International Baccalaureate Programmes and Educational Access

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Abstract

Educational access has long been considered one of the primary ways to close the achievement gap in the United States. In regards to all International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes, however, educational access does not have the same meaning across the globe and when discussing IB programmes, access is largely determined both by country and the type of school offering the IB programme being examined. While educational access should be considered a social justice issue, in regards to IB programmes, the concept of social justice should be approached differently depending on nation, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and perhaps, cultural context.

Introduction

In terms of American education, closing the academic achievement gap is perhaps one of the most important issues facing teachers, researchers, and policy makers. This gap is not just one that exists between minority students and their white counterparts; it exists between students of low socioeconomic status and students of high socioeconomic status and between students who speak English as a native language and those who study English as a second or even third language.

International Baccalaureate (IB) has a strong reputation for providing a rigorous academic and assessment program but is sometimes seen as an "elite" program – one for highly motivated, academically strong, and often affluent schools and students. This brings up the question of access and a discussion of access as a social justice issue since there are structures and organizational issues that often allow one class or group of students to have access to the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) or other advanced academic coursework while others do not. However, when considering access in terms of IB programmes and for the purposes of this paper, discussion will be limited to the IBDP, the IB programme designed for students in their final two years of secondary schooling.

It is important to think about the term "access" itself and if it should be applied to IB programmes the same way around the world. Access in an American context because of a desire to close the achievement gap is not the same as access in other areas of the world where enrollment in IB programmes may be limited because of national or local government factors. As a result, this paper will focus mainly on the questions and ramifications of access to various IB programmes in an American perspective but will only briefly address issues that might impact access to IB programmes in international schools and other international settings.

The following research questions guided the preparation of this paper:

- How is educational access a social justice issue?
- How has IB looked at the issue of access?
- How is the achievement gap debate connected to access?
- What structures are in place (or are lacking) to close the achievement gap for underrepresented populations in IB programmes in the United States?
- What issues might be present in schools that wish to implement IB programmes as a way to help close the achievement gap?
- How might the issue of access be different in international schools and other international environments?

It is expected that other questions might arise but that these questions would lead to topics and springboards for future discussion and research as these issues are peripherally related to upcoming literature review and dissertation work.

A Definition of Access and Application to IB

Perhaps the first thing to do is to present a working definition of access as it is being used in this paper. For the purposes of discussion, access is being defined as the ability to use something or the capacity to take advantage of something as in an opportunity. This would apply to education as in the availability of a course, curriculum, or a program of study. It could also be applied to an activity such as art or a sports program.

Given the definition above, the discussion of this paper concerns IB as a program of study, a curriculum, or an opportunity to take single advanced academic courses that are designated as “IB courses”. The question of access will be explored in light of the achievement

gap issue in the United States and a discussion of how the IBDP might be used to help close the achievement gap will be offered for review.

The Connection between Access to an Advanced Academic Program and Social Justice

Educational access in this paper will be analyzed in terms of one group or class having access to an educational program and another group not sharing that same access. In thinking about how access to IB would fit into a social justice context, the issue comes down to the idea that some students are not being offered the opportunity to be as successful as others in their peer group and this is not equity. Because of where they live, their income, their nationality, their perceived intelligence, or perhaps some other reason, some students are being denied an opportunity to study at the same level as other students. This would afford them a chance to achieve their goals, whatever they may be. It does not matter that IB is an advanced academic program, far above basic literacy or numeracy; the issue comes down to equity for the purposes of the following discussion.

Research Completed by IB

Although the IBDP is an international curriculum and assessment program, much of IB's research in the area of access has been focused on the United States. Perhaps this is also because of the connection to the achievement gap issue, or perhaps it is simply because of the explosion of the number of authorized IB schools in the United States over the last several years. As of May 1, 2010, IB has 1,122 schools in the United States (IB, 2010) and American students sat for more than 50,000 exams during the 2009 examination session, more than any nation in the world. Currently, IB maintains a blog titled "Addressing Access" on their website where they publish reports and data related to IB and access issues. The following paragraphs are a review of the work related to the research questions noted earlier supplemented by additional reading.

In the United States, closing the academic achievement gap has been a policy issue since the end of the Civil Rights Movement. In 2009, the mean reading score on the SAT for African American students was 429 compared to 528 for their White counterparts. Latino students had a mean reading score of 455. Mathematics comparisons were similar with African American students at 426, Latino students at 461, and White students at 536 (College Board, 2009). Schools that African American and Latino students often attend experience serious opportunity gaps in that they are less likely to offer advanced academic courses such as calculus or trigonometry (Adelman, 2006). In addition, many immigrant and working class students do not make the connection between high scholastic achievement and future career or academic opportunities and thus do not complete courses required for college admission. In some cases, the ways that some schools are structured and the ways that students are assigned to courses leads to gaps in educational opportunity or issues of access (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Stevenson, Schiller & Schneider, 1994).

This brings up the issue of IB programmes. Since discussion is focused on closing the achievement gap and getting students ready for university and potentially, a job market, analysis will be limited to the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP). The IBDP is a two-year course of study that requires students to study material in six course areas culminating in a series of international assessments. Schools that offer the IBDP are permitted to allow students to pursue individual subjects or to require students to complete the entire Diploma sequence – an undertaking during which a student completes study and examination in six subject areas including foreign languages and the arts. In addition to this requirement, students are also required to complete three additional obligations that are unique to IB – a critical thinking and philosophy course called, *Theory of Knowledge (TOK)*, the development and writing of a 4,000-word piece of

original research known as the *Extended Essay* and the completion of 150 hours of Community, Action, and Service, also known as *CAS* (Sjogren & Campbell, 2003). There are approximately 100 languages available for students to study as well as 29 other subjects. Schools choose which subjects to offer depending on resources but must cover all six general subject areas.

Students are awarded an IB Diploma if they achieve a score of total score of 24 points or more on their exams, do not fail more than one exam, and do not receive an "E" (elementary) grade on either their extended essay or their TOK essay. These particular two papers are graded by external examiners and are sent away for grading prior to the exam period. Exceptional TOK or extended essays can also help a student's total score by awarding up to an additional three points for particularly insightful work. Students in the United States take their exams in May each year. As it was said earlier that the United States has the most IB schools in the world, it also has the most schools offering the IBDP. Additionally, Robinson Secondary School, located in Fairfax County, Virginia, gives more exams each year than anywhere else in the world.

In the United States, over 85 percent of IB schools are public which means IB programmes are not being limited to those in private, fee-based schools. Students are in schools where IB programmes are available but are these programs available to *all* students? Again, this brings up the question of access.

Structures and Strategies to Help Close the Achievement Gap

In order to support high academic achievement, administrators and teachers should implement five specific strategies to help underrepresented populations and close the academic achievement gap. These include: 1) close monitoring of academic and personal growth, 2) access to high quality curriculum, 3) providing scaffolding to ensure success, 4) providing academically oriented and supportive peer groups, and 5) providing opportunities for social and

emotional growth (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Offering the IBDP would be one way of providing a high quality, rigorous curriculum for students and in many schools, the IBDP is supplemented with two years of IB preparation courses that scaffold the type of learning and academic work that would occur in the 11th and 12th grade IB courses. Some schools also offer the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) to support and prepare students for the IBDP but this is not required.

In the United States, Latino and African American students are more likely to attend large schools in urban areas with high student-to-staff ratios (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). At IB World Schools in New York and California that serve large numbers of both of these populations, the IB coordinators meet with students individually in 10th grade to plan course schedules all the way through 12th grade while emphasizing similarities between a traditional college preparatory curriculum and the IBDP requirements (Mayer, 2008). This helps students realize that small efforts can reap big benefits, namely achieving an IB Diploma in addition to a regular high school diploma granted by their state (Burris, Welner, Wiley, & Murphy, 2007).

Schools in more affluent areas have been shown to provide more rigorous curriculums than schools that are located in areas of students of low socioeconomic status (Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2005). In addition, schools in areas of more wealth often have better prepared teachers who have higher expectations for their students. Urban schools can also be in disrepair or lack resources due to per-capita spending budget constraints when compared with schools in wealthier areas. Moreover, with more than 25 percent of first-year college students needing remedial courses (Clemmit, 2006; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000), secondary schools need to create climates in which all students are offered opportunities to take advanced academic programs and classes that will prepare them for college-level coursework and hopefully, ensure that they do not have to take remedial education courses in reading, writing, or mathematics.

Research suggests that low income and minority students are not enrolling in advanced academic course offerings for several reasons. First, in some schools, students feel that they are not prepared to take the advanced classes (Stevenson et al, 1994) because they have not had the previous preparatory work required to make them successful in an IBDP or another advanced course offering. Second, in some schools, access to IB or other advanced coursework, such as the Advanced Placement Program, is restricted in terms of prerequisites, grade point averages, or recommendations and minority students tend to be placed in lower track classes in earlier grades, often are not placed in gifted and talented programs, and may have societal, language, and/or familial barriers to obtaining the required grade point averages to enter advanced classes (Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2006). These factors, combined with organizational policies that serve as barriers to increased access to IB and other advanced academic opportunities (ie. course size limits, scheduling issues, staffing) hinder efforts to close academic achievement gaps.

If more students are going to enroll in IB coursework, schools must have teachers who are prepared to teach those classes and believe that students from a variety of backgrounds can successfully navigate the required curriculums. At the same time, schools that offer the IBDP must work with their feeder middle and elementary schools to nurture students of all nationalities and racial groups so that students come to the secondary school motivated and academically ready to participate in honors, IB, and other advanced academic coursework (Mayer, 2008). Culturally responsive teaching should foster the skills that students will later need to access and be successful in IB and other advanced coursework. Administrators and teachers should work together to engage parents in the education of their children and address local concerns that might arise as districts implement policies that expand access to college prep and honors courses.

Another strategy that schools have used to increase enrollment in and access to IB Programmes is to decrease or eliminate entirely tracking of students either in secondary school or in both middle and high school (Garrity, 2004). Although this might be thought to be an answer to closing the achievement gap, detracking students only works if interventions are in place to make up for gaps in learning when the different 'paths' or 'tracks' are eliminated. Sometimes, when tracking is completely eliminated, students are "caught" without the necessary tools and scaffolding to come up to the higher level of the untracked class. The solution of detracking, although it often appears to close an achievement gap to administrations because more students are listed as taking an advanced or honors course does not actually close achievement gaps when many students are struggling and some students will end up repeating that same honors course the following year. At one Fairfax County, Virginia, high school a decision to detrack and eliminate a non-honors level of a grade 10 English course created a gap for second language English learners who were in a non-honors level transitional English 9 class the previous year and now have to come up much further in their learning and school work than their native English speaking counterparts in the same course (L. Hinkley, personal communication, April 29, 2010). In another district, three tracks were reduced to two in the 9th and 10th grades and any student was permitted to take an IB course in the 11th or 12th grades. "Even though any student could enroll in IB courses in grades 11 and 12, students made decisions early in their schooling that effectively, if unintentionally, excluded them from the IB program" (Burris et al, 2007, p. 54). Despite the cases noted, some districts have been successful in expanding access to advanced coursework, including the IBDP. Centre Union Free School District in New York used detracking and open enrollment policies successfully to increase enrollment in higher level mathematics courses from 38 to 52 percent (Garrity, 2004). The District of Rockville Center,

also in New York, attributes a rise in the New York Regents English mastery level results "from 60 to 90 percent to the substantial expansion of ethnic minority students enrolled in AP and International Baccalaureate courses" (Mayer, 2008, p. 3).

The Diploma Gap Project

In 2008, the Gates Foundation awarded a grant to IB to conduct an eight-week study of the "Diploma Gap", the gap between the numbers of high school students who could be reached by the IBDP and those students who actually are. The stated goals of the project were "to identify the reasons for the gap, quantify the impact of the gap, and devise strategic solutions to narrow it" (IB, 2009, p. 1). The study included five components:

1) interviews with leaders at IB,
2) focus groups and interviews with more than 50 school personnel at more than 12 schools in the United States,
3) student surveys of more than 400 students (these included IB, pre-IB, and non-IB students),
4) data analysis concerning American IB participation and performance, and
5) a literature review of research about IB and similar programs.

The study found that there were several possible sources for IB Diploma gaps with conditions at various stages in a student's educational path that would affect their likelihood of first choosing to start the IBDP and then complete the IBDP. Not surprisingly, a student must first attend an IB school because schools are the organizations authorized to offer the IBDP. Students may study a subject by themselves as in the case of *ab initio* language subjects but even these subjects are studied under the guidance of a teacher who makes sure that IB requirements and external assessments are being completed properly and according to published deadlines. The first

qualification does filter out many American high school students as approximately seven percent of all U.S. high school students attend a school authorized to offer the IBDP (IB, 2008).

Second, students must be academically qualified to participate in IB coursework. This does not mean meeting a certain grade point average but it does mean being at or above grade level. If students are in an IB school, retaining them to participate in IB becomes the second largest driver of the Diploma gap. "Less than half as many under-represented students (21 percent) are as sufficiently prepared as their higher income, white and Asian counterparts (45 percent)" (IB, 2009, p. 3). Among all qualified students, less than one in four actually participates in the IBDP. Surveys from students during the study revealed that students felt that the IBDP was a program for a small number of high-achieving students, rather than a challenging program that everyone could benefit from or a quality curriculum to be made widely accessible.

The third filter that kept students out of the IBDP and was a potential source for the Diploma gap was that *all* schools did not allow *all* students to enter the IBDP. Another term for this is open enrollment. Although most teachers and administrators agreed that IB is a curriculum that is good for all students, most schools do not operate the program that way and put up barriers to student access. Programs are run as extensions to honors programs or programs for elite or advanced students, with entrance requirements, prerequisites such as applications or recommendations. In the Diploma Gap Project, this translated into student perception survey results that revealed a belief that IB was not accessible to minority students and it was a program considered for "others". If less than one in four qualified students is actually participating in the IBDP, and there are this many hoops to jump through for that participation rate, is it no surprise when students do not complete the program? What supports are in place to assist and nurture

students so that once they start the IBDP, they have not only a chance to finish the Diploma Programme but a chance to be successful with it and earn an IB Diploma?

In addition to outlining the factors that prevent students from participating in IB Programmes, the Diploma Gap Project also proposed strategies for narrowing the Diploma gap. These include growing the number of IB schools more rapidly (something IB seems to be doing, given the growth of the Americas region), encouraging schools to expand IB programmes and adopt open access/enrollment models, and create support systems for underrepresented populations. These strategies, IB believes, would help provide more access to students but would also give more students a chance at being successful in their programs (IB, 2009).

"Access" Schools and the IBDP

IB differentiates between schools that attract under-represented populations to the Diploma Programme and those that struggle with this, by calling them "Access" schools. Many of their self-titled "Access" schools are Title I, low-income high schools that serve under-represented groups with over 60 percent of those students completing the IBDP successfully (IB, 2009). For clarification, at least 40 percent of students in a Title I school must be from low-income families; this is typically measured by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch (No Child Left Behind, para. 6). The "Access" schools differ from "Diploma Gap" schools usually in terms of school or district approach, support for students and sometimes, state involvement concerning higher education. In many ways, "Access" schools have figured out what works in terms of minority participation and access and they encourage their students to be successful in their IB programmes.

First, "Access" schools set specific targets for participation. Administrators and IB coordinators sell the program to the local community and publicize the program to all the

students, not just the honors students as is the case in many "Gap" schools. Lamar Academy in McAllen, Texas, (one of the 60 percent IBDP completion schools) uses parent and student outreach sessions as well as targeted marketing materials to encourage students to enter the IBDP.

Second, many "Access" schools promote the IBDP as a program for all students who are motivated to do the program, not just for those who were in a gifted and talented program or were in the honors classes. By discussing the IBDP with students in this manner, schools can encourage students to try subjects they are interested in and because they are motivated, with a little extra support, students often find they can be successful. Strong district level and administrative support is crucial, especially when students may falter or hit small stumbling blocks during multiple assessment periods.

Another feature of "Access" schools is that the districts and areas in which these schools are located in often dedicate extensive amounts of funding and human capital to establishing support programs and interventions to first help include students in the IBDP and then to help them be successful students once they enter the program. This might include vertical articulation of subjects between the middle and high schools, targeted instruction of skills needed to succeed in IB, encouragement of all students to enroll in IB and other advanced coursework, and organized structures that provide social and emotional support. Programs including Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) used in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, require under-represented students to sign up for at least one advanced academic course as a requirement of the extra support they receive by being in the program. "Access" schools and programs also usually exist in states that are highly supportive of IB and other advanced

academic programs. Often, these states provide scholarships and other financial support, and even sometimes provide educator incentives.

The states most supportive of IB also offer automatic and substantial university credit for students who complete the IBDP, as well as scholarships to many state four-year institutions. At the present time, Texas, Florida, and Oregon are the most generous in terms of IB support on the statewide level, with professional development programs for teachers, financial support for schools that adopt IB Programmes, and university recognition and scholarships for students who complete the IBDP. Furthermore, students who attempt and pass IB certificate coursework in these states often receive credit from state colleges and universities, something that is highly contested in some other states, especially in comparison to the Advanced Placement Program. For example, the State of Texas pays IB student examination fees and schools receive $100 from the state for each student who passes an IB (IB, 2009).

Between a Diploma Gap School and an "Access" School: Implementation Issues

The process to implement an IBDP is complex and takes at least 15 months before any secondary school would be able to actually start teaching the program. If a school is approved to be an IB World School and authorized to offer the IBDP, it would have had to provide IB with documentation that all facilities are sufficient to run the program, at least two years of coursework and then examinations will be provided to students, administration are supportive of the plan to adopt the IBDP, the designated IB coordinator will fulfill certain roles in the process of implementing the program and will be trained in IB procedures, rules, and guidelines, and that all teachers who teach the program will be committed to a plan of continuing professional development and will be trained before teaching the IBDP subject areas that the school will adopt for their students (IB, 2006). In addition, it costs a school approximately $12,000 the year

of application and around $8,500 for each year they are authorized by IB. In harsh economic times, some schools in lower socioeconomic areas struggle to justify the program to parents, board members, and other stakeholders. Title I schools have a particular battle to become "Access schools" as they sometimes suffer from incidents that disrupt IB implementation efforts including student violence, budget cuts that force class size increases or reduced staffing, and a focus on raising state test scores and the continued demands of No Child Left Behind's Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) . These demands shift attention away from challenging students to take more rigorous coursework and overwhelm the needs of implementing an IBDP. "When survival is at stake, the priorities are clear, and where IB is seen as competing with, rather than complementing the drive to survive these policy pressures, it is unlikely that schools can justify investing the time, attention, and resources required (Siskin, Weinstein & Sperling, 2010, p. 10). Although many Title I schools experience stressors that schools in affluent communities do not encounter, students can be successful in an IBDP in either type of school, provided that the support structures are in place for all students to be successful in the programme. Changing a school from a Diploma gap school to an "Access" school may take creative interventions and severe changes in beliefs and expectations from all involved to convince and reveal that disadvantaged students in low-income schools can succeed in being IB (Siskin et al, 2010).

IB Access in International Contexts

In terms of the rest of the world, access to IB programmes varies widely depending on the area of the world and the country involved. Just as there are different types of schools in the United States, there are various types of schools in the rest of the world. In terms of international schools, however, there are two major types – those that are recognized by the host country and those that are not. In terms of IB programmes, these schools may not differ greatly as many

unrecognized schools can and do offer IB programmes. Access issues outside of the United States in regards to international schools revolve around the idea of admission. Since most international schools are fee-based, private schools, they have the ability to decide which students have the right to attend their school. Depending on country and culture, some international schools have separate (and equal?) campuses for boys and girls, some countries do not allow host nationals (students from the country in which the international school is located) to attend that same international school, and others set quotas for host national students. Ministries of Education (MOE) can affect the ability of an international school to offer a certain program or admit a certain class of student but each country's MOE decides if they want to control or even inspect international schools in addition to any international accreditation requirements (Hayden, Thompson, & Walker, 2002). Scholarship concerning access issues in international schools is scarce. One thing that should be noted about international schools is that all international schools do not offer admission to students with learning disabilities or language difficulties; again, as these schools are private, they can also choose what programs to offer and to limit.

Conclusions and Future Questions

In considering the issue of IB and access, this is one case where the United States needs to set itself aside from the rest of the world because of the complexities of connecting access to the achievement gap issue. American education's efforts to right injustices of the past still continue and teachers are providing interventions, scaffolding lessons, and encouraging students to take more challenging coursework so that they are better prepared for university study and later life. The IBDP is one way to provide students with the tools and skills that they will need to navigate a global marketplace and become productive citizens.

The research that IB has completed concerning access is interesting but is just a start. At this point, the following avenues for future research could be suggested:

1) A longitudinal study tracking the college progress of students in some of IB's designated "Access" schools – Did the skills learned in the IBDP and the extra support provided by the "Access" school, translate to college success and graduation? (College success and graduation could be measured by some specific grade point average over a prescribed number of semesters).
2) A survey or several case studies of teachers who work with students who would be classified as members of underrepresented populations. This could be about some of the interventions and programs they specifically use with these students.
3) A qualitative study of those students who start the IBDP but fail to finish it for some reason.
4) A qualitative study of those students who complete large numbers of certificate examinations and IB courses but are not full Diploma students, meaning they do not do CAS, TOK or the Extended Essay for some reason. What are the reasons for taking six exams and not doing the other three requirements of the IBDP? Is this a school issue or a student issue?

In the rest of the world, it is clear that scholarship in the area of access to an international school education is needed and perhaps a better exploration might be to compare the education a child receives in an international school versus the education a child receives in a typical state-run school. Do access issues come into play when this comparison is made? Obviously, a fee-based international school in London is different from a public sixth-form college in the East End but what about comparing a public school in London offering the IBDP to that international

school? ACS has international schools in London that offer the IBDP; Elthorne Park High School is a public high school in London that also offers the DP. It would be interesting to compare these two schools and discuss access.

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