

Summary

Teacher conceptualisations and enactments of international-mindedness in Primary Years Programmes in Australian and Singaporean IB World Schools

Trevor McCandless, Julianne Moss, Mark Rahimi & Harsha Chandir, Research for Educational Impact (REDI) Strategic Research Centre, Deakin University

Background

International-mindedness (IM) is a foundational concept to all International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes, including the Primary Years Programme (PYP). This study seeks to understand how IM is conceptualised by PYP teachers and how they integrate IM into their pedagogical practice. This research conducted interviews and observations of teachers in two maximally different schools: one in Singapore and the other in Melbourne, Australia. It also surveyed teachers in PYP schools in Singapore and Victoria, Australia.

Research Design

The research employed a mixed methods design including both qualitative and quantitative elements. A quantitative survey based on a research instrument designed to assess teacher engagement with IM and intercultural understanding (Denson, Ovenden, Wright, Paradies & Priest 2017) was sent to all PYP teachers in Singapore and Victoria. Teachers from 24 Victoria schools and 2 Singaporean schools responded, providing 126 responses.

The quantitative components of the research included visits by the research team to two maximally distinct IB schools: one an international school in Singapore serving the children of expatriate families; and the other a Catholic systemic school in an affluent Melbourne suburb.

Findings

One of the major findings of this research is that PYP teachers frequently held a narrow definition of IM, one much narrower than that anticipated by the IB itself. The IB sees IM as being developed throughout a student's engagement with all aspects of the learner profile (LP) and therefore should be evident across all aspects of the curriculum. Nevertheless, this broad interpretation of the nature of IM was rarely adopted by any of the teachers interviewed in either school, nor was it necessarily evident in the responses received from the survey.

Interviews and Classroom Observations

None of the teachers interviewed in either school discussed the three-fold nature of IM: as in multilingualism, global awareness and intercultural understanding. Frequently, IM was interpreted as either anything within a lesson that mentioned aspects of another country, or of developing student respect and empathy for people from cultures different to their own.

While these are important aspects of developing IM, this is a much narrower understanding of IM than the IB proposes.

The interviewed teachers at both schools most frequently discussed IM as something they were able to occasionally incorporate into their teaching and classroom instruction. The IB conception of IM, where, 'the learner profile will become the central tenet of the IB programmes and central to the definition of what it means to be internationally minded' (IB 2006, p.2), was never alluded to in any of the interviews, other than those with the IB coordinators in both schools.

The differences between the student populations at both schools also presented differences in how the teachers in these schools saw their role in helping to develop IM in these students.

Singapore School

At the international school in Singapore, no local Singaporean student is allowed to attend due to government restrictions, and so the student body is composed of what some teachers in the school referred to as 'third culture kids'. Over 70 nationalities were represented in the school. As such, the teachers often commented that IM was not something they needed to explicitly teach, since it was an inevitable part of the lived experience of their students on a daily basis. Nevertheless, some teachers stressed that often these students had more in common with each other than their national differences might imply, and that their social class and status unified them beyond any other differences they might hold.

Melbourne School

The teachers at the Melbourne school felt that they faced a number of challenges in implementing IM that were not evident in the Singapore school. Many of the teachers stressed that the school was virtually monocultural, lacking many forms of cultural diversity. They felt that this made it difficult for their students to engage with IM in ways beyond a merely theoretical understanding or in seeking to display sympathy for the cultural other, a cultural other that was also often defined as being disadvantaged. Unlike the Singapore school, the Melbourne school needed to incorporate and report back upon three diverse and not always compatible curricula: the IB, the Victorian state curriculum and the Catholic Education curriculum.

The IB coordinators of both schools displayed a much broader understanding of the nature of IM, and how this was constructed throughout the IB, than was apparent in the interviews with their teaching staff. However, the teachers at both schools were observed and frequently discussed ways in which they integrated IM into their teaching practice, despite this often being done in ways that the teachers themselves did not always perceive as being related to student development of IM.

Survey

The survey sought to uncover how PYP teachers in Singapore and Victoria understood IM and its relationship to intercultural understanding. In many ways, the results of the survey reinforced those of the qualitative aspects of this research, that is, that a significant number of PYP teachers saw IM and intercultural understanding as somewhat peripheral to the demands of their daily teaching practice. The teachers also often confounded IM with intercultural understanding. It was found that the form the survey question took often influenced the answers received, where teachers were much more likely to respond positively if it might be interpreted that the survey was questioning their professionalism, but more likely to show ambivalence in their responses if the question focused on theoretical issues concerning IM or upon the resources available to them to teach IM.

Recommendations

- This research highlights the need for more extensive professional development relating IM to the PYP in general and the LP in particular.
- Professional development to broaden the understanding of IM as being composed of multilingualism, global awareness and intercultural understanding and how these interrelate with the LP would similarly assist teachers.
- IM was frequently perceived as a student disposition and as such teachers rarely had, or felt the need to have, any strategies in place to assess IM – this could be a further focus of teacher professional development.
- The IB is centrally concerned with providing students with the skills and dispositions to allow them to affect change in their world. The role of IM directing such change should be stressed within teacher professional development.
- IM is too often conceived of as how students might engage with distant others – that is, distant both in terms of culture and spatial location. However, both schools were located in situations with significant social and cultural diversity evident and at the schools' doorsteps. It is recommended that schools seek to make the most of the cultural and social diversity available to them within their own local environment.

References

- Denson, N., Ovenden, G., Wright, L., Paradies, Y., & Priest, N. (2017). The development and validation of intercultural understanding (ICU) instruments for teachers and students in primary and secondary schools, *Intercultural Education*, 28(3), 231-249. Retrieved from doi:10.1080/14675986.2017.1333346
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