

RESEARCH SUMMARY

The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP) implementation in the United Arab Emirates



Summary developed by the IB Research department based on a report prepared by:

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Background

This study, by the University of Nottingham, focused on school experiences of providing the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The population of the UAE has increased dramatically, from an estimated 90,000 residents in 1960 to the current population of 9.3 million people; the majority of these residents are workers who have relocated to the country (The World Bank 2015). The rapid growth of the UAE has created a significant demand for quality education for the children of expatriate workers and Emirati nationals, especially in the private and international school sectors, attended by the majority of students in the UAE.

The study sought to generate an overall picture of the value schools, students and parents place on the MYP in the UAE. Moreover, the study explored the degree to which the MYP, including the learner profile, is congruent with the UAE's religious and civic values.

Throughout the country, the Ministry of Education sets the basic standards for K–12 state sector and private education. In addition, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai oversee educational activities, and review and authorize the curriculum in each respective Emirate. With this in mind, the researchers also investigated the extent to which MYP schools are fulfilling UAE curriculum requirements and national objectives for education.

Research design

The research was undertaken in seven schools offering the MYP in the UAE: five schools in Dubai and two schools in Abu Dhabi. Four schools were authorized to offer the MYP and three were candidate MYP schools. Among these

schools, the percentage of Emirati students was as follows (in ascending order): 1%, 2.5%, 15%, 19%, 21%, 75% and 95%, with non-Emirati students consisting of students from across the Middle East and a wide variety of Western and non-Western countries.

At each school, researchers conducted individual or group interviews with: school leaders; a range of classroom teachers across subject areas, including teachers of Islamic studies and Arabic language; students and parents. Researchers also analysed the websites of all of the IB World Schools offering the MYP in the UAE and reviewed external reports and documents. Lastly, some informal observations of schools and lessons were conducted.

Findings

Perceived benefits of the MYP

The researchers found there was a strong commitment to the MYP across the seven case-study schools, with particular value placed on the flexibility of the programme, the emphasis given to the learner profile and international-mindedness, as well as the MYP's support of international mobility. Within the UAE, a clear benefit of the MYP is the ability to offer a holistic learning experience that is authentic to the local context.

Programme flexibility

The MYP was highly valued by both students and teachers as a flexible framework that challenges narrow subject boundaries, respects the views and opinions of learners, emphasizes inquiry-based learning and allows teachers to design their own assessments in ways that are supportive of learning.

"I love this framework and it gives flexibility for the teacher to be more creative, to do more reflection ... in terms of preparation like when you are planning, and in

terms of, ok, this is what you teach and this works well with the students and this is what we need to change". (MYP coordinator)

"Before I came here [my school] was really only knowledge based ... they would give you a list and you would learn it, but coming to an IB school ... you have to learn certain things, that is the requirement of any school, but you link it to the real world. In my previous school we would never have to make that link but now we make that link constantly ... Even in a maths test ... at the end of the test you always link back and try to find out how you use this skill in the real world". (MYP student)

Participants also felt that IB programmes privilege the professional judgment of teachers, particularly in the MYP. In the MYP, the parameters are broad, and this provides considerable scope for teachers to exercise professional judgment and to think creatively about how they plan their learning programmes. In some cases, however, this flexibility can also be perceived as a challenge, especially for teachers new to the programme. Consequently, support for new teachers, or teachers who are new to the MYP, is important. School leaders and teachers also raised the concern that gaining a deep understanding of the MYP can be difficult when professional development workshops are often held outside of the UAE, with few opportunities to attend workshops locally or in Arabic.

The learner profile

Study participants appreciated that the learner profile creates a framework for learning that offers "more than content", providing a "compass" to direct learning at both an organizational and classroom level. In this way, the learner profile provides a powerful link between the practical aims of the curriculum, the aspirations of students and a fundamental set of values. For school leaders, the learner profile also acted as a touchstone for framing the culture of the school, and was used by school leaders to "set a tone" and create an aspirational learning environment within the school. As the following quotation illustrates, parents similarly valued this holistic approach to education.

"I think that as parents we look at the child as a whole and he is developing in all ways— socially, personality wise, education, yes ... and sometimes ... you want to be able to measure it, but at the end of the day I want my child to succeed in life and it is not just because he got his time tables right and that he is doing his science lab properly—it is who he is—the confidence". (MYP parent)

Emphasis on international-mindedness and international mobility

Any environment in which a large proportion of the population are immigrants is inevitably complex. Through the MYP, teachers argued that students are well prepared to navigate this complexity. The emphasis in the IB on international-mindedness and intercultural understanding was seen as critical in the UAE context. Furthermore, international-mindedness was viewed as essential for creating an inclusive school culture where all students feel safe and valued. In environments with highly diverse student populations, inclusive cultures have to be consciously created, continually nurtured and sustained. Teachers explained that the IB's emphasis on international-mindedness make it well placed to support this kind of school culture.

Parents also appreciated the "portability" of the programme, being part of a "global system" in which movement between schools is mitigated by consistency in style and approach. Additionally, parents understood the need for young people to have the skills, attitudes and dispositions to operate as global citizens in a global labour market. For these reasons, parents placed a premium on international-mindedness and global citizenship in IB programmes. These views were expressed by one parent, as follows.

"I think that we are very lucky that we are in this situation because it definitely adds value. First they are learning a language that they would never normally learn, which is Arabic, and second, they have to learn tolerance and they have to learn about respect in a big, big way and not just the word and the generalization ... and if you look at the IB learner profile it really is [about] having this international diversity". (MYP parent, non-Emirati)

MYP alignment with UAE education objectives and requirements

The researchers found a high degree of convergence between the goals and aspirations of the MYP and UAE national education objectives. *Vision 2021*, the document outlining the UAE's national objectives for education, commits to developing "well-rounded citizens" with a balanced outlook. There is an explicit commitment to going beyond rote learning and a recognition that an education fit for purpose in the 21st century requires the development of a broader range of skills, which is consistent with the aims, principles and practices of the MYP.

Private schools in the UAE operate in what can be considered a "dual curriculum system", whereby the chosen curriculum, in this case the MYP, is combined with local requirements. In all of the participating schools, there was a high level of compliance with the local curriculum

requirements relating to the national expectations and regulations for Arabic language instruction, Islamic studies and UAE social studies. This was at least in part because the system is closely monitored by ADEC and KHDA. The researchers also pointed out that MYP students study at least two languages, which makes it relatively easy to comply with local curriculum mandates in which all students study Arabic and one other language.

However, it was also reported that some curriculum and other requirements appeared to differ between ADEC and KHDA, and that a degree of confusion existed with regard to some Emirate policies. In light of this, researchers suggested that the IB could play a greater role in supporting IB World Schools in their understanding and awareness of UAE policy dictates and how effective MYP provision can align with policy mandates.

Furthermore, the research underscored that it was critical for teachers and leaders to think through how the two curriculums are provided in a way that ensures coherence. This is significant because within schools there is the potential for an internal dual identity to develop, in which student experiences are not only different but also separate. Schools need to consciously act in ways that ensure the dual identity is part of a wider unity, rather than being separate and disconnected. This unity is developed when leaders and teachers assert their agency and make choices about how the school functions and how the curriculum is provided. Ideally, the goal is to create a school experience whereby the different approaches are not just linked but are mutually enriching.

MYP alignment with UAE Islamic religious values

Many educators in the study felt strongly that the attributes of the learner profile align well with the religious values that underpin Islam, Islamic values and Islamic attitudes to education. As shown in table 1, this was particularly evident concerning Islamic attitudes toward “knowledge”, “others” and “self”, with each of these corresponding to clusters of learner profile attributes.

Attitudes toward self	Principled Risk-takers Balanced Reflective
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Table 1: Categorization of learner profile attributes

For example, knowledge acquisition is central to Islamic values. Islamic approaches to faith depend on betterment through learning; so, being scholarly can be considered central to taking faith seriously. Islamic scholarship requires a commitment to seek knowledge and to be willing to engage in discussion and debate about issues. There is a need to be pluralist in approach and principled in relation to the possibility of disagreement. Similarly, several of the learner profile attributes stress particular relationships to knowledge acquisition. These attributes emphasize an inquiry approach to learning, conceptual engagement with knowledge and critical scrutiny of knowledge claims. In this context, “open-minded” refers to a receptiveness to new ideas or the ideas presented by others. Such ideas may challenge existing understandings and orthodoxies. The IB learner profile implies a disposition to approach all knowledge in this way.

However, in some schools there was a lack of clarity and understanding concerning local cultural expectations of what might be considered “acceptable” or “contentious” topics in the pursuit of knowledge. In some cases, this led to certain topics being viewed by Western teaching staff as “off limits”, whereas Arab staff and parents felt that, when handled in a culturally sensitive way, there was no reason why many issues could not be discussed. It was also pointed out that while some areas of study might not be appropriate within the UAE cultural context, there was no shortage of material that teachers could draw on to achieve similar objectives. Together, these points underscored the need for schools to be mindful of Western biases and to understand that intercultural awareness is a fundamental principle of the IB.

Conclusions and recommendations

Summing up their findings, the University of Nottingham concluded that delivering the MYP in the UAE provides an opportunity to offer a dynamic curriculum in a culturally diverse environment, which brings together distinctive cultural and pedagogical traditions. Identified strengths of the MYP were that it offered:

- a flexible framework, allowing teachers the “space” to exercise professional judgment about pedagogy, content and assessment design

	Learner profile attributes
Attitudes toward knowledge	Inquirers Knowledgeable Thinkers Open-minded
Attitudes toward others	Communicators Principled Open-minded Caring

- an inquiry-based approach, where students learn by posing questions and researching responses
- a connected curriculum, where emphasis is placed on linking content across disciplines to better reflect the world we live in
- the development of independent learners with an emphasis on skills development (learning how to learn)
- the emphasis on intercultural understanding in a diverse international school setting.

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers proposed the following recommendations and suggestions for schools and the IB.

Creating the culture. This refers to the ways in which school leaders create a culture within the school that respects local expectations, reflects the diversity of the school population and celebrates each individual within the school. Where this was done especially well, effective use was made of the IB learner profile. Mobilizing the power of the learner profile presents an opportunity to create a whole-school experience that is caring, balanced, open-minded and dynamic.

Connecting the curriculum. Careful curriculum planning not only integrates the two curriculums, but creates an enhanced and enriched curriculum from the thoughtful integration of the two. Curricular integration is achieved through the development of a common experience across all teaching, whether the subject being studied is part of the local mandate or the MYP.

Developing staff. Teachers from Anglophone countries often need support in connecting their teaching to the local context while teachers from the Middle East and North Africa region may need support in offering the local curriculum in a way that aligns with the MYP. In order to do this well, teachers require professional development to help them make the necessary adjustments. Often, this expertise already exists within the school. What is required are the opportunities for staff to share what they do and to learn from each other.

Working collaboratively across disciplines. Effective schools are characterized by high levels of collaborative working. The MYP's emphasis on subject integration helps mitigate against disciplinary isolation, but really overcoming it requires a more concerted effort. There is a need, therefore, to consciously connect colleagues by networking across subject boundaries.

Engaging parents. Making a connection with parents emerged as an important issue in this study, helping develop cross-cultural understanding and also mobilizing reservoirs of practical support. Schools established clear and formal structures for engaging with parents, which provided parents with a voice in school governance. However, there was also a strong emphasis on less formal involvement whereby parents met socially for coffee during the school day, or were made an integral part of school cultural events.

References

The World Bank. 2015. United Arab Emirates. Retrieved from: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/united-arab-emirates>. Accessed 28 November 2016.

This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at www.ibo.org/en/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

To cite the full report, please use the following.

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