

## **International Schools in Egypt: Are They Truly ‘International’?**

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### **Abstract**

Globalization has led to more competition not only globally but also locally. As a response to globalization and in an attempt to internationalize, international schools have been growing at an unprecedented rate in Egypt. There are practical reasons why so many parents enroll their children in such schools, but what are the larger implications and possible benefits? This article exposes the general nature of international schools in Egypt, taking into account the teachers, students, as well as the curricula on offer, with a focus on the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP). This article contends that there are many contradictions in the parent’s motivations to enroll their children at international schools.

### **Keywords**

International Baccalaureate, international mindedness, international school, globalization, internationalization, Egypt

### **Introduction**

Globalization is happening at our doorstep every day, creating a *flat world* according to Thomas Friedman. The fact that millions of people around the world can eat at McDonalds or Starbucks in their hometown is evidence of that. Robertson states that globalization does not exist unless it takes into account socially constructed *localities* (Robertson, The Conceptual). Thus, more relevant is the term *glocalization*, coined by sociologist Roland Robertson in 1992, which is the simultaneous development of global and local values and practices. It describes the interaction between *the local in the global* and *the global in the*

*local* (Robertson, Globalization 28). Friedman describes it as the extent to which a culture opens up to outward influences or ideas, and “melds them with its own traditions” (Friedman 324). Glocalization of education eliminates the threat of being able to attain global scholarship at the expense of being alienated from national culture concurrently.

Internationalization is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension” into the teaching, learning, and other functions of a school community (Knight 11). According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, internationalization is a response to globalization, with internationalized curricula designed to specifically address globalization (Bauman). An example of such an internationalized curriculum is the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) developed and overseen by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). All of the programs developed by the IBO focus on the development of Learner Profile attributes which underpin the IB programs, in conjunction with the academic requirements. The Learner Profile attributes include: principled, open-minded, communicator, thinker, balanced, knowledgeable, risk-taker, caring, inquirer, and reflective. These ten attributes are perceived to enable the students’ development of international mindedness (Wells 177).

The IBO attempts to build a bridge between globalization and internationalization in their aims and stated student outcomes of the IB program. International programs offered at international schools, such as the international and globally taught IB program, could be said to be a response to internationalization. However they could also be perceived as a factor that help promote globalization. Part of the IBDP students are encouraged to engage with their local communities, and George Walker (Director General from 1999-2005) states that the IBDP curriculum is such that it can be adapted by the local environment where it is offered, making the term glocalization relevant here (Hill 107). Internationalization is idealistic in its goals as it is identified with consciously promoting peace, international understanding and cooperation, and an internationally minded outlook, as an intentional response to globalization (Knight 11).

## Context

Egypt does not globalize well, as the imposition of global ideas and values (perceived as western) is faced with resistance due to prior colonization and the threat of losing national and religious traditions and values. A number of tensions arise from offering programs such as the IBDP that are perceived, by some local teachers as well as parents, to be humanist in nature in a developing non-western country such as Egypt.

Egypt is a relatively young post-colonial country. The French (1878-1882) followed by the British colonization (1882-1952) resulted in an imposition of western education models in an imperialistic economic system. After independence, and unsuccessful attempts at educating the masses, public and private schools electively adopted western models of education. Privatization of all levels of the educational system took place in the 1980s (Mehrez 102). However, the Ministry of Education, which provides the common core curriculum consisting of Arabic language, religion, civics, as well as national and regional history and geography, oversees all schools. The core curriculum serves to preserve cultural and religious traditions, in other words, a national identity (Megahed, 694). In a study of *Education and the stranded Egyptian elite*, Mehrez found that:

[...] these recently established private schools represent fewer than 10 per cent of the total number of schools in Egypt; however, they have also become the Egyptian elite's way of dodging antiquated national curricula, avoiding overcrowded classrooms (at least forty students in a class), and circumventing the role of the notorious *Thanawiyya Amma* (high school) national certificate that determines the future of high school graduates (102).

The results of these *Thanawiyya Amma* examinations determine which university the student can be admitted to as well as their future job prospects. Due to the high pressure of these results there has been at least one incident where a well-connected student had his papers swapped with those of a higher achiever ("Forensics"). There are also multiple

leakages of exam papers and mark schemes. Such incidents have recently been covered in the media (Youssef, “Calculus”, “Egypt’s”, “Despite”).

Since the 1980s, national schools have been employing poorly trained or unqualified teachers who mainly rely on the outdated pedagogical tool of rote memorization, which did not help the students learn the skills needed to be globally competitive. In addition, the public schools were underfunded and poorly managed. While Egypt’s flagging national schools closed doors, private schools opened them to the demands of the Egyptian elite for education that allows access to global markets, attaining cultural capital, as well as for upward and global mobility (Allen 130, Herrera 404).

Where the IBDP is offered in Egypt, private schools aim to operate in the context of globalization. However, as noted earlier, a more appropriate term currently, especially since the revolution, might be *glocalization*, as it can be seen as a reaction to global homogeneity where individuals become concerned with preserving the values of their communities (Anderson 36). This is becoming evident with the more highly educated younger generation of parents (especially those young parents who lived through the Arab Spring and specifically the 2011 revolution in Egypt) who are looking for their children to become globally mobile but also maintain some sort of national identity.

Bunnell (Middle East 18) also states that in the Middle East and certainly in Egypt, the IBDP is an elite program as it is offered only in private schools, which are out of reach for the majority of citizens. There are no public schools in Egypt that offer the IBDP. As education is seen as a form of gaining cultural capital, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in the *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, states that “cultural capital among groups in different locations in the class structure contributes to the reproduction of inequality in a variety of subtle ways” (2627). Brown argues that private educational credentials, specifically linked to international curricula, “are a central part of the mechanism by which elites maintain their economic advantage through the linkage between judgments of educational success and class-based cultural capital” (as cited in Lowe 364). The most obvious way this is achieved is through the prohibitive cost of tuition at private international schools that offer the IBDP in Egypt.

## **International Education**

The definition of international education is elusive. Some scholars agree that an international education would need to include contact with students from a number of different countries and the study of other languages, followed by learning about and experiencing other cultures, learning about the history and politics of other countries, and intercultural understanding (Hayden, Rancic and Thompson 120, James 320). However, in Egypt, the mere fact that a school offers a language other than Arabic is often used to categorize that school as an international one.

As Allan states, international schools are schools “where different cultures operate within the same environment, where there is often a dominant cultural ethos, both among the faculty and the students, and where the culture of the host country can impinge on the culture of the school, in varying degrees and in various ways, producing a school culture with individual and specific characteristics [in what becomes] a cultural borderland” (77). Cairene schools that fit this definition due to the transient nature of the school population are the Cairo American College, New Cairo British International School and the Maadi British International School. These are top tier international schools that intentionally maintain a specific ratio of international students to Egyptian students in order to maintain a diverse school population.

Schools in Egypt are often said to be international because they offer an imported curriculum or hire some international teachers. These teachers could all be from one dominant country that may or may not match the curriculum’s origin or they could be a mixture of nationalities. Usually the students will be local Egyptians. Although international mindedness is often part of these international schools’ missions, it is generally only to pay lip service to the accreditation entities that are looking for such idealistic indicators of internationalization.

## **International Mindedness**

International mindedness is very difficult to develop (Skelton 385) and just as hard if not harder to measure, as it is an attitude or disposition. There is no international mindedness

course that students can sign up for or a test one can take to measure how internationally minded one is. Other similar constructs are intercultural competence, cultural intelligence, global mindedness and cosmopolitanism. As difficult as it is to measure, some scholars, such as Jane Hett in 1993, have developed instruments that make an attempt at measuring global mindedness for example.

Harwood and Bailey define international mindedness as “a person’s capacity to transcend the limits of a worldview informed by a single experience of nationality, creed, culture or philosophy and recognize in the richness of diversity a multiplicity of ways of engaging with the world” (79). Ian Hill, deputy Director General of the IBO since 2000, defines an individual who is internationally minded as one who “understands that people of different backgrounds hold different views, examines why they hold them and respects other points of view without necessarily accepting them” (Cause 36). In 1974, UNESCO came forward with a list of Guiding Principles of International Education that overlap with the definition of international mindedness, which includes: a global perspective at all levels, respect for all people and cultures, awareness of growing human interdependence, communication ability, awareness of human rights and duties, international solidarity and cooperation, and individual problem solving for community, nation, and world (Sylvester 134).

Many schools state that their mission is for students to develop some form of international mindedness. Thus one would expect that students would graduate from the school exhibiting at least some international mindedness. However, even in programs designed to foster international mindedness such as the IBDP, I found the diverse student body to be the integral factor for helping students develop a form of international mindedness or a wider worldview rather than the program itself. At school, the students interact in various formats; in the classroom the students have formal discussions about specific topics moderated by the teacher while as part of a sports team or drama production, for example, students have more informal interactions with each other.

The development of international mindedness is due to both the formal and informal interaction that takes place amongst the students of different backgrounds, which according to Allport's Social Contact Theory reduces discrimination. The theory proposes that interpersonal contact between different groups of people and between individuals is an effective way to reduce prejudice and discrimination. Effective interaction occurs when the *contact* is managed properly, which means that the four conditions specified by Allport are met: equal status between groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. It helps people to interact effectively by learning to communicate to share ideas and perspectives (Pettigrew 66). Allport's rationale behind the success of this theory is that generalizations, oversimplifications and stereotypes diminish as one learns more about a people, thereby creating the open relationship needed for positive interaction.

### **Dilemmas**

At especially the top tier international schools in Egypt, there exist some contradictions and dilemmas that arise due to the attempt to address the needs of the clientele and make a profit. There are both positive and negative consequences that arise from the employment of western teachers or choosing to offer western curricula. By western teachers, I generally mean white American, Australian, European or New Zealand nationals, of which some are not even qualified to teach. The western curricula are those on offer in those previously mentioned countries.

**Teachers.** The employment of western teachers does not always benefit the school and students, as western teachers arrive with their own western values, pragmatics, and semiotics, which may clash with those of their Egyptian students or confuse them. It is sometimes intangible body language or the use of particular sayings that could be interpreted in different ways by different individuals, possibly unintentionally offensive to some. Another example is the use of humor or sarcasm in different cultures, which could also lead to misunderstandings. These teachers may need intercultural training before they start in order to better deal with their students and benefit the school the most. I do not know of any school in

Egypt that offers such training. At the most, they offer a short orientation session about such things as where and how to buy groceries and which includes warnings about not brushing their teeth with tap water (personal experience working at international schools for 15 years). This helps them with the logistics of adjusting to a foreign country but does not help these teachers in their classrooms.

Parents who can afford it and are aware of the symbolic capital of speaking English without an accent (as perceived by the parents), desire for their children to have native speaker teachers so that their children learn to speak the language with the correct accent, sometimes at the expense of a more experienced or qualified teacher. As most international schools are run as a business they must cater to their clientele's needs and desires. This also affects many qualified local teachers, sometimes even including those with an international education, who attempt to get hired by especially the top tier international schools in Egypt, as they find that they are not given a chance as possible candidates. Sometimes, this is due to their language fluency, accent, or in fact, their image (e.g., wearing a hijab). The clientele generally perpetuate the dynamics of this discrimination by complaining when their children do not have native speaker teachers even if more qualified at teaching. This then propagates to the students', resulting in similar perceptions of their non-native speaker teachers and clarifying to them who they should see as role models. They are fed the idea that Egyptians, like themselves, are not as worthy as their western counterparts.

*Curricula.* There are many curricula on offer in Egypt, such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education, French Bac, German Abitur, and American diploma, in addition to the IBDP. It is the methodology teachers use and the role models the students observe rather than the curricula themselves that result in the majority of the desired outcomes for students. The cultural relevance of these imported curricula is questionable. In some schools, Egyptian students are learning to add and subtract using foreign rather than local currency because of curriculum requirements and the teachers are supplied with resources to use that go along with the curriculum. In fact, some scholars argue that an



international curriculum is not necessary for international education to take place and vice versa (James 319, Hayden and Thompson 337).

Tarc asserts that in developing countries, individuals seek an international education as a way to “gain personal, corporate or national advantage in a global economy” (94), as well as English language competency to enable them to participate in the global economy or access the socio-economic elite of their nation (Allen 130). Priorities such as seeking better employment, applying to universities abroad as a means of social mobility (Lowe 366) and maintaining economic advantage and eliteness, have parents disregarding the perceived negative effects of the cultural irrelevance and western teachers on their children.

### **Why Choose IBDP?**

The IBDP is a two-year program, designed for students ages 16 to 19 in which students master specified material from six subject areas, along with a theory of knowledge (TOK) course, writing an extended essay (EE), and participating in the creativity, action and service component (CAS). The TOK course develops a “coherent approach to learning that unifies the academic disciplines” (IBO, Branding, paragraph 4). It helps students develop critical thinking skills and question the meaning of knowledge as well as learn to think in different ways while looking at assumptions in their academic disciplines. The EE is a 4000-word essay on a topic of the students’ choice (related to one of the subjects they are studying), based on independent research. CAS is a part of the IBDP that focuses on students’ personal and interpersonal development by engaging the students in the arts and creative thinking, serving others in their communities, and by involving them in physical activity to help them develop a healthy lifestyle (IBO, Branding).

It is important for school leaders to choose the program they will offer at their school based on evidence of outcomes. Research based on a case study at an international school in Egypt has identified the intended and unintended outcomes of offering the IBDP at their school. The data for this case study was gathered using semi-structured interviews with eight students, ten alumni and four administrators as well as a focus group composed of six teachers currently teaching IBDP at the school. In addition, an analysis of documents

including the literature, IBO public relations documents, websites and reports both internal and external to the IBO was conducted as well as a tracer study. Purposeful groups were identified for the sampling but then from within the group the interviewees and focus group participants were selected randomly. Triangulation of these multiple sources of data as well as other strategies such as checking back with the participants, helped to increase the credibility of this study.

The below diagram (figure 1) summarizes the intended outcomes of the IBDP. The intended outcomes are those outcomes that the IBO claims to achieve through offering the IBDP at a school. The larger and brighter the font the more frequently that particular outcome was mentioned in the interviews and focus group.



Figure 1: Intended outcomes of the IBDP

The strongest intended outcomes of offering the IBDP at this school, according to the findings of this study, was that it prepared students well for university and helps with university admissions, as well as helps students develop good quality writing skills.

The below diagram (figure 2) summarizes the unintended outcomes of the IBDP. The unintended outcomes are those outcomes that are not claimed by the IBO to be outcomes of offering the IBDP program.



Figure 2: Unintended outcomes of the IBDP

Time management and receiving college credit were two of the strongest unintended outcomes of offering the IBDP, according to the findings of this study. A significant unintended outcome of the IBDP that emerged in this study, was the elitism associated with having participated in the IBDP.

### **Discussion**

One way to address this issue of superiority, according to Muller, is by interaction with the local community (44). This is a significant finding that educators, educational leaders and policy makers should keep in mind when making a decision to offer the IBDP, as offering it might contribute to the creation or maintenance of an elite class which results in reproduction of inequality. Participating in the IBDP might contribute to the reproduction of social inequality (Resnik 265) or to the creation of a transnational elite that is distant from the concerns of reality (Tate 257). The elitist character of the IBDP would actually contradict its ideals of encouraging peace, understanding between cultures and international mindedness. Tate adds that it also supports the growing dominance of English, and addresses global concerns when local ones might be more pressing (257). In a developing country like Egypt, these concerns need to be taken into account when offering the IBDP, chiefly as the IBDP is mostly offered in private schools which are out of reach for the majority, creating an elite program as stated earlier (Bunnell 169). Specifically in the Middle East, the IBDP is only

offered at one state school in Qatar currently, and in Egypt the IBDP is only offered at private schools (IBO, Mission), which are expensive for most.

As previously discussed, student participation in international schooling and in the IBDP specifically leads to more opportunities for upward and global mobility (Allen 130). This describes the situation in Egypt accurately; families who can afford it aspire to send their children to international schools as a vehicle for social and economic mobility. In addition, the branding the school gains upon offering the IBDP attracts students to the school and constitutes an important motivation to do so. In contrast to the ideals of globalization, this branding has made the IBDP a commodity that the wealthier in Egypt aspire to obtain.

However, such an international education at international schools comes at the risk of culturally alienating students from Egypt. Al Farra supports this claim, stating that while some perceive international education a vehicle to internationalism, to be a necessity in this day and age, many in the Arab world, including the well-educated, are concerned that this “invasion by Western culture” threatens their identity and cultures (52). Alviar-Martin asserts that international schools in general may “emphasize students’ roles as global citizens at the expense of compromising national allegiances and responsibilities in their local communities” (1250).

The idealistic goals of developing intercultural awareness and international mindedness are also contradictory to the reality of most IBDP schools, where western-educated international teachers are the preferred hires and cultural, economic and social capital help gain entrance. Many international schools in Egypt are “international” as a form of marketing for their school. The true international schools are few and far between but may also be hidden from view as they may not offer an imported curriculum or hire foreign teachers – although I have not found one yet. The teachers and role models the students have at school can play a big role in helping them achieve the outcomes stated in the schools’ mission statements. Deeper thought, by school leaders, should go into adopting cookie-cutter western curricula and hiring only western teachers without making any adjustments or

adaptations to make the students' learning experience more culturally relevant. Ideally, "think globally but act locally" should be on the forefront of everyone's mind.

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**Biography:**

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