

## ‘TO IB OR NOT TO IB’

John McKEOWN\*

\*Üsküdar American Academy, Istanbul, Turkey

**Abstract:** *This localized small-scale ethnographic study addresses issues associated with students’ choices to study in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBO: IBDP, 2020), rather than following a Ministry of Education (MEB) curriculum, at a mixed-gender secular high school in Turkey. This study examines the implications that curriculum choices have on students’ pedagogic identity (Bernstein, 2000). Students’ curriculum decisions are based on academic results, on a future they envision for themselves, teacher feedback, and school participation. Student commentaries provide evidence of factors involved in how students make the choice to study the IBDP and what personal effects those decisions may have. Teaching faculty anecdotal evidence offers background information to contextualize the students’ choices. Dilts’ Logical Levels model (1986) is used to deconstruct the decisions that students make within a wider cultural context. An argument is made that acceptance into the IBDP leads to an awareness of social differences and hierarchies, and that the logic of students’ choices induces a positive selection of the more talented individuals into a group with a superior reputation, and how members of that group ‘exert control over their perceived identity’ (Kim & Loury, 2019).*

**Keywords:** *International Baccalaureate; diploma; curriculum*

### 1. CONTEXT

This small scale ethnographic study focuses on choices that high school students make to complete their junior and senior years at the Üsküdar American Academy, a mixed-gender secular high school located in central Istanbul, and the implications that those choices have on their pedagogic identity (Bernstein, 2000).

UAA students enter the high school at 14 years of age through an annual national competitive high school entrance examination, *Lise Geçiş Sınavı* (LGS, 2020). To be considered for UAA, entrants need to achieve scores within the top one percent of the approximately one million Grade 8 student test-takers, and, as a consequence, the students are bright, motivated, and high-achieving. The academic program is varied, rigorous and demanding, with high levels of student participation in clubs and sports to develop their non-academic talents. The school is fee-paying, educationally progressive, and under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Education (MEB).

Founded in 1876, UAA has a long tradition of promoting progressive education, and ranks as one of the top three high schools in Turkey, with high expectations and demonstrated academic success:

Our aim is to give a broad education and

foster students who are self-confident, fully developed socially and intellectually, fluent in English with knowledge of the culture behind the language and morally upright, global citizens,

and,

... to enable our students to select the university which best suits their character, ability and interests, ... and to further their education either in Turkey or abroad, and assist them in making the right decision in the final stages of this process. (UAA website, 2020).

Based on college acceptances of UAA seniors over the past five years, 42% of graduates are successful in their overseas university applications (UAA, 2020), with many students awarded either partial, or full scholarships. Graduates choosing to study in Turkey, advance to the highest ranked Turkish universities, with the majority of graduates accepted into faculties of either Engineering, Medicine or Law (UAA, 2020).

Students prepare themselves to sit the yearly Turkish university entrance examination *Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı* (YKS, 2020), in addition to completing the requirements for the Ministry of Education high school curriculum, often supplementing this course of study by sitting

American Placement (AP) subject examinations (The College Board, 2020) if intending to study abroad, or, by following the IBDP curriculum, graduating with the Diploma, and also with an intention of studying outside of Turkey. Students in the IBDP earn two Diplomas; one from the IB in January (in the first semester of Grade 12) and the National High School Diploma on graduation in June. IBDP students must meet some additional requirements from the Ministry of Education.

The route to university is fraught with obstacles and the school supports students’ choices of options to reach their intended goals, and these aspects will be examined in further detail in the discussion.

## **2. THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE DIPLOMA PROGRAM (IBDP)**

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, for students aged 16 to 19, is described at the IBO website as, “an academically

challenging and balanced program of education that prepares students for success at university and life beyond” (IBO, 2020).

UAA has offered the IBDP since 2014, graduating the first cohort in 2017. All UAA Grade 9 students are eligible to apply for a place in the IBDP, and selection is based on the student’s GPA, teacher recommendation, and school participation. Students exit the program with the IB Diploma as well as the MEB graduation certificate.

In the IBDP, students study six subjects, one from each of the six groups. Three subjects are studied at Higher Level (HL) although some students opt to take an additional fourth HL, and the remainder at Standard Level (SL). HL incorporates a wider range of topics than SL and focuses on certain topics in greater depth. Students choose one subject from each of the 6 groups from the following table (Table 1). Level choices (SL/HL) are made at the end of Grade 10.

Table 1 (Uskudar American Academy IB Diploma Programme, 2020).

<b>Group:</b>	<b>Subjects and levels (one subject from each group)</b>				
<b>1</b>	Turkish (HL or SL)				
<b>2</b>	English A (HL or SL)		English B (HL only)		
<b>3</b>	Turkey in the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century (SL only)				
<b>4</b>	Biology (HL or SL)		Physics (HL or SL)		
<b>5</b>	Mathematics (HL or SL)				
<b>6</b>	Chemistry (HL)	Economics (HL)	Computer Science (HL)	Visual Arts (HL)	Business Management (HL)

There is also the IBDP core requirement including:

- The Extended Essay: An independent, self-directed piece of research leading to a 4,000-word paper.

- The Theory of Knowledge: TOK explores the nature of knowledge and the role of evidence, focused on the key theme of “how do we know what we claim to know?”

- Creativity, Activity, Service: CAS is a range of activities outside the classroom that complement and extend students’ academic studies. (IBO, 2020)

Each course requires 25 assessments of different types, over the two years of the diploma. Internal assessments (IA’s) are evaluated by the teacher at the school, and IB examiners mark the external assessment components (EA’s). IB

examinations are knowledge-based and criterion-referenced (IBO, 2020). The variety and quality of assessments further separates the IBDP from other curricula like AP or A-Levels (Mathews & Hill, 2005).

While the UAA high school population is homogenous Turkish, and might be considered as an L2 (second language learner) environment, English serves as the language of instruction, and the spectrum of student English ability levels range from fluently bilingual to functionally bilingual, with an IELTS average score of 7.4 in Grade 11. The IBDP is conducted in English with the exception of Turkish language courses.

Students entering Grade 11 choose to study either HL or SL, for example, English Language A (HL or SL), or English Language B (HL only). English Language B, designed as a language

acquisition course for students with several years of English, provides the necessary skills to enable students to communicate successfully in English (IBO, 2020). Language A is a literature course designed to develop an understanding of literary criticism including text analysis and literary conventions. As UAA is not an “English” or an international school, it is possible for students to take English B, although their abilities may be more closely aligned to the English A requirements. Students opt for English B as a route to a top course score of 7.

### 3. THE TURKISH NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR HIGH SCHOOL

When students enter Grade 11, they choose one of four tracks: Turkish language–mathematics, science, social sciences, or foreign languages. However, UAA offers electives instead of academic tracks, giving students a wider range of options. Entrance to university is regulated by a national university standardized entrance examination *Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı* (YKS, 2020) administered by The Council of Higher Education (Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Sistemi, ÖSYS, 2020) and after which high school graduates are assigned to a university according to their performance. At the end of Grade 12, students take a high school finishing examination which they are required to pass in order to sit the *YKS* and continue on to their studies at a university. To make it into the highest-ranked universities, whether abroad or in Turkey takes careful, lengthy and detailed preparation on the part of the student and their family.

### 4. PEDAGOGIC IDENTITY

For Bernstein (2000), a pedagogic identity is constructed and projected for both students and teachers in a larger discourse, shaping pedagogic practice, and is

... concerned essentially with *contemporary resources* under conditions of cultural/economic change for constructing a sense of identity belonging to, and different from, and for the management of internal sense making and external relationships in time space and context. (2000: 205)

The IBDP serves as a highly visible externally branded curriculum, provided in relation, or some might argue, in opposition to the national

curriculum. It is the product “branding” that positions it in a hierarchy of curriculum options, and offers an alternative pedagogic identity due to its academic rewards, assessments, and distinction, all associated with the value of IBDP credential (Doherty, 2010:4). Parents and students have to choose between different curriculum, matching both student abilities and future aspirations to the pedagogic identities projected by different curricula. In this study, Bernstein’s pedagogic identity concept will be used to further understand how the IB Diploma distinguishes itself in the educational marketplace, and the implications for students as they make curricular choices.

### 5. DILTS’ LOGICAL LEVELS MODEL

Dilts’ Logical Levels Model (1986) can be used to deconstruct the decisions that students make within a wider cultural context. Perhaps the most widely known hierarchy is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 1), where meeting an individual’s needs

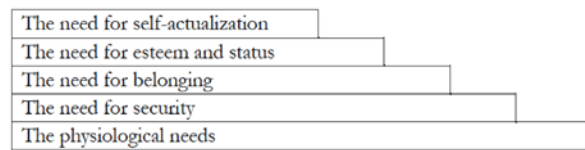


Fig.1 The hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow (1943)

goes from the bottom to the top, with the superior needs not met until the basic ones are sufficiently satisfied.

Dilts proposes a pyramid of neurological levels where changes produced at the superior levels of the pyramid produce a transformation in its subordinate levels (Figure 2).

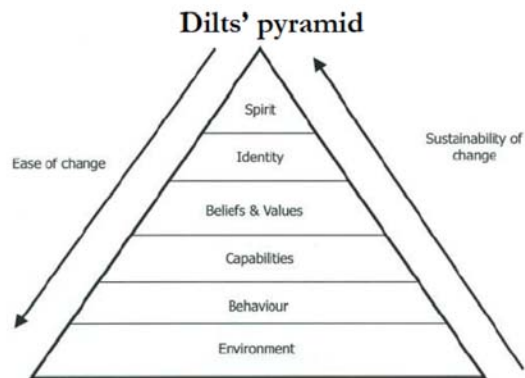


Fig.2 Dilts’ pyramid of neurological levels. Diagram taken from Clarke (2007)

Beliefs and values support the individual's sense of identity, and serve to further identify with a larger system of which they are members, as UAA student, IBDP scholar, and Language A or B group. From students' collated comments, it can be seen that they are *very* aware of the distinguishing characteristics that define a group, school, even a program. In the Dilts' model, the identity level is the confirmation of a sense of self-worth and the self-realization that a person identifies with a particular group, often to achieve their ends, or mutual ends.

## 6. STUDENT SURVEY

It may be noted that UAA is a IBDP November exam school, versus May, so that Grade 10 students have a semester of adaptation, including acquainting themselves with the core course work (CAS, EE, and ToK), and then dive into their subjects in earnest in January. The later exam period allows Grade 12 students to send their Diploma results to prospective universities earlier in the academic year.

At the time of writing, there were 53 IBDP students enrolled in Grade 11 (33 females and 20 males), and, in Grade 12, 34 students (17 females and 17 males). For students in the Grade 12 cohort, there was a concern that they had not been given sufficiently detailed information on which to base their decision to study in the IBDP, and what the personal effects of that decision might be. In order to support students, and gather information related to the issues raised, IBDP Grade 12 English teachers devised anecdotal and open-ended prompts for a survey, and received approval to administer the anonymous survey.

Grade 12 students in December 2019 were asked to complete the survey which addressed four topics: (1) reasons for selecting IBDP; (2) academic issues in the IBDP; (3) choice and satisfaction; and, (4) reflection on the choices made. From a class of 34, 23 surveys were received. Teachers' comments were recorded in the notes taken during the review of the results of the student commentaries. Students had significant feedback on their science, mathematics, and Turkish language, courses and for the sake of brevity, the comments specific to those subject areas have been omitted in the collated responses:

### Selection of IBDP

- ambitious academic demands
- advantage for entry into foreign universities
- higher status than MEB with more hours

- heavy workload/peak time demands
- lack of clarity choosing English A or B or A SL or HL
- IBDP oversold; lacks realistic time frame
- parent advice important

### Academic issues

- multiple assessments at awkward times of academic year
- English A lacked focus on comparative literature
- English B too easy for level of language skill
- too much teaching with MEB mentality
- teacher emphasis on general feedback with a lack of formative assessments
- assessment needed more preparation, and focus on IB assessment
- some subject teachers not sufficiently IB knowledgeable
- grading discrepancies
- lack of continuity in teaching approach/content vs process lack
- of time to absorb multiple topics

### Satisfaction

- teacher turnover created gaps in preparing for IB assessments
- too many topics covered superficially
- lack of intellectual freedom
- multiple assessments at awkward times of academic year
- use of cumulative assessment
- IB approaches to learning (AOL)
- core subject integration TOK EE CAS

### Reflection

- stressful studying for IBDP while preparing for YKS at the same time
- supportive peers
- lack of personal time
- bonding with other IB students
- wider range of topics than MEB
- developed types of writing skills
- International perspectives used
- worked on self-management skills, and other types of skills
- more opportunities for different types of learning

Interestingly, this cohort despite their extensive commentary, achieved remarkable results: a combined average of 39 (from a possible 45): the world average is 29.65. 52% of UAA IBDP students received 40 or above, compared with 9.7% of students worldwide. The results are a

tribute to the quality of students, their determination, and the support and trust established with their peers and teachers. The end result separates the IBDP students from the MEB candidates in a number of significant ways which will be examined in the discussion.

## 7. DISCUSSION

At the outset it ought to be mentioned that although student participation was lower than expected, teachers in reviewing student comments found that their responses aligned to the four prompts and confirmed what they had heard throughout the year. Teachers also expressed their high regard for the honesty and forthrightness of the students' responses. Student responses ran from 200 - 400 words in length: they had a lot to share.

Responses indicated that students had an acute awareness of the appeal of the program for the academically ambitious. IBDP for this group was highly desirable as the program's reputation, combined with the institutional status, gave them an academic competitive edge over other candidates applying for places at foreign universities. Students who began in the IBDP and decided in the second year of the program to attend a Turkish university were in the awkward position of completing the program while at the same time preparing intensively for the Turkish national university entrance exam (YKS). Their comments show that this double whammy of high academic rigor and long hours after the school day spent with tutors left them stressed and questioning the choice to have embarked on studying the IBDP in the first place. A common thread that appeared across the student responses, regarding the choice of the IBDP, is the strong link established between the IBDP and intellectual rigor and academic standards. On the other hand, students commented that often the types and frequency of assessment emphasized traditional assessment practices in different formats, and tended to promote conservative ideas of educational standards with the IB exerting a high level of control of what is learned and how. They had wanted to know more about the workload involved.

However, the comments about coherence to the IB system, may also assist students in the formation of values that scaffold their emergent identity as "IBDP student", "IBDP Language A student" and, proceeding further, "successful IBDP student", or, finally, "IBDP graduate". This transition is partially due to engagement with the program, and is possible through communicative

socializing with friends, groups, in classes, clubs, and from the feedback of community members. Students from day one at UAA are oriented towards success, and make those values of the school compatible with themselves. The IB moniker is the icing on the pedagogic identity cake.

For Dilts, at the identity level, the focus is on self expression, self-consciousness, and establishing an ideal self, a self-image. This creation of an identity creates a feeling of "self-sense" (Dilts, 1996), and shows the ways in which an individual perceives him/herself being correlated with self esteem and self-respect. The social prestige associated with a program at school transfers to the individual, strengthening their self-esteem and confirming their self value (1996: 214), and could be said to lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, and, further, to a sense of one's place and to behaviors of self-inclusion in that group.

From comments received, it becomes clearer that this shift to a pedagogic identity is conferred by acceptance into the IBDP and by the completion of the requirements. However, given the ambivalence of student comments about the personal stressors they encountered during their two years in the program, success may be measured in different ways, and of course, from different points of view, different audiences, even accepting universities. This end result does not necessarily mean that the IB student has achieved more than the student who had chosen to study a national Turkish high school program.

The perceived pedagogic identity, however, goes further, and induces a positive selection of the more talented individuals into a group with a superior reputation. Despite the claims to produce internationally-minded world citizens, there may be an argument to be made that students perceive the creation of a veiled hierarchy in this educational programming.

Taking one aspect of IBDP discourse revealed by respondent comments, it can be seen that there is a construction of "IB students" as a homogeneous group, having particular qualities as articulated in the *IB Learner Profile* (IBO, 2020), to develop learners who are:

- Inquirers
- Knowledgeable
- Thinkers
- Communicators
- Principled
- Open-minded
- Caring

Risk-takers  
Balanced  
Reflective.

In constructing this type of in-group, there will also be an out-group. When students wrote their comments referring to “IB” they wrote in a voice representing a homogeneous group. The repeated presentation of IB students as embodying such qualities implies that other, non-IB, students may lack them. Creating this exclusive “us” marginalizes those outside the group, using a positive-us / negative-other discourse strategy (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

This cohort may represent a transitional group for the school: the first cohort to forthrightly question the IBDP approach, its relation to programs that other seniors follow at the school, and the effects that the experience had on them not only academically, but personally, and how it further could define their identity and future prospects.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This small-scale ethnographic study revealed issues associated with high school students’ choices to study the IBDP, in a specific local school context, based on the comments collected from a student survey. The comments, generated from four prompts, revealed that the students had different layers of awareness of their choice to study the IBDP, and the extent to which their choice had produced personal changes or awareness, including their real or perceived status at the school. One area of developing awareness was the tacit appreciation of the acceptance into what may be perceived as a hierarchical group, and with it, an acceptance of a particular type of pedagogic identity, a likely but unknown consequence of their choice.

Dilts’ Logical Levels Model (1986) was used to focus attention on the creation of a pedagogic identity. Student responses illustrated what the effects of studying in the IBDP are for them, and for their future. An argument was made that acceptance into the IBDP leads to an awareness of social differences and hierarchies; to an “in” group, and an “out” group. Such differences were also demonstrated in the student choice of either English A or B. It was further suggested that identifying student academic success in the IBDP school environment is a powerful contributing factor in the formation of a student’s pedagogic identity.

It was shown that students’ entry into the IBDP in this context, at the very least, creates an impression both within the group, and from outside

of it, that there is a selection of talented individuals into a group with a superior reputation. The realization of this exclusion or inclusion, has a powerful effect on their pedagogic identity given that the majority of UAA students accepted to study abroad originate from this group.

It is hoped that this small study may serve as a signpost for other IB schools seeking to further define the effects of student selection of, and participation in the IBDP, and may encourage further research into the effect that the program has on its learners personally, academically and professionally, and to what extent this process of identification supports the aim of the IBDP to develop internationally minded citizens.

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