

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

*A mixed-methods case study of International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programmes in four Colombian schools*



**Based on a research report prepared for the IB by:  
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## Background

The International Baccalaureate (IB) has expanded its presence in Latin American countries significantly. Today, there are more than 400 IB World Schools throughout Latin America, serving students from 5 to 18 years of age. In Colombia, there are currently 33 IB World Schools, including 10 that offer the Primary Years Programme (PYP). Recognizing the growing presence of the IB in Colombia, this mixed-methods case study aimed to explore the perceptions of teachers, students and administrators as well as ways of working and learning within four PYP schools in Colombia.

## Research design

The researchers used a mixed-methods, multi-site case study (Green, Caracelli and Graham 1989) design. This methodology was particularly useful for exploring the contextual differences in the programmes across school sites, as well as the perceptions of educators and students in the four schools. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to generate a more complete understanding of individual experiences and to acquire an expanded student sample (Bryman 2006).

During an intensive two-week site visit, the research team conducted individual interviews and focus groups with administrators (n=10), teachers (n=19) and students (n=28); observed classrooms and school facilities; collected documents; and administered a paper survey to a sample of students aged 10 to 12 years (n=309).

This study took place in four PYP schools located in a major city in Colombia, South America. All of the participating schools were private and had authorized programmes. Table 1 provides some information about the four participating schools.

|  | School A | School B | School C | School D |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Total student enrollment                 | 514      | 1,851    | 1,800    | 671      |
| Number of students enrolled in the PYP   | 309      | 942      | 1,107    | 367      |
| Percentage of students who are Colombian | 95%      | 91%      | 90%      | 86%      |

*Table 1: Demographics of Colombian school sites in this study*

## Findings

### Administrator perceptions

#### *Influence of the schools' governance structure*

Schools in Colombia often operate under vastly different governance arrangements that are primarily determined by the school's ownership structure. Colombian schools can be owned by a family or individual owners, much like a private business. Two of the case study schools were owned by private families. In other Colombian schools, a foundation serves as the owner of the school. In this scenario, the foundation directs the broader policy concerns of the school, hires the director and also sets strategic priorities. The other two schools included in this study were directed by foundations. The study suggested that these arrangements significantly impacted the ways in which the case study schools implemented the PYP. In particular, they shaped how resources were allocated to support classroom teachers, the supports that were provided to students and the prioritization of broader school initiatives. Additionally, findings indicated that the schools with a more detached ownership, in this case the schools owned by foundations, tended to invest more robustly in the PYP than schools that had a more engaged owner.

### ***Finding qualified PYP teachers***

Three of the schools reported that one of the major challenges they face is finding teachers with the skills, and particularly the language skills, needed to teach the PYP. Administrators indicated that local teacher training programmes do not provide teachers with the skills needed to teach effectively in a bilingual, transdisciplinary and inquiry-based programme. One director remarked that teachers from Colombian schools of education are taught to think “in a different way”, meaning they are trained according to traditional teacher-centred instruction. Administrators recognized that the Colombian market for teachers makes it difficult to find teachers who can help them to implement the PYP faithfully.

### ***Teacher supervision and professional development***

In response to the challenge of finding qualified teachers, administrators were fully invested in developing supervisory models that support teacher development. PYP coordinators, in particular, were actively engaged in supervising and evaluating classroom teachers. Related to their evaluation of classroom teachers, administrators also stressed the importance of providing professional development to teachers to help them transition into the PYP. PYP coordinators provided professional development through a number of means, including, classroom-based modelling, workshops and coaching teachers to help them understand various aspects of the PYP. Although some schools provided more support than others, an effort was made by all of the schools to help teachers acquire the necessary skills to be successful.

### **Teacher perceptions**

#### ***Transitioning to the PYP philosophy from a traditional school model***

For their part, teachers acknowledged that the transition to the PYP was difficult and that support was critical for successful implementation. Teachers described the transition from a “traditional school” model to an inquiry-based PYP model as “challenging”, albeit worth the energy and time required. The change was particularly marked in school D, as many of the educators were teaching at the school prior to PYP implementation. For teachers at school D, the move away from a traditional school model was described as entailing a complete overhaul.

*At the beginning, this school was completely traditional. The teacher was in front of the board; the students were in perfect lines. They were listening to you. You have all the knowledge and they are listening ... The classrooms now are different ... The teacher is not in the middle of the class, is not in front of the board ... now walking around solving questions, maybe asking them so that they recognize*

*that they can do the exercise, that they can understand instructions, that they can create ... So everything has changed.*

Transitioning to the PYP at all of the schools required a considerable shift in pedagogy, toward a student-centred and holistic approach. Teachers noted that in order for the PYP to be successful, teacher buy-in and time to make the transition were necessary.

#### ***Need for professional support and investment in teaching***

All of the teachers emphasized the importance and value of having access to professional development inside and outside of the classroom. This support included official IB professional development, coaching from the PYP coordinator and in-school workshops, seminars and collaborative meetings. The teachers highlighted the importance of a school “investing” in their abilities and also noted the need for ongoing support to ensure the success of the PYP, particularly as many teachers described feeling overwhelmed when first learning about the PYP. As one teacher from school C described:

*The truth is, I didn't understand something at the beginning, I—you know, there are too many things, like profile, attitudes, interdisciplinary skills, you feel a little bit overwhelmed sometimes. But I think that it was step by step. They gave me tons of support ... And right now, if I'm honest, I'm still working on different things that I need to work on ... So I think that the support is very big.*

#### ***Intersecting challenges of PYP implementation and bilingual education***

Many teachers viewed teaching with a PYP philosophy, while also ensuring that students become fluent in a second language, as a serious implementation challenge. The realities of “teaching English and the PYP” concurrently were described as “difficult” and something that required additional resources and teaching approaches to ensure that students “understand things fully”. Teachers expressed that it was challenging to teach an inquiry-based programme while supporting students with varying degrees of exposure to English. Collectively, teachers indicated that the IB should provide additional support and resources for bilingual instruction and that the current support is inadequate. Such resources should provide suggestions and examples to help teachers to operationalize aspects of the IB learner profile and PYP pedagogy in their bilingual classrooms.

#### ***Teaching resources***

All of the teachers described resources as essential to PYP implementation. The importance of a library and librarian, for example, were resources that teachers felt helped

them to implement the programme and provide meaningful learning activities for students. Teachers indicated that the most important resources were well-developed libraries, instructional technology and curricular materials that were up to date. Without these resources, the teachers found teaching in an inquiry-based way difficult, if not impossible.

## Student perceptions

### Primary role of teachers in the learning process

The centrality of the school staff to the learning environment was apparent across the student data. Students spoke about their teachers as the primary driver behind their positive schooling experiences, positioning the teachers' pedagogical practices and ways of being inside and outside of the classroom as central to what made their schools unique. One student from school B explained what she liked about her teacher.

*I really like my teacher—that she thinks that we can do it. So she doesn't say the answer, and she helps us to develop the answer. So she doesn't think for us, so that we think ... She does that and she teaches us like that everything is possible, that you can do it, and that she teaches what we are supposed to do.*

Here, the student associated the process of learning with being connected to a teacher who "doesn't think for us"; rather, the teacher was positioned as creating a learning environment wherein the students believe in their abilities and recognize their potential.

### The learner profile as integral to school life

The data and classroom observations illuminated the ways in which the learner profile was integrated into everyday practices within the schools. Across the four school sites, the students spoke at length about how the learner profile and the inquiry-based nature of the PYP positively shaped their learning experiences. Students often spoke about the learner profile as being far more than simply

a set of discrete concepts. Rather, they often described the learner profile as something that their teachers and the PYP coordinators "live" and "are". Students at school D explained how they perceived the learner profile as impacting their experiences both within the classroom and in other aspects of their lives.

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Student 1 | I think it's a better way to understand other people and to be a better person each day, because when you apply the IB profile skills in your daily life, you can notice a difference with your family and your friends.                             |
| Student 2 | To me, the IB profile is to be a good leader every day, so when we are working in groups or with anyone, we can work by our self or in teams so we can get a good way to be our self or with others, so we get better each day to learn with others. |
| Student 3 | I think the IB profile is something that it can always help us to improve, and we can use it in our lives to improve them and make them better.  |

### The centrality of school resources for learning

The students described various resources as being foundational to their learning, with technology being emphasized by many students. Students at two of the school sites (school A and school C) emphasized technology the most, positioning it as one thing that makes their school "special" and facilitates their learning. Yet, regardless of the level of investment, students at all school sites noted the need for technology. Other resources students mentioned included the library, field trips, expert speakers and language-learning opportunities.

## Student survey results

### Student perceptions of their school

Students from each of the schools that participated in the study strongly indicated that they were both enjoying their schooling and were proud to be a student in their school. An overwhelming majority (89.3%) of students indicated that they enjoyed being a student at the school. Similarly, more than 90% of students reported that

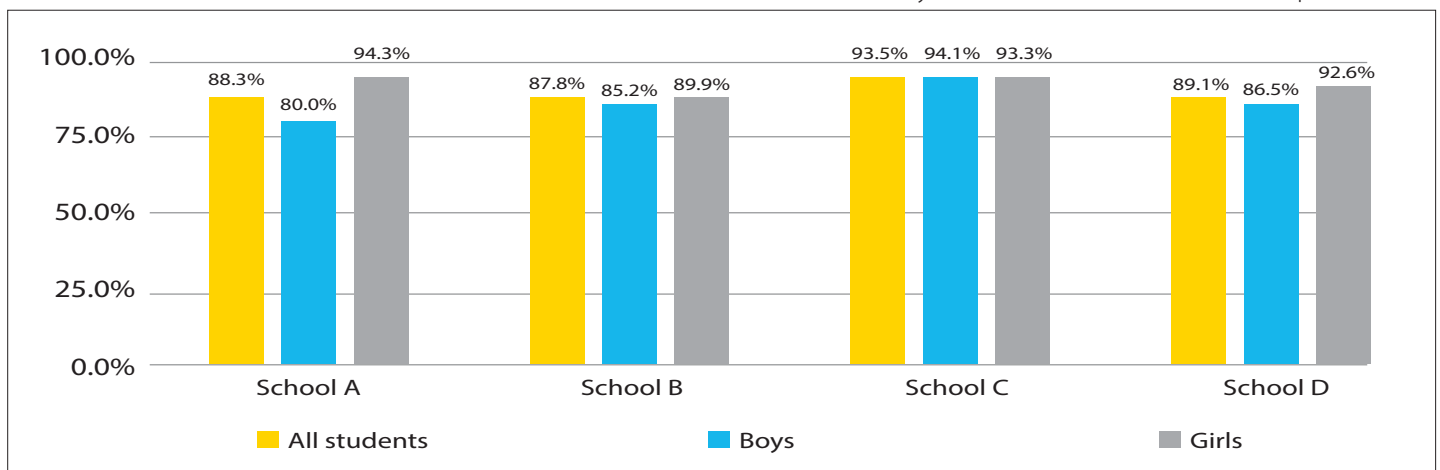


Figure 1: Percentage of students who indicated that they "enjoyed the school", by school location and student gender

they were proud to be a student at their school. Taken together, these results indicate high levels of satisfaction with the PYP and the IB World Schools included in this study. Researchers noted that male and female students expressed support at slightly different levels. A larger proportion of female students reported enjoying school than their male counterparts, although the differences were not statistically significant.

### ***Student perceptions of themselves as learners***

Students generally believed that they were successful academically. More than 60% (63.1%) of students agreed with the statement “I am successful as a student”. Moreover, the students generally perceived that their success was partly dependent on hard work. More than 80% (84.1%) of students agreed with the statement “I will always be successful if I work hard”. Collectively, these responses indicate that students perceived their abilities as learners positively, as well as understanding that their success as a student was dependent upon hard work and dedication.

### ***Student perceptions of instruction***

Student survey responses suggest that they perceive teachers to be primarily using traditional instruction approaches rather than inquiry-based strategies. Nearly 80% of students indicated that instruction in their classes primarily involved “listening to the teacher talk”. Less than one-third of students surveyed (29.8%) indicated that they worked on projects in their class or that they initiated or completed independent, creative writing assignments (31.4%). Only a quarter of students (25.2%) indicated that their teachers used experiments or other demonstrations in their classrooms as an instructional strategy. These responses align closely with classroom observational data the researchers collected during site visits at each school. Again, ongoing professional development and adequate support and resources will prove essential to further enhancing inquiry-based learning within schools.

## **Recommendations**

While data from this study indicates that the four schools were successfully implementing the PYP, the authors made some recommendations based on the findings. For a complete list of recommendations, please see the full report.

### **Establish recommended governance procedures for schools that encourage shared decision-making and a strong student focus**

As Colombia allows schools to be privately owned, the IB should consider developing suggested or recommended governance procedures for schools that ensure parental

involvement, transparent and shared decision-making, as well as prioritization of student learning in relation to resource allocation. Researchers found that the level of support varied across schools and that the school-wide commitment often reflected the owner's priorities rather than the core philosophy of the IB. The IB would be well-served to assess how governance arrangements may impact the implementation of its programmes.

### **Enhance professional development offerings and training materials relating to the delivery of a bilingual education programme**

Teachers collectively viewed the PYP as difficult to interpret in a bilingual setting, which has the potential to undermine the efficacy of the programme. Implementation of the PYP in Colombia and other Latin American countries could be improved through the development of additional guidance and resources relating to effective bilingual instruction. These resources should provide suggestions to teachers to help them understand how to operationalize aspects of the IB learner profile and PYP pedagogy in their bilingual classrooms.

## **References**

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- Green, JC, Caracelli, VJ and Graham, WF. 1989. “Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs”. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Vol 11, number 3. Pp 255–274.

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

To cite the full report, please use the following:

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