The applicability and impact of using the IB Learner Profile as a framework for discussing bullying in the MYP: Lessons from a practice-based research project.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a small-scale research project conducted in a Swedish IB International School with Middle Years Programme (MYP) students. This research used an experimental design to examine the applicability and impact of using the IB's Learner Profile (LP) as a structure for modulating a program on discussing and preventing bullying in the MYP. The applicability and impact were measured using a mixed-method approach that reflected the views of the students and the teachers involved. This paper will first present the rationale and background to the study, including the research questions. It will then give an overview of the literature associated with bullying prevention and the IB philosophy. The next section of the paper will explain the process of putting the modules together, followed by presentation of the methods and methodology used to gather the data in this research. It will then move on to an analysis of the data and finally identify the lessons learnt in terms of applying the LP as a framework for discussing bullying.

2. Rationale, background for this study and research questions

The school is located in the South of Sweden and has a student population of over 500. The school offers the Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma Programs. The existing anti-bullying program focuses on the reporting and investigation of bullying allegations. The particular system in question is common to many Swedish schools, whereby students act as informants of bullying incidents and report them directly to the anti-bullying program coordinator. As a staff group, we considered that it would be more proactive if we could find a way to encourage the bystander to the bullying

situation to directly address and help prevent the bullying situations from occurring (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005). This could be constituted as an attempt to move away from a more punitive model of reporting towards a preventative and wider-reaching approach. Accordingly, the author of this paper considered that the application of the LP in a discussion on bullying had the potential to involve the student group in preventing bullying and was therefore worthy of further investigation. Based on this premise, a research plan was put together and an application made to the Jeff Thompson Award Committee, the IB's award program, for practice-based research projects. The proposal focused on investigating whether the LP had the potential to help frame a modular program to address bullying in our school. The success of this application helped to give the project additional credibility in the school community, which in turn helped provide the impetus needed to carry out the research. Ethical approval was sought and received from the principal. Students and staff were advised that should they wish not to participate in the survey or the focus group they were free to say so. Students and staff were also informed that their identities would be kept confidential and that the voice recording of the voice group would be destroyed after use.

The team responsible for the creation of the program's modules consisted of teachers and after-school staff and was coordinated by the author, the school counselor. The class mentors (teachers who are assigned specific classes and act as contact persons for the students in their allocated classes) delivered the modules over a ten-week period, once a week for 30 minutes each time. It can be highlighted that the process was also an exercise in carrying out research in a school setting. The challenges and experiences in respect of this are relevant for other schools who may consider carrying out similar research of their own.

3. Literature review

As part of the research process, a review of the academic literature in the area of the IB's LP and associations with bullying programs was conducted during the period

between August 2013 and December 2013. The review focused on the following areas:

- What is reported in the literature regarding the IB LP as a framework for discussing bullying?
- More generally, what is known about anti-bullying programs' success in school settings and what research methodologies were used to evaluate them?

It is important to carry out literature reviews to gain an overview of the existing research and knowledge in a specific area. The literature review can help gain insight into the wider research on the topic, thus providing the best chance of knowing how to build a suitable empirical research design. As Hitchcock (1995, p.91) argued, 'a good literature review and its products should inform and underpin the whole of a research project'. Indeed, the aims of the literature review in this study were to help broaden and refine existing knowledge in the area studied.

The review adapted a strategy that focused on recent publications via the SCOPUS search engine with the following key words (IB, bullying, learner profile, evaluation, prevention). Articles in peer-reviewed journals were considered within the disciplines of education, social work, and psychology. Baldry & Farrington (2007) suggest that different definitions of bullying can lead to different results so it is important to first state what one means by bullying. Accordingly, this research worked from the standard definition offered by Olweus (1993) who states that 'a person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself'. Baldry & Farrington (2007 p.184) consider that one of the ongoing problems in investigating the efficacy of an intervention program is to identify 'which elements of a program are most effective in reducing bullying, since they usually offer different elements, such as using videos [and] group discussions'. This review focused on themes considered relevant to both the creation of an IB-based anti-bullying program and also the methodologies subsequently used in this research. The themes form the

basis of this brief literature review and were generated through a process of discussion with the other members of the anti-bullying team.

Theme 1: Prevalence and success of interventions

The prevalence of bullying in Sweden, although difficult to estimate as measures used vary significantly, is considered to be 6% for boys and 5% for girls (bullied at least sometimes during the school term, including every week/all the time) (Flygare et al*.,* 2013). However, data from Norway and Denmark also revealed discrepancies amongst Nordic countries. For instance, the data showed that 15% of boys and 11% of girls in Norway and 26% for boys and 24% for girls in Denmark experienced bullying (Frisen & Holmqvist, 2010). In the USA, some figures suggest that 29.9% of students have some involvement in bullying, either as a victim or a bully (Nansel et al, 2001). With respect to the success of interventions, research suggests that most programs do not, however, show any significant effect, and where effects are shown, these are generally modest (Frisen & Holmqvist, 2010, p.172). The results of the review by Ttofi *et al.* (2010, p.45) showed that 'programs have a bigger impact on bullying for older children' as this is an age when bullying decreases. Programs targeted towards 'older children tend to be more effective in reducing bullying because of the student's superior cognitive abilities, decreasing impulsiveness, and increasing likelihood of making rational decisions' (Ttofi *et al.,* 2010, p.6). The evidence on the success of interventions is mixed but it is suggested that the age group of the MYP cohort gives the best chance for positive outcomes given the increasing maturity of the students and the general decrease in bullying within that age group.

Theme 2: The IB and anti-bullying programs

The literature search carried out for this research, albeit not extensive, did not identify any studies that focused on the LP in the same way that it is used in this research. However, the literature did help illuminate the background to the LP and

the critical view some authors have taken regarding its origin and application in practice. In 2006, the IB published the LP, a list of 10 attributes that describe the type of student the organization hopes to develop. They are: Inquirers, Open-minded, Knowledgeable, Thinkers, Communicators, Principled, Caring, Risk-takers, Balanced, and Reflective. However, Oord (2013) challenges the philosophy behind the LP and considers it to be too prescriptive and moralistic in tone. He argues that LP is at odds with the autonomous nature of the IB philosophy, expressed by the likes of Dewey who state that basing an education on character formation imposes upon the student an 'interpenetration of habits' (Dewey, 1938). His discussion draws attention to the power of language in helping to create the 'good student'. In 2012, the IB announced that there was to be a shift in the use of the LP. Oord adds that 'although many in the IB community adopted the learner profile with much enthusiasm, others at times felt under pressure to display and adopt the learner profile, even when they sensed the profile was at odds with their own educational philosophy' (Oord, p.216). The difficulty in helping schools use the LP is outlined by Wells (2011) who argues that there is no research or theory which explains the origin of the LP and how it manifested from the PYP values. The 'focus on the three concepts of values, attitudes and behavior arises from what can be considered three functions of the LP (taken from Wells (2011):

1. It is pivotal to the curriculum: 'these are values that should infuse all elements (of the programmes)' (IBO, 2008a:1).

2. It promotes a certain attitude: 'an embodiment of what the IB means by 'international mindedness' (IBO, 2008a: 1; Renaud, 1991, quoted in IBO, 2008b).

3. It leads to a kind of behaviour: 'the IB espouses the principle of educating the whole person for a life of active, responsible citizenship' (IBO, 2008a:1).

He adds (p.184) that according to the view of the IB, 'it is not so much that teachers, managers or other members of the community [who] deliver the curriculum through the Learner Profile, but that through modeling behavior and attitude associated therewith, the students are somehow able to imbibe, virtually by osmosis, attributes of the Learner Profile's qualities'. Studies investigating, documenting, and

researching how the LP connects with the practical school world can only but serve to improve practice and in turn relevance for the students.

Theme 3: Staff involvement in anti-bullying programs

O Brennan *et al.* (2014, p.870) report that '75% of teachers had a student report a bullying incident to them'. The relationship between the student and the teacher is significant and serves as 'a protective factor from the deleterious effects of bullying on students' academic achievement (*ibid.* p.871). In addition, the authors consider that staff who feel connected to one another and have information and strategies to discuss bullying would be more invested and comfortable intervening in bullying at their school (*ibid.* p.872). Hong & Espelage (2011) recognize that bullying programs 'are only as good as their implementers. Teachers are often implementers of these programs in their classroom; however, they have many demands on their time and are likely to drift in their ability to adhere to [anti-bullying] lessons'. From this, one can deduce that staff involvement in the creation and implementation of an anti-bullying program both empower and develop better programs. This became an important consideration in driving the collaborative nature in this research project.

Theme 4: Lessons from the students

Following on from empowerment and participatory perspectives, it is important to hear the views of the students who receive the modules and include their voice in issues directly related to them. From this same value base, Frisen *et al.* (2012) comment that few studies have asked about what they, themselves (the students), think should be done to actually stop the bullying problem in their schools. Mainly, such studies have focused on how students think that victims should cope in bullying situations. With the same consideration, Frisen & Holmqvist (2010) in their study asked an open question to 13 and 16 year olds. At both 13 and 16, the students' most frequent answer was that school personnel should take action by having serious talks with students involved and that victims should learn to cope with the bullying e.g. by

standing up for themselves or by ignoring the bully. Peer behavior may in fact be easier to change than the behavior of the bullies, and through these changes, the behavior of the bullies might also be affected. Only 25% of the students surveyed reported that bullying stopped because of the intervention of the school personnel. Peer support was also insignificant - 'by juxtaposing the findings of the present study with the previous one, one may thus question whether the role played by peers in counteracting bullying is really as important as had [been] previously suggested' (Frisen & Holmqvist, 2010, p.240). This information is relevant as it helped inform the design and content of the modules used in this research.

Theme 5: Methodologies

As the focus of this review was limited, it was considered from the outset that studies using a mixed method methodology would receive preference over other studies, given their increasing popularity. Mixed-method studies combine quantitative and qualitative research methods. Within mixed-method methodologies, different methods for collecting data are used, such as surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups. The growth in popularity can be traced in part to the 'over-reliance on quantitative studies (that) has limited our understanding of certain aspects of the bullying phenomenon' (Hong & Espelahe, 2012, p.116). Limiting our perspective can mean we miss some important information from the students who are directly affected by bullying issues. This leads Pellegrini & Bartini (2000) to argue that multiple approaches to bullying behavior in schools are needed. In a similar vein, Hong & Espelahe (2012) argue that mixed methods can provide new insights that compliment and highlight divergent findings. The mixed-method approach allows schools to 'evaluate bullying prevention programs across different schools and communities'. Hong & Espelahe (2012, p.116) point out that 'mixed methods have been well received by the social science community due to a strong commitment to utilizing multiple sources to generate findings'. In an overview of studies on bullying programs in school, Lee & Cornell (2010, p.45) report that the Olweus Bully/Victim

Questionnaire (BVQ) is the 'most widely used bullying self-report survey in the world'. They suggest that 'confidential administration of the BVQ allows schools with anti-bullying prevention programs to conduct a more informative evaluation of their success in reducing rates of bullying'.

More specifically Baldry & Farrington (2007) argue that to assess the effectiveness of an intervention program and to 'control for extraneous variables, exclude alternative explanations, and maximize internal validity, it is important to study a control group with similar characteristics to the experimental group'. This is known as an experimental design. In practical terms this can mean one class in a year group receiving an intervention while the other class in the same year group does not. In summary, the literature reviewed supports the use of mixed methods and the use of an experimental design when trying to assess the impact of a bullying program in schools.

4. Developing the modules

Ttofi *et al.* (2010) suggest that more attention should also be given to describing the way in which programs are implemented. With this in mind, the intention in this section is to provide insight into the process undertaken in the creation of the modules and the subsequent dissemination. A dedicated staff group met on a number of occasions and discussed the potential for combining the LP with our anti-bullying program. These were heated discussions but finally resulted in agreement on specific constellations. We agreed the following combinations: Knowledgeable & Inquirer, Thinker & Balanced, Communication & Reflection, Principled & Open-minded, and Caring & Risk-taker. As we were using IB language, it made sense that we would structure the modules on typical IB frameworks. As such, we identified the following structure for each of the five modules: The **Module's overall question**, e.g. *How does being a risk taker inspire one to be more caring of others?* **Module's Sub-questions** e.g. *what does it mean to take risks/not take risks, what happens with the mind and body when you take risks? How can being mindful contribute to one*

becoming 'more caring' to oneself and others? And **Module's Objectives** e.g. *the objective is to understand that caring for others can sometimes involve taking risks, caring for oneself is important & to understand why being mindful is important.*

From this step we set about creating icebreakers and activities together with sourcing appropriate multi-media resources such as the making of short video bullying vignettes. Once ready with the modules, a meeting with the class mentors participating in the study was held. This meeting lasted about two hours and the mentors were presented with all the modules in printed form. The mentors also had the extra support of having one member of the anti-bullying staff team act as a point of contact to answer any questions on the modules and to offer debriefing after each session, if needed. Feedback suggested that this was valuable in helping them feel comfortable with the material and for the anti-bullying team to receive regular informal feedback on how each session went.

5. Methodology and research focus

This section presents the methodology and methods used to gather the data in this research. It also refers to the methodology that was used to deepen the examination of the quantitative and qualitative data. The literature review was used to present a brief overview of the current research on bullying and identify relevant areas that helped inform the design of the methodology for this research and, simultaneously, the learner-profile-based modules.

The literature review points to the applicability of different methodologies in the researching of bullying in schools. Based on the results of this review, it is argued that an experimental design, with the randomization of classes within a mixed-method approach, was a suitable and valid research approach. In terms of methods, it was clear from the review that the Olweus survey is one of most commonly used surveys for the assessment of bullying in school (Dyer & Teggart, 2007), eliciting student responses on all aspects of victimization and the perpetration of bullying. As a result, it was considered that this survey was to be used for this research project.

To compliment the survey, the focus group will be used given that it is a common method when gathering feedback from a selection of a research sample and works especially well within a school context (Cohen et al, 2007). A semi-structured approach was used for the focus group, with themes (i.e. bullying in general, feedback from the modules, feedback on having the Learner Profiles, and the changes that they would make) rather than direct structured questions framing the discussion. The author and one other member of the anti-bullying team facilitated two focus groups with students, with 10 in each group, and a focus group with mentors who delivered the modules. These meetings were recorded and subsequently transcribed and analysed for emerging themes. The survey was administered online, during school time, before the modules and again four weeks after, with a sample of 190 students (Control 90, Experimental 100).

The survey data was processed through Google Survey. This generated basic descriptive statistical information. Following this, the system used by Baldry & Farrington (2007) to present their findings from a meta-analysis was adapted to discuss the statistics produced by Google Survey. This system classifies changes in percentage outcome as: *desirable* (a reduction of 10% or more), *undesirable* (an increase of 10% or more), or *small* (a change of less than 10%). In terms of the data from the focus groups, a thematic analysis (Cohen *et al.,* 2007) was used to analyze the data gathered from the two focus group interviews. The framework presented by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to guide the ensuing thematic process in that themes were generated as a result of the examination of the data. These themes form the basis of the discussion in the next section.

6. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data

This section will present an analysis of the results gathered through the survey and the focus groups. As this research used a mixed-method methodology, the reporting of the results gives equal weight to both measurements. The quantitative data,

gathered using the Olweus survey, showed a mix of results and is reported using the method and terminology described above (Baldry & Farrington, 2007, Kyriakides et al, 2006). Many of the categories of analysis in the survey did not show any substantial changes. However, there were some notable changes, such as the 13% increase in the 'number of friends' category when compared to the group who did not receive the modules. This suggested that students may have widened their social network through participation in the modules. The material in the modules focused on building relationships and trust and may have contributed to the replies to this question. Widening the social circle can also help deepen the support networks for the students and help prevent bullying (Frisen *et al.,* 2012). In addition, it was also important to see that there was an 11% increase in the number of students in the module group, four weeks after the intervention, who answered that they had not been bullied in the past couple of months. There was no notable change with the non-module group over the research period. While the results in this small study are tentative and have to be interpreted with caution, it is promising to see that there was a desirable change in the students' personal experiences of bullying.

The biggest percentage change was recorded in response to the question concerning how much the student felt that the teacher or mentor did to counteract bullying in the last couple of months. The module group increased by 20% in the 'desirable' category compared to no notable change in the non-module group. This suggests that the group who received the modules perceived the mentors to be doing something to help with bullying in the school. As was highlighted in Section 3, the relationship between teacher and student serves as a protective factor. Therefore, the desirable increase suggested by the data points to an increase in this protective factor.

While these results are positive, as mentioned, many of the questions did not show any change from the time before the modules were implemented for either group.

While a deeper analysis of this is outside the scope of this paper, the lack of change in the other categories' results can possibly add to the credibility of the changes noted. It is also important to point out that no negative impact or undesirable score was recorded. This could suggest that the students were not worse off for having partaken in the modules.

As mentioned, the qualitative data was taken from two focus groups after the modules were delivered. As stated in Section 5, a thematic analysis was used to generate themes from the data gathered, which are presented over the next section.

Theme 1: Nature of bullying in the school

The students referred to situations which are experienced as bullying by one person but in fact may be 'miscommunication' where the person who bullies comes on too strong and the other person may be a bit too sensitive and interprets it as bullying. 'I have kind off seen a bit of that, but it is miscommunication'. This insight was supported by another student who stated that 'I mean most of the time it is people with the misunderstanding that they are being excluded, or it can be intentional, things with snap-chat are becoming really big and when people are not allowed to take part in it, that little group they want to be in, they feel like that they are being bullied but really it is just miscommunication'. Many of the focus group participants challenged the traditional image of physical bullying, for example, 'many people don't know what bullying is, they think [of] shoving someone into the corner, or hitting them', instead referring to the possible emotional impact.

Theme 2: Impact of the modules

The feedback from the students regarding the modules was generally positive. Some of them were able to observe some changes in their class behaviour, stating that 'since we did the thing in mentor time, the program, I think it's a lot easier to notice bullying, plus we now know ways of stopping it'. It was clear from their responses

that they enjoyed the discussion elements of the meetings, in particular one activity where a student was secretly given a role to play in the group. In that instance, 'every single thing someone brings up and they would say that is completely wrong and it did kind off bring down everyone, and we learnt afterwards that the correct way to deal with that is to tell them, no one actually told them that they were being negative'. The students were critical about the fact that the mentor time was early in the morning and about the length of the meeting: 'we didn't really talk much all the time, if we would have talked more we would have needed more time'.

Theme 3: Feelings about the Learner Profiles

There were mixed comments about the integration of learner profiles with the main messages of the modules. In the words of one student, 'for some of us the learner profile, you don't care about it because it's just words. But then when you talk about it, you really focus on it and you know better what it is supposed to be'. Some of them indicated that the practical link was helpful in making the connection with theory and practice: 'personally I would think that the LP is over-used, all the time. I know why there are used, because it's the IB. I think if you want to introduce someone to learner profiles you should start with a real-life situation, this is what it is, not just a bunch of words. I think you should start with the bullying modules'. Again, the application of the learner profile in the everyday life of the students was contested and exemplified by another student who stated that the connection with modules and the learner profiles 'was pretty clear but I don't know how useful it actually was, I think it is more like something to think about but you don't ever really apply it'. The challenge for these modules was to make the terms meaningful and relevant, as 'reading the definition of the word doesn't mean anything to help us understand what caring and respect is'.

This section presents the data from the mentors' feedback, structured via three themes that emerged from the analysis of their responses. These themes

represented the areas that the mentors identified in response to the semi-structured lead focus group.

Theme 1: Building relationships

The mentors in general felt that there 'was a world of difference compared to having the modules to when we did not have them'. The mentors were referring to their feeling that 'we never had anything to deliver to mentor time'. The key messages appeared to be that it 'was good, more work in some respects, but it was nice to have structure'. The structure that the modules provided enabled the mentors to build relationships with the students. This was echoed by one mentor when he commented that 'if you compare the conversation we had with the students when it worked well, with the time before the module. It felt much more meaningful'. The structured approach enabled the building of trust between mentors and students. Another mentor commented that 'I always saw this as a step in the process of the students building trust with us, the teachers, and they will become used to telling their stories and be willing to share'. The need to share, and having the time to do so was a dominant factor, which the mentors felt necessary for the success of the program. They felt that they 'got to know the kids a little better as a result of it'.

Theme 2: Flexibility vs. Structure

Another theme that emerged from the data was the tension between the mentor's appreciation for structure and also the need for flexibility in managing the group. This was supported by some of the comments such as 'the thing is, if they start talking about something, we need to have flexibility, I mean, you need a program with enough information, you are not going to have any blank spot in there, but if you are going to want to try and complete all of that stuff then where are the gaps to exploring'. Because of the constraints of time and the level of the information some mentors felt as though there was 'not much scope for spreading out the discussions.

Maybe it is just saying to the teachers that you are allowed to be flexible, you don't have to get everything done, or include all this'.

Theme 3: Learner Profiles

The final theme generated from the data concerns the learner profiles and the mentors' views on their applicability to the modules. The general comments reflected a tension in the sense that they were instructed to refer to them as much as possible in the modules, and by the IB, and the fact that some mentors do not feel overly comfortable using them in conversation. As one mentor commented, they were a 'great starting point, but after you introduce it, I think after that point I'm not sure it helped'. Some of the mentors were concerned that 'some of the kids switch off when you mention the learner profile, so I almost avoided it, after the initial overview and maybe occasionally referring back it'. One mentor who commented that 'I think it can be good if you have a hard time to put your feelings into words' appreciated the structure that the modules provided. However, there was a general frustration with the learner profile which was reflected by another mentor who stated that 'I get annoyed with the learner profiles not being put into practice as much, like how we want them to act, like 'uber' people, and I think by giving them diplomas, it does not put them into practice, but using them in this context it puts it into an everyday situation and in that sense I think it is good'. This suggests that this mentor moved from a position of resistance to one of possibility following a period of extended contextualization of the learner profile, thereby giving her a new experience of how they can be used to discuss bullying. Another mentor was not so convinced when he suggested that the learner profiles 'should be subliminal and by saying them out loud that is not the way you use them'. The internal conflict of using the learner profiles when they may go against ones own personal approach, suggested by Oord (2013), was echoed by one mentor when he said that 'it is not sexy. I become very aware of myself when I use them, to the point I think it is ridiculous, not that I disagree with the profile'. This mentor goes on to acknowledge that this may not be the same

experience of all teachers by saying that 'maybe a different school would not have teachers who feel uncomfortable with saying it'.

7. Lessons learned

The analysis suggested that the students had widened their social networks, had less experiences of bullying and importantly, felt that the school was doing something to tackle bullying in their class. As this was a practice-based study, the results have to be approached with caution. The desirable changes point towards the need for further examination of the applicability of the learner profiles to a locally-created anti-bullying program. Different methodological approaches could also generate new insights into how the learner profile is integrated into anti-bullying programs.

The analysis also highlighted that the definition of bullying is wider than the traditional perspective of physical abuse. The students were able to see changes in how students communicated with each other, which suggested that building on the communication skills, one core focus of the modules, was relevant and topical. The students echoed many of the mentors' comments and the clear lesson for future work with these modules is to make the practical link to learner profiles clear and meaningful. The mentors echoed the theme of building relationships and trust with the students and it can be suggested that the way the modules were organized enabled this to happen in many cases. It was also clear that the modules needed more flexibility to allow mentors to build on conversations happening in the group. However, it is obvious that time is a key factor in this and future module delivery in the school will take this into consideration.

8. Conclusion

This paper presented the results of a small-scale piece of research in an IB international school in Malmö, Sweden. The aim of the study was to find out the applicability and impact a module-based program based on the learner profile had on bullying for the students in the MYP. This research was practice-based and so the

intention is to use evidence gathered on the ground to inform local practice. However, the local can also be used to inform the global; therefore this paper may be relevant for other schools that intend to carry out similar research. On the whole, the research showed promise; therefore further work will be done in the school to achieve greater balance between the structure and flexibility of the modules, the integration of the philosophies of the learner profile with practical examples and creating better conditions, such as the length of mentor time, for the delivery of the modules.

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