

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Educational Reform and International Baccalaureate in the Asia-Pacific*

**David Gregory Coulson, Shammi Datta, and Michael James Davies,  
Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2021\***

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This book is a collection of papers on the International Baccalaureate (hereafter IB) by David Gregory Coulson et al. The IB seeks to internationalize education systems and develop uniform international standards. The IB is a curriculum that focuses on student inquiry-based learning. It offers a curriculum from primary to secondary school graduation; the curriculum is common to all participating IB schools, regardless of the country in which they are educated, and its graduation offers university entrance qualifications to universities in various countries.

The IB is a newcomer to the education system, launched in Switzerland in 1968. It is still in the process of spreading in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, and is not well recognized in the local community. As an education system still in its developmental stages, the IB system is often undergoing reviews and, to some extent, quite drastic reforms that go beyond the usual educational revisions. For example, previously, all subjects were taught in English, French, or Spanish, which was a significantly higher hurdle for non-English speaking countries such as Japan, but the 2013 reform made it possible for some subjects to be taught in Japanese.

The book on IB education is divided into three sections - Practical Approaches, Approaches and Implications for Education, Professional Development and Training of IB Educators, and consists of eighteen independent chapters.

The authors and themes cover various parts of the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, China, and Australia. Half of the authors are university researchers and the other half are teachers from IB schools in the field. I want to contribute my views from three perspectives here.

### **1. Application to Existing Education Systems**

First, many of the chapters have in common that they do not evaluate the IB in isolation but

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deal with the educational transformations caused by the impact of the IB on the region-specific education systems that are currently prevalent.

For example, in Chapter 1, which deals with private high schools in Japan, the curriculum of the Diploma Program (DP), the high school equivalent of the IB, also covers the subject of Theory of Knowledge (TOK), together with Extended Essay (EE), Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) subjects, which together form the core of the DP's academic curriculum. The TOK, which develops critical thinking skills, requires learners to complete two assessments, an essay and a presentation, within two years of the DP. This chapter explores various aspects related to the implementation of the TOK curriculum in schools that do not participate in the IB.

Similarly, Chapter 2 focuses on backward curriculum design, which constructs education by working backward from the final student image. It is noted that this reverse engineered education design will not only popularize the IB but will also provide an essential catalyst in solving the chronic problems of public education in South Korea.

Chapter 16 takes Pakistan as its setting and discusses the impact of the IB's critical thinking methods on public education in Pakistan. A survey was conducted among primary school teachers in public schools, mainly in Karachi and nearby cities, to calculate their critical thinking disposition. The results of the survey show that primary teachers in Pakistan are still far from acquiring critical thinking skills, let alone encouraging them in their students. Furthermore, the author cites a lack of opportunities for teacher education that would support the development of critical thinking skills as one of the reasons for these results.

The author of this chapter concludes that an educational system such as the IB, with its introspection, open-mindedness, and the process of understanding others' perspectives, forms the core of critical thinking attitudes and can lead to the development of critical thinking in teachers and students and suggests that the IB be included in the design of public education as a successful model of inquiry-based education.

However, the gap between the ideals of the IB and the reality of the Pakistani educational environment is so significant that it is easy to imagine that introducing only IB inquiry-based education will not instill critical thinking attitudes. The reason for this, as the author himself states, is the prevalence of didactic teaching and rote learning in most educational institutions. The problem is also pointed out in the context that even though teachers themselves are trained in critical thinking, they still do not succeed in teaching through critical thinking in educational settings.

## 2. Active Involvement of IB Libraries and Library Staff

Design principles regarding IB libraries are not yet fully developed, and in the field, manual practice by librarians and library staff continues.

The International Baccalaureate Organization published a guideline on IB libraries in 2018 called *Ideal Libraries: A guide for schools*. Even before that, for example, the author of Chapter 17 was involved in the development of the guidelines in his 2011 book *The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program and the School Library: Inquiry-Based Education*, that made various recommendations on the role of IB libraries and librarians, including a critique of quiet libraries as study rooms.

A survey was conducted to evaluate the guidelines among IB school librarians in Chapter 17. While the *Ideal Libraries* guidelines are practical, providing questions to provoke conversation within IB libraries, the document also attempts to provide a vision for libraries/librarians to support teaching and learning. There is evidence that the document was also used to clarify and inform the individual job descriptions of IB librarians. On the other hand, the librarians' narratives also contain

comments on the discrepancy between the IB's ideal vision of libraries and the reality of libraries and librarians.

### **3. Discussion of IB in Japan**

Several chapters in this publication focus on IB high schools in Japan. In Japan, schools stipulated in Article 1 of the School Education Law must satisfy both the School Education Law and other relevant laws and regulations and the curricula established by the International Baccalaureate Organization to become an IB-accredited school. The Government of Japan has set a target of 200 schools, and the number of International Baccalaureate-accredited schools, was just under 180 as of June 2022.

As noted throughout the book, learners' language proficiency in Japan is a major barrier to the expansion of the International Baccalaureate in the country. Students were required to take IBDP courses in English, Spanish and French, the official languages of the IBDP. It is now possible to offer a dual-language IBDP program in which two-thirds of the required courses can be taken in Japanese. This has created a more feasible option for schools whose students are reluctant to complete the DP in English only.

Due to these institutional trends, compared to research conducted five to ten years ago, we have moved beyond the stage of discussing the institutional acceptance or non-acceptance of the IB in Japan, and the framework of the IB program and the debate has progressed to the introduction of the IB into existing schools in Japan.

Another topic barely touched on in the book was the Post-graduation strategy of the IB, with limited discussion on the university side, which is the pathway for IB graduates. As the IB is a high school diploma and at the same time offers university entrance qualifications, it will not work unless more universities recognize the system. The overall strength of the students who graduate from the IB, including their academic ability, is that they have completed the DP, which in itself means that they are, in a sense, "world-class and eclectic". However, the reality is that the number of universities in Japan or in Asia that accept IB graduates is limited. In Chapter 1, a case is discussed where some private universities are pushing for the creation of IB programs in their affiliated junior high schools as a strategy. In addition, in 2014, University of Tsukuba made a groundbreaking decision to admit students based on DP completion qualifications, an interview, and an essay alone, without imposing a center examination. This is an area that awaits discussion, not only in terms of the system and establishment of the IB but also as a goal-setting process to lead to higher education.