

Research summary

Assessment of student development and learning in International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme schools

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

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Background

The aim of this study is to examine how International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) schools define the purpose of educational assessment in their assessment policies and practices. This investigation offers a deeper understanding of the assessment cultures within the PYP case-study schools and provides insights into the current assessment literacy of teachers. In addition, this study seeks to identify the specific professional learning needs and support required by PYP teachers.

Research design

The researchers employed a multiple case-study approach, with two phases of data collection: an online survey of teachers ($N = 97$) and detailed teacher focus groups and coordinator interviews to follow-up on themes identified in the survey. Researchers also conducted a desk audit of school websites and assessment policy documents.

Eight PYP schools were included in the research: three schools from the Africa, Europe, Middle East region, two schools from the Americas region and three schools from the Asia-Pacific region. Researchers selected schools carefully to ensure the research incorporated a wide range of IB school types.

The aim of the PYP assessment case studies was to develop an understanding of the way teachers in PYP schools see the purpose of assessment and how they use assessment to plan for depth and rigour of learning. To examine this proposition, researchers analysed the cases through the lens of the latest findings in the literature and explored similarities and differences between the cases.

Findings

Approach to assessment

Assessment in the PYP case-study schools was described as holistic and ongoing, and involved adopting a wide range of assessment strategies. Assessment in these schools was comprised of both formative and summative assessments. The commitment to both formative and summative assessment is evident in school websites and publicly available documents, and is also articulated clearly by PYP teachers and coordinators.

Some tensions were observed between mandated external standardized testing and assessment approaches, particularly formative approaches developed within the school. Tensions can emerge when parents place high value upon these test results. Several schools articulated the importance of educating the whole school community about the value of both formative and summative assessment. Such a collaborative, community-focused approach ensures alignment and continuity between the school, family and community, with PYP schools modelling discussion with parents and the wider community about the importance of both formative and summative assessment in advancing student learning.

Implementation of assessment

Teachers in this study support the theme of a holistic approach to assessment, describing it as a cycle that is well integrated into teaching. Further, the diverse purposes of assessment are evident in the PYP schools.

- **Assessment of learning:** Assessment of learning took several forms. It included external standardized tests that might be used for external benchmarking or for gathering evidence at the beginning of a school year. Teachers were passionate about the summative assessments they had developed. They provided excellent evidence of how they developed rich open-ended tasks that invited learners to demonstrate how they could apply their learning to new contexts.
- **Assessment for learning:** The schools in this study embraced a variety of aspects of assessment for learning. Innovative and diverse forms of this type of formative assessment were used to plan for

personalized learning, develop and customize curriculums and provide a student-centred focus for inquiry units. It was seen as a daily process, fully integrated with teaching, and involving a wide range of strategies including anecdotal observations, checklists, rubrics and portfolios.

- **Assessment as learning:** Assessment as learning emerged as an approach still in development in the PYP schools. The case-study schools reported on their use of a wide range of self-assessment tools. While some focus group teachers were able to articulate the value of self-assessment for building metacognitive skills in learners, this focus was not well embedded for all teachers. Teachers in this study used peer assessment sporadically; it was viewed as challenging, and some teachers were dubious about its value. Several schools felt that such an approach needed to be introduced carefully through modelling to ensure it did not have undesirable social consequences.

Evidence and documentation in assessment

Teachers in the case-study schools provided and described a rich array of activities, strategies and assessment artifacts, demonstrating a strong grasp of the evidence required to assess student growth of knowledge, understanding and skills. They articulated how assessment tools were used to gain insight into student understanding and to compare learning across progression points. Many teachers were deeply reflective; they understood the purpose of the task they had designed and were able to reflect on both student learning and their own learning as a teacher.

Rubrics were widely used in schools for all assessment purposes. Portfolios were also widely used, manifesting the cycle of assessment that schools embraced—although their form and value was contentious for many teachers. Lastly, the affordances of ICT have been enthusiastically adopted in several case-study schools, and these tools appeared to enhance many aspects of their assessment practices.

Assessing development and knowledge

The case-study schools and their teachers used a wide range of evidence to illustrate current levels of development and knowledge. They reported that this evidence was used to plan for personalized learning, ensuring that students were working and learning at the appropriate level, with clear goals for the next stage of their learning.

Schools embraced the concept of a developmental continuum, but they found it difficult to articulate which framework they currently used or should use. Some schools expressed concern about the perceived conflict between progression points that might be specified in curriculum documents and child development models that focus on a range of attributes such as communication, social skills, physical and cognitive development.

Assessing development of learner profile attributes

Teachers in the eight case-study schools in this project enthusiastically supported the learner profile (LP). They planned for it in their teaching and in units of work, and took advantage of everyday opportunities to build the profile with their students. Their approach to assessment of the LP attributes was informal, with a range of tools such as broad self-assessments (symbols, thumbs up, and turn and talk), checklists and anecdotal records. It was referenced in portfolios and included on report cards. Assessing progress in any particular attribute of the LP was regarded as much more challenging. Most teachers found it difficult to conceptualize progress and there were no continuums available for guidance. Several teachers and coordinators supported the idea of a continuum to guide them in the assessment of LP attributes among students.

Role of formative feedback and assessment

Teachers in this project recognized the critical role of feedback, its role in formative assessment and its potential for supporting student learning. They articulated how they provided feedback in all of its forms, rejecting the concept of personal praise in favour of process acknowledgment and appreciation. In particular,

they advocated moving towards process feedback that is specific and informative, and focuses on helping children to evaluate their own performance to gain mastery. Self-assessment was highly valued for its ability to build reflective lifelong learners. Teachers were more equivocal about peer assessment, expressing doubts about its value as a valid assessment tool and cautioning about the risks of using peer assessment or feedback in the absence of strong modelling for students.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the researchers made the following recommendations.

- Schools caught between jurisdiction-mandated testing and school-based assessment should receive additional support from the IB to develop strategies for educating whole school communities about the value of a rich and balanced approach to formative and summative assessment.
- The IB should publish a guide to assessment that supports staff in PYP schools in their use of a range of assessment strategies. The aim of such guidance would be to give teachers confidence in their current practices and to suggest further options for their consideration—particularly in the area of assessment as learning—outlining not only a range of strategies with this purpose but clearly articulating how these strategies can build metacognitive skills and support students to become lifelong learners.
- Portfolios have spread rapidly across all education sectors, increasing their affordance as an assessment and reflection tool, particularly in digital formats. Teachers in PYP schools would benefit from professional learning and development around the concept of portfolios and how to better manage the evidence for, of and as learning that portfolios provide to teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders. This would include how to maximize their potential as both a formative and summative assessment tool that reflects assessment validity and reliability, and incorporates the role of moderation to assist in making professional judgments. The affordances of ICT for assessment need further promotion, as ICT allows schools to showcase their practices to benefit the IB community.
- Teachers need guidance to support a developmental approach to assessment. A framework or continuum document would assist teachers to position students on a common continuum and support student learning with greater confidence. This continuum would relate to academic areas of development but should include other areas such as social and emotional learning.
- The IB should develop a continuum of development for each of the LP attributes to support the development of more effective assessment for learning in this important domain of student learning and personal growth.
- Teachers in PYP schools should be given additional support in implementing peer assessment and peer feedback in their schools. This could take the form of well-constructed videos or online professional learning and development resources that address the how and why of peer feedback and the role it can play in supporting student learning. The concept of parent feedback deserves further investigation. This approach has great potential to build stronger parent–school relationships and bring parents into the assessment cycle in a purposeful way.

This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at ibo.org/en/about-the-ib/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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