

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Case studies of learner profile implementation and impact in the United States



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

The learner profile translates the International Baccalaureate (IB) mission statement into a set of 10 attributes that express the values and vision for the continuum of programmes. The profile represents ideals that should inspire, motivate and focus the work of IB students, teachers and schools. The learner profile encourages students to become inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced and reflective.

This study examined the implementation and impact of the learner profile in different types of schools offering the IB Diploma Programme (DP) in the United States. Specifically, the study compared the ways in which the attributes have been translated into and influence curriculum, assessment, school policy, school culture and non-academic activities in three traditional public schools, an international school and a faith-based school.

Research design

This mixed-methods study utilized in-depth case studies and included a combination of focus groups, interviews and surveys.

Student focus group respondents answered questions about their familiarity with the learner profile and how the learner profile attributes were being promoted in their schools. Educators discussed the ways in which their programme addressed the attributes through curriculum, assessment and school culture. Educators were also asked to assess which of the attributes were most important in their schools and whether they believed any attributes should be added or changed.

Students ($n = 496$) completed a survey that included measures of the learner profile attributes. The survey was originally developed by Walker, Bryant and Lee (2014) and was modified slightly for an American audience. It measured the extent to which the DP helped students to become knowledgeable, inquirers, caring and open-minded. Each attribute was measured through six to eight survey items, using a six-point response scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

The case study schools included three comprehensive public high schools, one international studies public school and one parochial high school. All sites were located in the same western state. Further information on the schools is provided in table 1.

Site name	School size (number of students)*	Number of respondents, $n = 789$ (interview, focus group and survey)	School type	Percent eligible for free/reduced lunch
School A	1,153	95	Public	71%
School B	3,225	203	Public	51%
School C	771	247	International, public	54%
School D	1,689	151	Parochial, private	3%
School E	2,050	93	Public	41%

*School size is the number of students in the entire school, not the number in the DP alone.

Table 1. School characteristics

Findings

Teacher familiarity with the learner profile

Educators at each school, including the principals, DP coordinators and teachers, had strong familiarity with the learner profile. Focus group discussions showed that educators were familiar with the concepts developed in the learner profile but did not have an immediate grasp of the definitions of all of the learner profile attributes. Educators perceived the learner profile as a framework and guide rather than a list of individual characteristics that must be addressed through the DP.

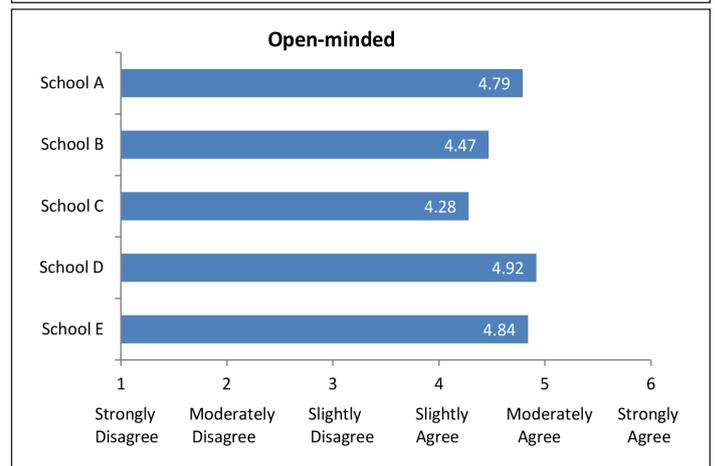
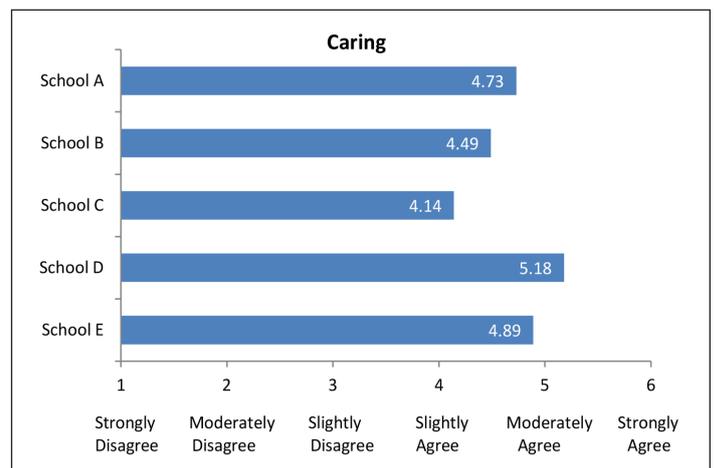
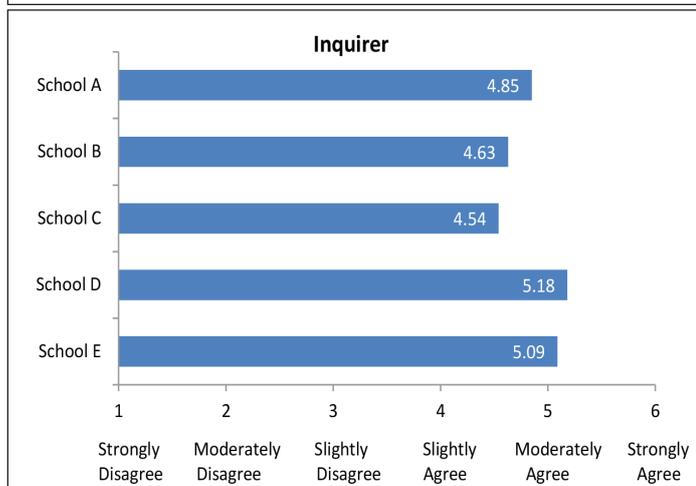
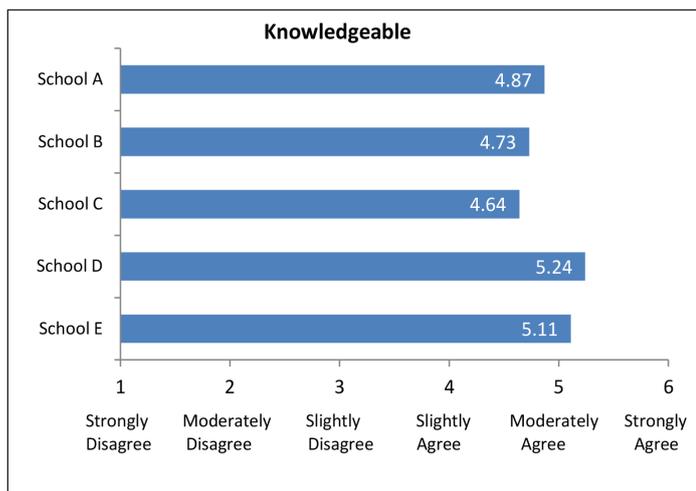
Two of the sites reported that all staff revisit the learner profile each year, either as they orient new students or as they begin their professional learning community meetings. Teachers and coordinators were introduced to the learner

profile primarily through professional development offered by the IB or during their initial orientation to the DP. Several were reminded of the learner profile during programme evaluation, which occurs every five years, while others revisited the profile as they revised their mission/vision statements.

Student understandings of the learner profile

Students felt that the attributes are characteristics expected of IB students, although their familiarity with specific attributes was limited mostly to what they learned during their DP orientation. On the whole, student understandings matched teacher definitions and conceptualizations of the learner profile attributes. Students varied from teachers only in the degree of emphasis on specific attributes, not in the interpretations of the characteristics themselves.

Survey results indicate that, in general, students “moderately agree” that the DP helped them to develop the attributes that were included in the survey (“knowledgeable”, “inquirer”, “caring” and “open-minded”). The highest averages were reported for items measuring “knowledgeable” (see figures 1–4) and “inquirer”. The items measuring “caring” and “open-minded” received lower average ratings from students.



Figures 1–4. Average student ratings for each of the measured attributes by school

Student and educator perceptions of individual attributes

Interpretations of the learner profile attributes were fairly consistent across sites.

- Inquirers.** All sites discussed “inquirer” in terms of developing research and investigation skills. Some also mentioned developing curiosity and independence. One student from School C explained how inquiry is built into coursework:

“We are asked to write papers all the time, and most of them require you to investigate something. Even if we disagree with one another, we are told to find evidence to support our positions, and that means we conduct research, too. I know we don’t, but it feels like we do this [inquiry] every day.”

Sites were less likely, however, to discuss inquiry in relation to learning with enthusiasm or sustaining a love of learning throughout life.

- Knowledgeable.** Schools generally defined “knowledgeable” as developing and using conceptual understanding and integrating knowledge across disciplines. Sites tended to emphasize becoming knowledgeable in terms of exploring concepts, ideas and issues of global

significance. The notion of engaging with issues and ideas of local significance was typically associated with the service dimension of the programme, as opposed to an integral part of coursework. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of the DP was addressed either implicitly or explicitly at all sites.

- **Thinkers.** All sites suggested they strongly promote critical and creative thinking in multiple ways. Respondents, however, did not typically interpret “thinker” as encouraging reasoned and ethical decision-making. Students at School B were unanimous in reporting the DP helped them to develop critical thinking skills. For example, in their theory of knowledge class, students were asked to create their own definition of knowledge.
- **Communicators.** Educators discussed “communicator” in terms of the written, verbal and nonverbal skills they fostered in students. They occasionally mentioned the ability to communicate in more than one language. Lastly, all of the sites interpreted communication as involving listening and stressed the importance of collaboration.
- **Principled.** Without exception, the sites interpreted “principled” in terms of academic integrity. All of the sites experienced some challenges with plagiarism and cheating and thus often emphasized academic honesty with the students. The idea of respect for the dignity and rights of people everywhere was more likely to be associated with “open-minded” and/or “caring” than with “principled”.
- **Open-minded.** Nearly all sites interpreted “open-minded” as being able to listen and respect the perspectives of others. This idea was further defined in terms of diversity within the classroom and examining other cultures throughout the world. Virtually no one discussed the term in relation to appreciating one’s own culture and personal history. The term posed some challenges in the parochial school site due to the potential conflict with religious teachings that promote a particular point of view in some circumstances.
- **Caring.** Administrators, teachers and students defined “caring” as the development of compassion, empathy and respect for others as well as the promotion of a commitment to service to make a positive difference in the local community or the world. Social justice was variably emphasized at the different schools.
- **Risk-takers.** Sites struggled the most with the attribute “risk-taker” and generally interpreted it as pushing students to take intellectual risks in their interpretation of evidence, creation of products, sharing of ideas and willingness to take multiple perspectives. They were less likely to interpret risk-taking as approaching uncertainty with forethought and determination or in terms of resilience and resourcefulness. A number of students pointed

out that choosing to pursue the DP involved significant risk due to the academic rigour of the programme.

- **Balanced.** All respondents interpreted “balanced” in the same way: finding a balance between intellectual, physical and emotional activities. This was a challenging attribute for many, as the majority of respondents suggested that the DP stresses intellectual pursuits over all others. Students and teachers tended to agree that achieving balance in the DP is challenging, as one student explained:

“IB helps us to become aware that we need a balance, but at the same time, IB is good at making sure we are not balanced. You do learn to manage your time better, but I don’t think any of us would say we have a good balance yet.”

- **Reflective.** Nearly all respondents defined “reflective” as looking back and learning from one’s experiences academically and personally. Reflection was often associated with the creativity, action, service (CAS) requirement.

Administrators, teachers and students at each school were able to identify ways in which the learner profile attributes were addressed within their programmes. Participants appeared to have the easiest time identifying specific strategies for the implementation of “inquirer”, “thinker”, “communicator”, “knowledgeable” and “reflective”. For the most part, “caring” was associated with CAS and/or with students being supportive of each other in the programme. The attributes associated with character development, such as “caring”, “open-minded”, “balanced” and “reflective”, tended to be linked to the CAS activities. Most thought CAS addressed these characteristics directly.

Schools were least likely to have specific activities associated with “balanced”, “risk-taking” and “principled”, all of which were reported as concepts that are expected of IB students but are not often explicitly addressed. Sites consistently reported that they assess the attributes most closely associated with skill acquisition, such as research skills, the ability to think critically and creatively and to communicate well. The other attributes were rarely directly assessed. For instance, at School E, teachers assessed students’ critical thinking skills in a number of ways. Mathematics instructors based part of their grade on how well students were able to explain the reasoning process that led them to solutions. Other teachers reported students needed to display evidence that they not only understood the content but could evaluate its accuracy, utility or relevance.

Differences and similarities across sites

Global versus local emphasis

The emphasis on global and local knowledge varied by school, both in terms of the curriculum and in the types of CAS activities that students selected. In some cases, students were more involved in global issues and expressed little

knowledge of local issues of concern. In others, students were better connected to their neighbourhoods and local needs. The service orientation in the parochial school was stronger and was integrated into the philosophy of the school. Nevertheless, a commitment to service was evident at all of the schools. The extent to which classroom discussions and activities were related to social justice also varied by school, with one comprehensive public high school having a much stronger emphasis than the other four.

Statistical differences between sites and student sub-groups

There were statistically significant differences between the parochial school and the international/magnet school on measures of “knowledgeable”, “inquirer” and “caring”. In each case, the students from the parochial school rated each attribute significantly higher than students from the international magnet school. Effect sizes were moderate, with the highest effect size for “caring”. No significant differences were found, however, between any of the other schools. Students pursuing the full diploma rated “knowledgeable” and “caring” significantly higher than students taking DP courses, although effect sizes were small (see tables 2 and 3).

IB student type	Mean	Standard deviation
Diploma	4.93	.85
Course taker	4.60	1.10

Note: $p < .001$, Effect size (Cohen's d): .35

Table 2. Student sub-group differences for knowledgeable

IB student type	Mean	Standard deviation
Diploma	4.65	1.18
Course taker	4.26	1.41

Note: $p < .001$, Effect size (Cohen's d): .31

Table 3. Student sub-group differences for caring

Strategies for implementing the learner profile

Successful strategies for implementing the learner profile tended to centre on specific instructional techniques or activities assigned to students. For example, all schools engaged students in developing and testing their own hypotheses and required extended essays to foster academic attributes, along with some aspects of open-mindedness and reflection. All sites included service requirements, which promoted caring and, to some extent, balance and reflection. Lastly, all schools asked students to critique each other's work in order to develop students' thinking and communication skills as well as open-mindedness.

Teachers were emphatic in relaying the idea that the most successful strategies were those that took an integrated approach to addressing the learner profile. As one teacher from School D explained, the learner profile should become part of the culture of the school:

“The programme promotes the learner profile without formally pointing to it. But our work with these attributes is not just in the IB program. The attributes are woven into our entire curriculum. It's something we expect of all of our students, not just exclusive to IB. It's just more prominent in IB with the posters and other reminders.”

Teachers also reported that assignments that developed multiple attributes at once were more impactful than those seeking to address attributes singularly.

Impacts of the learner profile

Administrators and teachers at all sites had positive attitudes towards the learner profile and thought having it as part of the DP fostered positive results. They agreed that the learner profile reminded both educators and students of the performance and behaviours expected of IB students. Teachers thought the learner profile had an impact on students, particularly with regard to promoting deep thinking, knowledge of global issues, ability to explore new ideas, development of confidence and desire to engage in lifelong learning. Both educators and students agreed that many of the coursework assignments helped students to acquire a number of the attributes.

Participant recommendations

Generally, respondents liked the attributes and most wanted them to be retained as they are. A number of participants believed there was significant overlap between certain attributes and that some of them could be combined to minimize redundancy. These respondents were most likely to highlight overlap between “inquirer”, “thinker” and “knowledgeable” as well as “communicator” and “open-minded”. A few expressed concern about the attribute “risk-taker” and recommended that other terms be used to clarify meaning.

Respondents at several sites identified attributes that they felt were missing from the learner profile. A number of teachers mentioned the skill of “time management” as an element that was missing from the learner profile. Additionally, one group identified “resilience” as a missing attribute while another highlighted “discipline” or “motivation”.

Reference

Walker, A, Bryant, D and Lee, M. 2014. *The International Baccalaureate continuum: Student, teacher and school outcomes*. Bethesda, MD, USA. International Baccalaureate Organization.

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

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