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# A CRITIQUE OF THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE LEARNER PROFILE AS A CURRICULAR DOCUMENT: CONTEXT, HEGEMONY, HERMENEUTICS AND THE FOUR RS

Lisa J. Starr

University of Victoria,

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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## Introduction

According to the Character Education Partnership, programs that focus on ideals such as citizenship, caring, integrity and persistence are directly linked to overall student success, specifically in student behavior and attitudes. While few would argue with the ideals of a more responsible and caring youth, questions naturally emerge in relation to the context, delivery and validity of such an initiative in international schools throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The answers to some of these questions will be explored through a discussion of hegemony, hermeneutics and William Doll's four criteria for curricular design: *richness*, *recursion*, *relations* and *rigor* in relation to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Learner Profile.

## Background

In the United States, programs that focus on ideals such as citizenship, caring, integrity and persistence in schools have been linked to overall student success, specifically in the development of responsible student behavior and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Character development programs in schools are both curriculum-based and integrated into non-curricular areas such as "service projects, extracurricular activities, and conflict resolution programs."<sup>2</sup> Despite a plethora of literature relating to character education in the United States, the pursuit of high moral character for students is not exclusive to American schools. One example in which character

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1 Lickona 1988, as cited in Thomas, R.S., "Assessing character education: Paradigms, problems, and potentials," <http://www.lions-quest.org/content/whatsnew/archives/wnarticles2.htm> (accessed February 15, 2007).

2 D. Davis, "Character education in America's public schools," *Journal of Church and State* 48, no. 15 (2006): 5.

development is central to student learning and also the subject of this discussion is the IB Learner Profile (see Appendix 1). While few would argue with the ideal of creating a more responsible and caring youth, natural questions emerge relating to the context, delivery and validity of such an initiative, particularly when one set of characteristics or virtues is applied to a multiplicity of cultural school contexts as is the case with the IB Learner Profile. The answers to questions of context, delivery and validity will be explored through a discussion of Doll's four criteria for curricular design, *richness*, *recursion*, *relations* and *rigor* in relation to the IB Learner Profile.

Curriculum has historical roots in a philosophically modernistic structure built on the Tyler Rationale and Taylor's theory of scientific management. Tyler categorizes curriculum into four questions: (1) what educational purposes should the school seek to attain (objectives); (2) what educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes (design); (3) how can these educational experiences be effectively organized (scope and sequence); and (4) how can we determine whether these purposes are being attained (evaluation)?<sup>3</sup> The Tyler Rationale requires a definitiveness that does not apply to the understanding or enactment of cultural values and norms. The resulting structure has dominated education but fails to create space for that which does not fall into objectives, lesson plans, scope and sequence and evaluation;<sup>4</sup> space for exploring and understanding the meaning and application of values occurs outside of this scope. Frederick Taylor's scientific management of industry, which promoted a carefully orchestrated series of steps that ensured productivity and minimized waste, gained immense popularity in society during that period. His philosophies were so universally embraced that they inevitably flowed into education and the organization of schools.<sup>5</sup> This educational system was built on scientific stability born out of the industrialization and urbanization of American culture in the late 1800s as education became a publicly-funded, equally-accessible opportunity no longer restricted to the privileged. However, more than one hundred years later as we find ourselves navigating the realities of globalization, we can no longer consider curriculum in such narrow terms. Doll proposes a postmodern view of curriculum built upon four criteria: "*Richness* (a curriculum's depth of meaning), *Recursion* (the complex structures that support critical reflection), *Relations* (the intersecting of curriculum and cultures) and *Rigor* (one's commitment to exploration)."<sup>6</sup> This critique of the IB Learner Profile views curriculum through Doll's lens because the

3 Ralph Tyler, 1949, as cited in Pinar et al., *Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1995).

4 P. Slattery, *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

5 E.W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan College Publishing Company, 1994).

6 D.J. Flinder and S.J. Thornton, *The Curriculum Studies Reader* (New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 200.

criteria acknowledge the blurred boundaries of education in the era of globalization; character development, like education itself, can no longer be exclusively tied to one culture or country. Though Doll's perspective on curriculum is only one of many, it provides the lens through which this paper will examine the philosophy of education advocated by the IB, which is being used in schools all over the world with notable growth in the Asia-Pacific region.

Not only has American society changed, but so has global society; previous boundaries that separated societies have diminished considerably and we find that education itself has become a global enterprise. There is an increasing emphasis on a sense of global citizenship that acknowledges the universal characteristics of students who model such citizenship. The IB Learner Profile is used in schools throughout the world and is one curricular document that outlines specific characteristics sought by and modeled by global citizens. These characteristics will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay.

## **What is the International Baccalaureate?**

Globally, the International Baccalaureate is managed in four regions: Africa/Europe/Middle East, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and North America/the Caribbean. There are 733 schools in the Africa/Europe/Middle East region, 398 schools in the Asia-Pacific region, 270 schools in the Latin America region and 1,349 schools in the North America/Caribbean region currently offering one or more of the IB programs. Since 2000, the International Baccalaureate has expanded from 926 to 3,326 programs. The International Baccalaureate has well-established roots in the Asia-Pacific region where 344 schools in more than twenty countries offer one or more of the Primary Years Program, Middle Years Program or Diploma Programs.<sup>7</sup> Many of these schools are considered international schools because they offer an English-language curriculum modeled after the American or British system of education and often cater to the local expatriate community although they have increasingly larger enrollments of domestic students. Graduates from international schools commonly pursue post-secondary education in Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States. The International Baccalaureate promotes "intercultural understanding and respect, not as an alternative to a sense of cultural and national identity, but as an essential part of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>8</sup> International schools that partner with the International Baccalaureate are expected to model this philosophy in part by adopting and implementing the IB Learner Profile, a curricular document that places ten values at the center of its programs.

In order to understand the IB Learner Profile a brief discussion of the

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7 International Baccalaureate, "International Baccalaureate world school statistics" <http://InternationalBaccalaureate.org/facts/schoolstats/progcombinationsbyregion.cfm> (accessed February 10, 2009).

8 International Baccalaureate, "mission" <http://www.ibo.org/informationfor/supporters/> (accessed November 28, 2009).

context is necessary. Many of the schools that use the label International Baccalaureate World School, particularly those outside of North America, have a unique cultural makeup; it is this diversity that presents the greatest challenge to the relevance and utility of the IB Learner Profile. Murakami-Ramalho makes the following characterization:

In terms of organizational culture, because American international schools may not be immersed only in European or Eurocentric societies, the communities and philosophies of the schools often differ from the host countries' socioeconomic and educational contexts. This situation gives rise to many organizational identity questions that can permeate the school at a number of levels, including how educators, students, parents, and friends of the community relate to each other in defining a common good in school practices and routines.<sup>9</sup>

### **What is the International Baccalaureate Learner Profile?**

The intention of the International Baccalaureate in its use of the IB Learner Profile is to “inspire, motivate and focus the work of schools and teachers, uniting them in a common purpose”<sup>10</sup> in developing international-mindedness in individuals who have a common desire to “create a better and more peaceful world.”<sup>11</sup> In this pursuit, IB learners should be *inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced and reflective*. The IB Learner Profile is also intended as a source of “reflection and analysis.”<sup>12</sup> In both shaping and representing the “culture and ethos”<sup>13</sup> of a school, the values detailed in the IB Learner Profile should be explicitly present in “classroom and assessment practices, the daily life, management and leadership of the school.”<sup>14</sup> While it may be representative of an ideal, two important questions emerge for schools: (1) theoretically, whose ideal is being represented; and (2) practically, how should the IB Learner Profile be used?

### **Some Practical Issues with Use of the IB Learner Profile in Schools**

Character education, which focuses on teaching character traits or virtues like those identified in the IB Learner Profile, is mainly about behavior; through performing virtuous actions continuously, the action becomes rote and almost unnatu-

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9 E. Murakami-Ramalho, “Practices in foreign lands: Lessons on leadership for diversity in American international schools,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 12, no. 1 (2008): 79. Available from Ebsco-Host database (accessed October 10, 2008).

10 International Baccalaureate, 2006, 1.

11 Ibid., 5.

12 Ibid., 2.

13 Ibid., 1.

14 Ibid., 2.

ral not to perform. Davis offers an additional explanation:

A school committed to simple character education explicitly names and publicly stands for these values; promulgates them to all members of the school community; defines them in terms of behaviors that can be observed in the life of the school; models these values; studies and discusses them; uses them as the basis for human relations in the school; celebrates their manifestations in the school and community; and upholds them by making all school members evidence that it works.<sup>15</sup>

This trait-by-trait approach to character education mirrors the purpose and utility of the IB Learner Profile. However, social science tells us that children must be actively involved in the learning process for learning to take place. Simple character education is a transmission model that requires little if any involvement from students.<sup>16</sup> This transmission model has been proven ineffective for intellectual development; applying the same model to ethical development is equally ineffective. Though the intention of the International Baccalaureate is for schools to critically evaluate their learning environments, and in doing so create opportunities for students to develop the attributes of the IB Learner Profile, the reality is that schools do not adequately provide such opportunities.

A plausible explanation for this can be found in Apple's description of the intensification of education. Apple asserts that the workload of teachers has increased over the years to include responsibilities that extend beyond classroom instruction, thus intensifying the role of teaching. This is particularly problematic as teachers respond to the demands placed upon them as a result; the range of skills does not decrease but teachers begin to "'cut corners' by eliminating what seems to be inconsequential to the task at hand."<sup>17</sup> As a result, the emphasis on quality is replaced by quantity; more tasks are accomplished with less depth. When considering the exploration and development of character and its complex application, quantity simply does not suffice. Teachers in international schools like those found in the Asia-Pacific region are no less susceptible to the limitations created through the intensification of teaching than their North American counterparts. The absence of time to devote to one's practice is ever-present; this coupled with the increased demands placed on teachers outside of their actual teaching responsibilities provides one practical explanation for why the implementation of the IB Learner Profile is flawed. Additionally, the erosion in the quality or desire for

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15 M. Davis, "What's wrong with character education?" *American Journal of Education* 110, no.1 (2003): 37.

16 A. Kohn, "How not to teach values: A critical look at character education," <http://www.alfiekohn.org> (accessed May 8, 2005).

17 M.W. Apple, "Controlling the work of teachers," in *The Curriculum Studies Reader*, ed. D.J. Flinders and S.J. Thornton (New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 189.



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“work well done”<sup>18</sup> lends itself to the superficial application of the IB Learner Profile. Despite what some may see as its theoretical idealism, few could argue that merely having the attributes visible in classrooms and schools (which inevitably happens) is enough to make them central to learning, let alone to have them imbedded into pedagogy.

### **The Hegemonic Underpinnings of the IB Learner Profile**

Given the cultural and value conflicts that arise in pluralistic classrooms, the IB Learner Profile is dubious in its attempt to use ten common attributes to paint schools and learners with the same hegemonic brush. Williams characterizes hegemony as a deeply rooted sense of reality in both meaning and practice that is created based on a dominant set of values or ideals.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the attributes identified in the IB Learner Profile, there is an undeniable and obvious link to character education initiatives common in the United States that privilege one cultural view of character and ethics.

More importantly, the hegemonic discord created in the use of the IB Learner Profile is both complex and deep, and places students at the center of the conflict between their own cultural references and traditions and those of the Euro-American education they seek. Irrespective of its intent, suggesting that a set of values can be universally applied is questionable, particularly without the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid..

<sup>19</sup> M. Apple, “On analyzing hegemony,” in *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990).

means to effectively address the development of such values. Apple suggests asking the following questions: whose knowledge is it? who selected it? why is it organized and taught in this way? The depth of the conflict created by the answers and time required to address them is difficult to fathom.<sup>20</sup>

Academic malpractice or cheating can be found in all levels of schooling, although acceptance of it can be tied to cultural points of reference. In a study conducted by Magnus, Polterovich, Danilov and Savvateev, results indicated that cultural factors could explain cheating behaviors among students.<sup>21</sup> Among American students, cheating was seen as an unfair instrument of competition and an important intrinsic value of the educational system; thus, students were less inclined to cheat. In contrast, Russian students demonstrated a societal mistrust of those in positions of authority in which teachers were included; hence, informers were viewed more negatively than cheaters. In this example, collective and individualistic values differ from one culture to another. The study also indicated that “cheating is considered a rational act where the student balances expected utility of higher grades against expected costs (severity of punishment, probability of getting caught, prevailing attitude toward cheating).”<sup>22</sup> Another example may illustrate the point further. A student may view cheating as an acceptable means to an end where the attainment of good marks reflects positively upon one’s family, particularly in a society where status in the cultural and societal hierarchy is important. Cheating becomes one strategy in achieving this aim where the risk of academic punishment is significantly less than the potential benefit of promoting one’s family status in the social order. The student may justifiably believe that his actions demonstrate a creative approach to a complex problem, reflect respect for his family and immediate society, and show an appreciation for his own culture. These are characterizations of three IB Learner Profile attributes: knowledgeable, principled and open-minded. As an institution, schools provide a decidedly mixed message for the student. The IB Learner Profile attributes are valued but only under the assumption that the actions created fall under the school’s belief in how they should apply, which is rooted in the policies and procedures of the Euro-American culture of the international school. The institution clearly says that cheating is wrong but the cultural values which are more firmly rooted than the rules of a school create a real and practical dilemma for the student, one that is rarely acknowledged or discussed in any depth.

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20 Ibid.

21 J.R. Magnus, V.M. Polterovich, D.L. Danilov, and A.V. Savvateev, “Tolerance of cheating: An analysis across countries,” *Journal of Economic Education* 33, no. 2 (2002): 125-135.

22 Ibid., 130-131.



## The Utility of Doll's Four Rs in Rendering the IB Learner Profile More Effective

With respect to Doll's post-modern explanation of the four Rs, *richness*, *recursion*, *relations* and *rigor* can be applied to the use of the IB Learner Profile to make it purposeful. While the Tyler Rationale still provides much of the structure found in schools, it does not address the differences between schooling and educating as efficiently. As such, the traditional model does little to help teachers use the IB Learner Profile or give it the depth necessary for it to be of educative value. Tyler's guiding questions for curriculum require a definitiveness that does not apply to the understanding or enactment of cultural values and norms.<sup>23</sup>

Doll's four Rs provide a better theoretical model for creating a curriculum based on the IB Learner Profile. First, the notion of culture and values lends itself to the *richness* required of a postmodern curriculum. Creating the dialogue necessary to explore one's values and ideals is bound to create chaos when the participants are encouraged to share a wide range of experiences, thoughts and ideas.<sup>24</sup> The interrelatedness of the shared chaos created in the exploration of cultural and intercultural values sets the stage for another of Doll's Rs, *relations*—particularly cultural relations. Values are deeply embedded in any school culture. Prescribing them, as in the IB Learner Profile, is counterproductive to creating understanding and meaning.

Another of Doll's Rs, *recursion*, provides further context in using the attributes of the IB Learner Profile. In order to understand others one must understand oneself. Both entities are ever-changing, without beginning and end points, and require "reflective interaction with the environment, with others, with a culture."<sup>25</sup> This belief directly conflicts with the IB Learner Profile which suggests that the attributes are tied directly to participation in the IB programs. Once participation ends, do the attributes cease as well?

The application of Doll's final R, *rigor*, to the IB Learner Profile presents similar questions. A transformative curriculum has a certain emphasis on indeterminacy that requires the learner to continually explore and seek new interpretations, a natural process in dealing with cultural and individual values. However, the attributes included in the IB Learner Profile are very specific and prescriptive in terms of what an IB learner should be. Character development should not include specific traits or values but opportunities to engage students in their own learning. True learning takes place because students are equipped with skills that they have learned, practiced and can be applied in any setting regardless of the time, place or context.

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23 Tyler 1949 as cited in Pinar et al, *Understanding Curriculum*.

24 W.E. Doll Jr., *A Post-modern Perspective on Curriculum* (New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 1993).

25 Ibid., 255.



## Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

Freire states, “in its desire to create an ideal model of the ‘good man,’ a naively conceived view of humanism often overlooks the concrete, existential, present situation of real men.”<sup>26</sup> This is exactly the problem with the IB Learner Profile; it fails to create opportunities for the attributes to be recognized contextually for a deeper meaning and understanding. The assumption that the heterogeneity found in international schools will naturally foster such dialogue is faulty; the presence of students from diverse backgrounds does not equate to educational benefits.<sup>27</sup>

The creation of a hermeneutic dialogue, as initiated by Doll’s criteria, is a meaningful strategy for giving both depth and significance to IB Learner Profile attributes as well as staying true to their intent in fostering international-mindedness. By its very nature, hermeneutics requires that practitioners remain open to answers created as being only a “temporary resting place.”<sup>28</sup> This type of dialogue is logically suited to a discussion related to the meaning of culture in which unanswerable questions are ubiquitous. A curriculum built upon conversation that “is always in process, is dynamic, and is transformative”<sup>29</sup> lends itself to the deep exploration of the questions *who am I* and *who are we*, which should be the foundation of any examination of values and beliefs. The emphasis then shifts from the transmission of any set knowledge to a study of many perspectives and their interconnectedness.<sup>30</sup>

This being said, the difficulty of creating a truly hermeneutic discourse regarding the nature and validity of the IB Learner Profile attributes is almost impossible to achieve in the institutional setting as it currently functions under the Tyler Rationale. Nonetheless, the challenge involved in both listening and questioning in order to transcend hegemonic boundaries must be viewed as worthwhile. “The power of hermeneutic imagination in its capacity to reach across national and cultural boundaries to enable dialogue between people and traditions superficially at odds to problematize the hegemony of dominant culture in order to engage it transformatively.”<sup>31</sup>

Teaching values, if even possible, requires critical thinking that will enable children to be independent citizens in an ever-changing world. Using traditional approaches like the prescriptive attributes of the IB Learner Profile, which

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26 Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 128.

27 McKenzie, 1998, as cited in Murakami-Ramalho, “Practices in Foreign Lands.”

28 W.E. Doll Jr., “The four R’s—An alternative to the Tyler Rationale,” in *The Curriculum Studies Reader*, 228.

29 Doll, W.E., Jr. *Utilizing the 4 R’s*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, College of Education, 2008. 3.

30 Ibid.

31 C.M. Chambers, “‘As Canadian as possible under the circumstances’: A view of contemporary curriculum discourses in Canada.” in *The International Handbook of Curriculum Research*, ed. W. Pinar (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 227.

employ pre-set values and attempt to paste them onto students, does a disservice to the needs of the individual and society in general. We can engage them through hermeneutic dialogue but we cannot realistically plan the outcome of what values a student holds without serious regard for an individual's sense of self and of their community; to try is an attempt to further the hegemonic flaws that currently exist in international education and in other culturally diverse settings. Do we want our students to walk out of the doors of schools with the ability to think and reason independently in the world, or do we want to create students who can think only when given the specifics of what to think and where to think them? **PEAR**

*Appendix 1: The International Baccalaureate Learner Profile*

<b>Inquirers</b>	They develop their natural curiosity. They acquire the skills necessary to conduct inquiry and research and show independence in learning. They actively enjoy learning and this love of learning will be sustained throughout their lives.
<b>Knowledgeable</b>	They explore concepts, ideas and issues that have local and global significance. In so doing, they acquire in-depth knowledge and develop understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines.
<b>Thinkers</b>	They exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognize and approach complex problems, and make reasoned, ethical decisions.
<b>Communicators</b>	They understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication. They work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others.
<b>Principled</b>	They act with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness, justice and respect for the dignity of the individual, groups and communities. They take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences that accompany them.
<b>Open-minded</b>	They understand and appreciate their own cultures and personal histories, and are open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities. They are accustomed to seeking and evaluating a range of points of view, and are willing to grow from the experience.
<b>Caring</b>	They show empathy, compassion and respect towards the needs and feelings of others. They have a personal commitment to service, and act to make a positive difference to the lives of others and to the environment.
<b>Risk-takers</b>	They approach unfamiliar situations and uncertainty with courage and forethought, and have the independence of spirit to explore new roles, ideas and strategies. They are brave and articulate in defending their beliefs.
<b>Balanced</b>	They understand the importance of intellectual, physical and emotional balance to achieve personal well-being for themselves and others.
<b>Reflective</b>	They give thoughtful consideration to their own learning and experience. They are able to assess and understand their strengths and limitations in order to support their learning and personal development.

*\*accessed from 'IB learner profile booklet, International Baccalaureate, [www.ibo.org/programmes/profile/documents/learnerprofileguide.pdf](http://www.ibo.org/programmes/profile/documents/learnerprofileguide.pdf) (accessed November 28, 2009).*