and explore multiple perspectives of teaching content; (5) Cooperatively design and construct classroom and school environments, integrating culture and language And other elements of diversity.

Encourage cross-border and distributed cooperation to improve the isolated situation of IB teacher professional development. The organizational complexity of IB courses requires a high degree of cooperation between each manager and teacher. Cross-border and distributed forms of cooperation such as cross-department meetings, cross-grade teaching, and cross-disciplinary teaching are of great significance for improving the isolated situation of IB teachers' professional development and enhancing their professional development level (Muthén, Kaplan & Hollis, 2017).

For instance, 1. Inter-departmental meeting in School 1 offers IB courses (especially full-continuous IB schools), it is common for IB teachers to teach multiple course modules at the same time, and their teaching responsibilities often overlap with each other. Therefore, inter-departmental meetings have become a way to cultivate distributed teaching leaders An important way of ability. Generally speaking, inter-departmental meetings are divided into two forms: formal meetings and informal meetings. The informal meeting is designed by three IB project coordinators, based on the actual needs of teachers' professional development, confirming the theme of the seminar, and providing teachers with professional development opportunities. In a formal inter-departmental meeting, three IB coordinators are usually invited to participate in the regular meeting of the same department, to observe the recent development of the department or progress, and jointly explore solutions or discuss future directions to achieve resources between different levels Complementarity and interaction and cooperation between teachers and managers of different project groups.

Similarly, cross-grade teaching in School 4 had been adapted by administrators. The cross-grade teaching model is regarded as a tool to enhance curriculum consistency and aims to provide continuous support for students' learning. The inter-grade teaching model helps teachers grasp the learning characteristics, needs and deficiencies of students, and reduces the negative impact of different teaching methods that may appear on them.

Most importantly, inter-grade teaching helps IB teachers understand the continuity of the entire IB curriculum, helping them to understand the position of a certain teaching point of the IB curriculum in the whole and the relationship between the teaching points, and promote their teaching the improvement of skills. (School 4)

Promoting Strengthen cooperation: Encourage teachers to become “distributed teaching leaders.” Distributed teaching leaders aim to achieve curriculum consistency by allocating different teaching resources and support to different organizational levels. The distinctive and diversified concept of IB courses requires teachers to have different curriculum concepts and teaching styles from traditional teachers. The most effective way to adapt to IB teaching is to continuously allow new teachers to try various projects of teaching work, and communicate with new and old teachers.

Full cooperation and dialogue help them understand and recognize the school's philosophy and goals more quickly, and have the same “language system” as the IB school. The common language system here does not only refer to the “jargon” of the IB industry (for example, knowledge theory and learning including common views of IB teaching practice. For example, international orientation, student projects, inquiry learning methods). In order to support the deepening and sharing of this common understanding, we constantly promote the distributed

teaching leadership of teachers through multiple roles. When teachers enter the bottleneck period of professional development, managers should encourage teachers to continuously accumulate knowledge and enhance their ability through strategic teacher deployment, and stimulate the development of their distributed teaching leadership ability (Ruscio, 2017). At the same time, although the distributed management of IB teachers can effectively promote their professional development, it is greatly affected by teachers' willingness and attitude to undertake additional tasks. Therefore, we should strive to create an organizational culture of shared vision and enhance the professional development of IB teachers promise.

### **Borrowing Some Experiences on Curriculum Reform from IB Courses**

#### **(1) The Aim of Curriculum is not Exam But the Critical Thinking and Communication Skills**

The majority of IBDP students from the five participating IBDP schools in China were of Chinese students but with non-Chinese citizenship. Whilst being careful not to stereotype, the teachers and administrators noted that certain learner traits were specific to these Asian students' socio-cultural norms and values (Lowe, 2019). There was consensus among four of the schools that one of these traits included a strong work ethic which may positively affect students' success in the IBDP. In particular, one teacher stated that:

...we have some very, very dedicated studious students who will spend six, seven, nine hours a night doing homework and that's what it takes to do well in the IB. (School 1, Teacher 1)

The participants established that, coupled with their strong work ethic, Asian IBDP students in China also had extremely high expectations for their IB studies. Accordingly, it was thought that an emphasis on high grades resulted in a narrow focus on preparation for assessments. A headteacher poignantly contended that students, therefore, often reduced the IBDP to a "high-stakes" exam:

It is my impression that in China with the traditional approach with the Gaokao. It is all about taking the next step and entering the right university so passing the exam is the priority. So my impression is that unsurprisingly in a culture that associates success at university with success in high stakes exams for high school students, that is often where the focus is. (School 2, Headteacher)

In four schools teachers and administrators highlighted that another characteristic of Asian IBDP students in China was that they initially struggled with critical thinking and communication skills. As a coordinator recounted in an anecdote, these traits were often counterintuitive to these students' cultural heritage:

Being critical is a bit more a Western tradition. It takes the Chinese kids a while to realize that they can disagree with the teacher and I won't get angry. Sometimes at parents' evening I say that the son or daughter does not speak enough in class, and they say "*thank you very much*". I say "*I want them to speak more*" and they say "*oh no, no, no my child should not speak in class*". But I really want them to engage, especially in the small classes. (School 4, IBDP Coordinator)

#### **(2) The Core curricular of Creativity, Action, Service (CAS), Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and Extended Essay (EE) should be borrowed to current public schools as they had been accepted by administrators, teachers, and students to be positive to the program.**

Teacher and administrator groups from each of the five schools argued that TOK was a distinguishing feature of the IBDP, also, CAS ensured that students were given ample opportunities to develop skills such as

leadership, and EE to be regarded as a highly important first experience of researching and writing an academic essay for students.

TOK was regarded as a distinguishing feature of the IBDP and was considered that the TOK was crucial in taking students out of their comfort zone and encouraging them to engage with philosophical issues and debates. As one coordinator explained, this was important in developing skills, such as critical thinking:

TOK is really useful because it teaches kids to think...students are taught to question everything they know. The example I give to the kids is one plus one equals two, the most basic thing you know is not true: if you have one part of sugar and add another part of sugar then you still have one pile of sugar. (School 4, IBDP Coordinator)

Obviously, teachers contended that the epistemological issues covered over the TOK course were valuable in enabling students to identify relationships between subjects. One of students stated, this contrasted to their experiences of other curriculums:

I think I really did not grasp (the TOK) when I was engaging in it at the beginning of learning TOK. It was very much a silo mentality. Even in Math and Physics I cannot remember teachers saying “you know how you are doing this in Physics, this is how it connects to Math”. But, you know, TOK provides ample opportunities for those type of connections. (School 2, Student 5)

Interviewees from all five schools were in strong agreement that students found the Extended Essay to be a highly important first experience of researching and writing an academic essay. In particular, they emphasized that in the process, students were given opportunities to learn through mistakes under the guidance of teachers.

Meanwhile, IB school teachers and administrators from all five schools concurred that one of the core aims of CAS was the development of non-academic Learner Profile traits. In particular, they considered that the compulsory nature of CAS ensured that students were given ample opportunities to develop skills such as leadership. As one teacher argued:

I think the CAS is great, especially the service element. And I think that with the IB requirement, we really have to get the kids to do this, whereas if it was out of choice, some of them would, some of them wouldn't. And I think if we're trying to educate and nurture the whole person, I think CAS does a lot for that, in terms of nurturing social skills, going to the wider world—it builds their confidence, builds their leadership. (School 4, Teacher 1)

### **(3) IB curriculum requires unique pedagogical approaches that aimed towards analytical, communicative, and creativity skills, which are weaknesses of curriculum of public schools.**

As one coordinator emphasized, promoting communication skills is one of the foci of IB curricular effectively.

Very clearly is the communication skills because they do a lot of writing and presenting to improve their communication skills. (School 3, IBDP Coordinator)

It was observed that pedagogical methodologies in teaching the IBDP curriculum hinged on facilitating student engagement and classroom discussion. For example, one headteacher described the objectives of their school's teaching practices as, “student choice and empowerment” and “defense of argumentation”:

I think our teachers try to promote thinking and not just giving students information in the IB Program. They ask a lot of questions that are thought-provoking and that require independent research, independent thinking, defense of argumentation. (School 5, Headteacher)

**(4) Current “strong frame” type of Chinese curricular system should learn from the IB curriculum on its the breadth of the IBDP curriculum came at the expense of covering content in-depth.**

The IBDP's holistic approach to education was more suited to core competences which emphasized by Chinese government. This was due to greater emphasis on extra-curricular activities and the covering of a wider range of subjects through elective courses in public schools in China. Particularly, current closed Chinese high school curriculum system are facing the challenges of separating from the globalization (Ryan, 2017).

For instance, the Extended Essay was emphasized by participants from all five schools as providing important training in university essay writing ranging from devising research questions to writing a bibliography. And the course provided an important grounding in epistemological issues (Heineke, 2014). As one of the teachers described, this was considered to be vital for helping students develop a cognitive maturity to a level appropriate for engaging with university level academic issues:

...one of the crucial things about transitioning to university is that they have to start to think for themselves, evaluate the different views of people who are telling them things, how reliable their sources are, and all those sorts of things. So I think taking a bit of time to discuss specifically, how do we know, how do we decide who we're going to believe in different situations, is important for university study where they're increasingly given access to a bunch of books and encouraged to make their own judgment. (School 4, Teacher 2)

Those Chinese students in IB schools broke the myth of “paradox of Chinese students”, which emphasize that they are often struggling to engage fully in critical thinking and classroom discussions. However, teachers at four IB schools proved that the implementation of IB curriculum for Chinese students could promote both their academic and oral engagement. As the holistic approach of the IBDP curriculum that aims to provide both a broad and academically rigorous curriculum, which are lack of in the current curriculum system in China (Schafer & Olsen, 2018).

## Conclusion

As a learner under high pressure, a partial student of traditional teacher training and a practitioner of global thinking, there is insufficient cooperation and identification, lack of specificity and weak global problem-solving ability in IB teachers' professional development (Peterson, 2015). To respond to the challenges, three IB schools has established a good professional development foundation for IB teachers through systematic pre-service training system, encouraging interdisciplinary teaching activities to help IB teachers break through the isolated situation of professional development so that they can participate in the international professional learning community network to enhance the global literacy of IB teachers. It provides the following practical implications for the professional development of IB teachers in China: improve the pre-service screening and training system for IB teachers, motivate teachers to become “distributed teaching leaders” (Ryan, 2010), conduct demand-oriented professional guidance activities and promote IB Teacher's cross-cultural understanding.

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