

YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE:
Creative Professionalism and Leadership in IB International
Schools

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Creative Professionalism

The principle of ‘creative professionalism’ means that IB curriculum development is informed by the experience of teachers and examiners in schools around the world who join curriculum review committees led by IB staff. As an independent organization, no government or political agenda plays a role in the IB programme. Curriculum development is guided by the mission, learner profile and feedback from schools and examiners.

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Abstract/Problem Statement

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) offers three challenging educational programs to a worldwide community of international schools: the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programme (MYP), and the Diploma Programme (DP). The development of this program structure has never been specifically tied to or derived from an explicit set of educational standards (Conley & Ward, 2009). Moreover, the IBO adheres to a policy of “creative professionalism,” which guides them to seek experienced educators to be part of the process of program development. To start teaching International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, an educator simply attends a training workshop. After some time teaching IB courses, experienced IB educators, with training from IBO staff, are encouraged to apply to lead teacher training workshops, to mark exams, to assess externally moderated coursework, and to be members of program review committees and school evaluation visits (IBO, 2012b). The opportunities offered by the IBO as part of their “creative professionalism” policy can act as a catalyst to drive schools and teachers to enact instructional and collaborative leadership – that is, if they endeavor to continuously engage in dealing with challenges posed by the IBO’s programs. The purpose of this paper is to explore how this key IBO policy encourages forms of teacher leadership in international schools that offer IB programs.

IB Programs and Possible Hindrances to Fostering Leadership

IB schools have experienced dramatic growth worldwide in the last ten years (Resnik, 2012), and a common trend in international education has found international schools adopting two or more of the three programs offered by the IB (David Klein, 2007). However, these three programs were not created at the same time (IBO, 2008b), they were each borne out of different curricular assumptions, and the idea of the IB “continuum” was incorporated after their creation

and implementation (Hallinger, Lee, & Walker, 2011). Hence, schools adopting more than one IB program have reported issues with the transition of students from one program to the next (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012b). This evolutionary form of development of IBO programs, with only recent attention to transition issues, can cause frustration and confusion among teachers and leaders, and make it difficult for a school to distribute leadership for fear of individuals leading in different directions with mixed messages. Even today, the vocabulary for similar structures in each of these programs is not completely aligned (Riesbeck, 2008), making it difficult for members of a school to communicate. At schools that are overcome by these obstacles, teachers can very easily become discouraged by IBO jargon and frustrating aspects of the program, and lose faith in the potential impact of their efforts. One could argue that this potential lack of faith is just one way that teachers in schools mismanaging change could fall into the “just a teacher” mantra that keeps them in their classrooms and out of leadership positions (Helterbran, 2010). Many IB teachers with poor school support experience this crisis of faith in the IBO and their programs, and these teachers rarely engage in active contributions to the IBO’s work through positions as workshop leaders, examiners, and the like. One could argue that the IBO’s loose structure can act to repel the formation of teacher leadership in international schools.

Instructional Leadership

It is, however, precisely this challenge in articulating a continuum among the IB programmes that can act as a catalyst for schools to enact various forms of teacher leadership. The IBO states firmly that its programs each act as a framework, not as a full curriculum; it is up to each individual school to seek the best fit of IB programs in their context (IBO, 2008a). Hallinger and his colleagues found schools that actively seek alignment of this framework in their context and address the aforementioned transition issues between IB programs

demonstrated a much higher level of structural interdependence, with program coordinators, department heads, and grade level leaders meeting among themselves and/or with administration as an articulation strategy (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a). At these schools, teachers engaged in documentation of school philosophies, aims and goals, and in backward mapping, which required them to chart missing linkages between the IB programs (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a). Note here the focus of these activities is always learning: teachers articulate the learning of students using structures that promoted their own professional learning. The IB program framework that becomes part of these articulation processes is based on various branches of current education research, which satisfies Leithwood's call for more research based professional development for teachers (Leithwood, 2008). For many IB teachers, this way of planning and working become so natural that they do not necessarily notice that instructional leadership is taking place. Reisbeck justifies this, pointing out that most IB teachers do not perceive instructional leadership in their principals and school leaders, but largely because they see themselves as leaders in their own fields – which indicates a strong presence of empowerment and instructional leadership among them (Riesbeck, 2008). IB programs have an open-ended element due to questions of alignment with state programs and transition issues between the IB programs themselves (Resnik, 2012). However, these challenges can bring out instructional leadership in IB teachers in schools with more than one IB program that actively engage in a continual process of working with these challenges.

Collaborative Leadership

The IBO, by virtue of these challenges, can also foster forms of collaborative leadership. In addition to the aforementioned articulation tools that many IB schools use to encourage instructional leadership, research shows that schools also employ multiple strategies in response

to IB program challenges that, in turn, foster collaborative leadership (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a). Many schools require cross-program teaching of their faculty, a strategic staffing or multiple positioning strategy where schools employ professionals to teach MYP and DP classes (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012b). As an example, this allows teachers of final year MYP classes to use their DP experience to inform their preparation of students for MYP-DP transition. Many schools also encourage cross-program cooperation, whereby teachers may supervise or mentor non-classroom-based aspects of each program, such as MYP's Personal Project or the DP's Extended Essay. (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a; Riesbeck, 2008). In order to do a proper job of this, teachers need to collaborate with those in other programs to understand the needs students will have while completing these tasks. Research shows that involvement in other programs can stimulate teachers otherwise "compartmentalized" in a particular program, and "highlights the role of distributed instructional leadership" (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a, 683). Challenges inherent in the IB framework can push schools to enact strategies that distribute leadership, and allow leadership to be collaborative.

Capacity Building and Teacher Empowerment

Outside of these challenges posed, the IBO also contributes to teacher leadership by providing many ways to build the capacity of teachers. IB schools, and teachers, benefit from the myriad of professional development opportunities offered by the IBO. As already mentioned, the IBO offers chances for experienced IB educators to become involved in marking and checking exams and externally moderated student work (IBO, 2012a), to train new teachers as workshop leaders, to join school evaluation visits, and to participate in various stages of the program review process (IBO, 2012b). As part of their membership, and the policy of "creative professionalism", schools are encouraged to contribute to the growth of the IB programs, and to

allow teachers to take part in these various forms of professional development (IBO, 2008b). Naturally, involvement in one of the aforementioned roles in the IBO can undoubtedly lead to professional learning that, in turn, teachers share with their colleagues. Though research shows that school leadership has little influence over the improvement of school capacity, this same research also shows that school capacity has a great impact on student learning and staff motivation (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The IBO acts as an additional, external influence on teachers and schools regarding capacity building through its encouragement of teacher and school contribution. Thus, schools offering IB programs have both school leaders and the IBO encouraging improvement of teacher capacity, something that brings about staff empowerment and helps teachers become leaders in their field. One can only conclude that this adds to the motivating force for teachers to act to increase their own capacity, and thus, also improve the chances of them taking on future leadership roles.

Concluding Remarks

I do not wish to imply here that the IB program is the solution to a failing school's problems, or will miraculously bring leadership qualities to a school. As Hallinger indicates, the context created by IB programs is still an "insufficient condition" for distributed leadership (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012a, 672). However, IB programs offer a framework, not a curriculum, and require schools to actively and continuously engage all faculty in the best implementation of their programs for that school's context. Thus, IB programs can be a catalyst to drive a school towards collective action, and this collective action, in turn, brings about instructional and collaborative leadership. The development of these forms of leadership are very much dependent on the efforts of faculty within a school, but the role of the context created by the IBO can not be ignored.

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