Promoting International Mindedness in Our Schools

The Dalai Lama said, that “more calm, more peace, more compassion, more international feeling is very good for our health.” More peace, compassion and international feeling are also central to the IB mission. In this article I will explore the importance of international mindedness and some implications for teachers and school leaders. Although I am starting from a regional perspective, the very nature of international mindedness makes it imperative to view these ideas as pertinent to schools in the four regions of the IBO.

Most of the IB schools in the IBNA region are not “international” in the traditional sense of the word—they do not cater to an expatriate community with English as the language of instruction in a host country with another native tongue. In our region, most IB schools teach students from the local community. They often have classes with large numbers of immigrants, but are nevertheless local, neighborhood schools. We must derive our claim to being an “international school” from the curriculum itself.

What unites the IBO community of schools is our commitment to an integrated international curriculum. A recent study by Kenneth Tye concluded, “throughout the world, schooling is still seen as a major force in the building of national loyalties.” 1 National, provincial and state curricula have always been designed to instill the values, history and perspectives of a particular society. The IBO offers local schools an international program for the entire school continuum, reaching beyond the local context.

“International mindedness” remains a challenging concept to define and bring alive in our schools. School leaders contribute to the development of the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the teachers in many ways. In IB schools, there is a clear obligation to explore the meaning of internationalism and to give our teachers and school communities powerful reasons to embrace it in their teaching and planning. In each of our schools, it will be important to explore the following questions with all stakeholders (community, parents, teachers, students).

1. Why is it important to foster internationalism in education?
2. What will international mindedness look like in my classroom and in my students?
3. How do we build curriculum around the principles of internationalism as expressed in the IBO mission statement?

1. Why is it important to foster internationalism in education?

As the recent tsunami in Asia demonstrated with a terrible clarity, the interdependence of peoples, communities and nations is becoming ever more palpable. Conflicts in far flung places impact people around the globe in complex and unexpected ways. The environment is struggling to absorb the impact of six billion people on the planet. Martin Gannon once said, “There are as many reasons, and perhaps more reasons, supporting the view that global disintegration may be our fate rather than global integration.” 2

To avoid this fate is one of the goals of international education. Children educated for tomorrow’s world must be equipped with the habits of mind that will allow them to act in meaningful ways, whether locally or globally. It is as important to understand the “other’s” point of view as it is to understand one’s own. When we learn to view our world not as “us and them” but as “us and us” we will come closer to finding fair and just solutions to the issues facing humanity. An education that promotes international mindedness will provide young people with
the skills, knowledge and values to confront these challenges and make meaningful contributions to their solutions.

2. What will international mindedness look like in my classroom and in my students?

There are overt as well as subtle ways to promote international mindedness in our students. The foreign language requirement of the program promotes internationalism by valuing the language of another culture. While the flags, international days and trips abroad are a starting point, the goal is to develop a deeper understanding of another culture. What we are striving for is not flag recognition, but the development of intercultural awareness, which will foster a sense of cultural identity in our students. When we introduce our students to inquiries into the cultures, histories and beliefs of others on our planet and look for commonalities, we begin the development of international mindedness. Knell and Wartella observe that, “International education builds respect and ties between nations, advances learning and scholarship, and is a powerful force in replacing myths and misinformation with knowledge and understanding.”

An international curriculum guides our students in developing the knowledge, values and skills necessary to be citizens of the world. Developing interpersonal and communication skills as well as thinking and research skills allows our students to be open-minded and inquiring individuals. Our classrooms must offer rich and varied opportunities to develop these skills.

Young people may not be able to care about global issues without knowledge of the world beyond their local communities. Knowledge will lead to caring, and caring will lead to action. Through action, our students can contribute to the building of a better world, whether it be through a fund raising activity for distant tsunami victims or a clean up in our own backyard. Thoughtful curriculum design will help our students develop an international knowledge base so they can develop the capacity for the action that is integral to the three programs of the IBO.

3. How do we build curriculum around the principles of internationalism as expressed in the IBO mission statement?

Applying the concepts of internationalism to curriculum development can help teachers impart international knowledge and understandings in their classrooms. Whatever level of the IB programs a school offers, an examination of the central concepts of internationalism within the context of the school should become an integral part of curriculum planning. The design of curriculum will come to include the conceptual frames of:

- the role of culture in our lives and the lives of others
- the interdependence of natural and human systems on our planet
- the role of peace education and conflict resolution in our world
- environmental awareness and sustainability
- citizenship and service as an expression of individual responsibility.

As internationalism becomes more meaningful to teachers, they will begin to make important connections to their own disciplines and programs. Ongoing reflection from all participants--administrators, teachers and students--will enrich the internationalism in the curriculum.

For the Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma Programmes, internationalism has different applications, but not different meanings. Our commitment to international mindedness is the central idea of our program. Internationalism must be integrated into all learning rather than viewed as an add-on subject. It is the task of both individual teachers and whole schools to
make it implicit at all levels of learning. The principles outlined in the IBO mission statement illuminate this goal:

The International Baccalaureate Organization aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.4

H.G. Wells wrote, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." As we consider the ravages of the past century, resulting from both conflict and progress, this statement takes on a renewed urgency. A deep understanding of the interdependence of nations, cultures, peoples and our fragile planet will be a prerequisite for the healing of our natural and political environments. An international education will lead young people to acquire the tools needed for them to understand and create a more secure, sustainable existence on this planet. If we must leave them with a difficult legacy, then we owe it to the next generation to also provide them with the tools they will need to make the necessary changes. The international curriculum we promote through the IB will give them these tools. To paraphrase H.G. Wells, let the race begin!

5 Wells, H.G., 1920. The Outline of History, Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind

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