

## Parents' risky choices around the IB Diploma

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### Abstract:

In recent years there has been a rapid growth in the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBD), a secondary curriculum administered by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), as an alternative to the local curriculum in Australian schools in some schools. This growth is indicative of an increasing demand from Australian families for new educational structures, practices and processes. With more curriculum options and pathways such as the IBD available in the secondary education system, parents are faced with a more complex high stakes decision when it comes to choosing the optimal education path for their offspring, one which requires a careful assessment of potential outcomes and risks. This paper reports on the responses of 184 parents to an online survey conducted in 26 Australian schools that offer the IBD as a curricular alternative. It examines which parents either chose, or chose not to, enrol their children in the program, why, and what risks they perceived to be associated with that choice. The paper will compare the choice behaviour of the two groups of parents from a sociological perspective, framing the enquiry with reference to globalisation and neo-liberal education policy and its effect on parental choice of schooling. This paper will make evident how parental choice of educational alternatives has become a more complicated process for Australian families.

### Introduction

In recent years there has been a rapid growth both globally and within Australia of enrolments in the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBD), a secondary curriculum administered by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), a non-profit organisation based in Geneva with regional offices across the globe. The Diploma's curriculum and external exams for Years 11 and 12 are now offered as an alternative to the local state curriculum in some 50 Australian schools across all states with more seeking accreditation. Parental choice of educational alternatives has thus become a more complicated process no longer limited to the choice of school and subjects within a given curriculum. When making choices for their offspring, parents have always had to weigh up pragmatic considerations, such as the acquisition of knowledge and skills for future employment, against more 'philosophical' considerations, such as what constitutes a good education and helping their children become better citizens. With more dimensions added to their educational choices, this paper will argue there are also more risks to be considered and managed.

This paper reports on the responses of 184 parents to an online survey conducted in 2008-2009 within the communities of 26 Australian schools that offer the IBD as a curricular alternative. It examines why parents either chose to, or chose not to, enrol their children in the IBD, then explores some of the risks they perceived to be associated with that choice. To situate the study, the paper firstly examines the broader context within which such educational choices are made, in particular the impact over the last few decades of globalisation and neoliberalism, which have raised the stakes around credentials and brands and expanded opportunities to pursue higher education or a career overseas. This brings more global perspectives and global products into play in the local educational market, with both benefits and risks to be accounted for in families' educational strategy. The IBD itself presents as a package incorporating a number of signature elements. The analysis then

'unpacks the package' and investigates which of these elements are considered more or less desirable and which appear more or less risky to Australian parents. The conclusion reflects on curricular markets and how, with more curriculum options and pathways such as the IBD available in the secondary education system, parents are faced with more complex and inherently more risky, high stakes decisions when it comes to choosing the optimal education path amongst alternatives for their children.

### **Globalisation and neoliberalism: a new context for educational choices**

Globalisation will be understood here in the broader social sense emphasising the interaction and interdependence of a wide range of cultural, demographic, technological, and ideological flows as well as economic relations (Appadurai, 1996). The growth of a world economy has seen an expanded demand for new skills such as the ability to speak more than one language and intercultural awareness. Workers with these skills can increasingly capitalise on opportunities and incentives for employment overseas. This larger perspective for imagining futures and national interests is having a profound effect on curricular design and education systems. Burbules and Torres (2000) argued that the interplay between the economic and political contexts of globalisation has brought about significant educational reform, with educational concepts and policies being rethought and redefined in light of these 'real or perceived' (p.2) global circumstances. Equipping students with the knowledge and skills to fit into an increasingly competitive international labour market has become a new imperative for national governments and education systems (Burbules & Torres, 2004). The IBO started work towards similar goals (Resnick, 2008) well before national education systems, but under a different logic of the internationalist ideals within Geneva's UN community in the 1960s: to accommodate a growing population of international mobile students by 'providing an internationally acceptable university admissions qualification' to those young people 'whose parents were part of the world of diplomacy, international and multi-national organizations' (Jenkins, 2001, p. 94).

One of the effects of globalisation has been the ideological trend in many Western democracies towards neoliberal policy frameworks that emphasize lower taxes and shrinking public sector provision while promoting market approaches (Harvey, 2007; Martin, 1998; Pusey, 2003). In countries where it has gained acceptance, neo-liberalism has influenced not only aspects of economic policy, but also government policy on education and people's views about education and educational choices, especially within certain social groups. In Australia, for example, there has been political support in some echelons for a reduction in government subsidies to public education and a corresponding increase in government funding to private schools. Thus, as Harvey (2007) points out, governments are rolling back their commitment to the welfare state by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within the institutional framework of a notionally free market.

The idea of a 'free market' in education has also contributed to a relaxation of regulations governing curriculum choice in the public school sector, freeing government schools in some states to opt for alternative curricula, such as the IBD, Steiner, or Montessori programs. Campbell, Proctor & Sherington (2009, p.5) however considers this an education 'quasi-market', given the degree of government support to produce and sustain choice, and the continued 'safety-net' of residualised public provision. Pusey (1991, 2003) suggests that the negative impact on government school provision or perception thereof has led a significant proportion of middle class people to feel let down by the erosion of public services, or at least to have reduced expectations of what public services might offer in the face of growing local and global competition. It is this feeling of insecurity and uncertainty among the parents, especially middle class parents, about their children's future education that has fostered more strategy, competition, and exercise of choice in educational matters. Campbell et al. (2009, pp. 4-5) argues that these new conditions have redefined 'the good parent-citizen' as an important player in the educational landscape, one 'whose knowing

participation in the market as an informed chooser of schools is supported by government ... The market active parent-citizen is also entrepreneurial, willing to take more control, to be less dependent.' Pusey (2003, pp.1-2) observes that the downside to this newfound freedom is that 'as uncertain individuals, we are forced, now as the risk managers of our own lives, to make new economic and social choices in a changed structural environment.' Hence, parents today are making choices about products, the consequences of which they may well have had no prior experience.

Beck's (1992) thesis re risk society links the planetary scale of environmental hazards and terrorism threat to the increasingly individualised conditions in the private world of social actors, who are asked to 'reflexively construct their own biographies' (p.3), rather than rely on well worn paths of established scripts. In this paper we argue that these parents in this vein will undertake some form of risk assessment when making such speculative choices for/with their children, projecting aspirations into unknowable, uncertain futures. Such assessments will serve as 'a "simplifying heuristic" for guiding action in face of the irreducible indeterminism of complex social processes' (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 21, quoting Heyman & Henriksen). Wilkinson (2010, p.15) points out that risk can be read as a fundamentally positive or negative attribute. Positive risks are where the potential gains or the 'prospect of acquisitive opportunity' outweigh potential losses. For example, parents may be swayed by the opportunity for their children to have access to a better tertiary education or enhanced qualifications with which to enter the competitive labour market with more international opportunities. Negative risks, on the other hand, are about the threats or detrimental effects that may confront individuals or their families. For example, enrolling in the IBD with its reputation for being academically demanding runs the risk of failure. Such attempts to make a rational risk assessment will inevitably rest on subjective judgements or hypothetical projections and rely on partial, incomplete information, and perhaps the overly optimistic claims made available in marketing brochures. Based on the survey results, this paper examines the types and level of risks, both positive and negative, that parents perceived to be associated with the choice of senior schooling curriculum for their children.

### Unpacking the IBD package

The IBD comes as a package incorporating a variety of compulsory elements that give it a brand of being a 'balanced', 'well-rounded', 'holistic' education (Doherty, 2009). Since its inception in the late 1960's, the design of the IBD (see <http://ibo.org/diploma/curriculum/>) has been conceptualised as a hexagon denoting six subject groups around central core experiences. A student must choose an offering in each of the six study areas, three of which are studied at a higher level (similar to the British "A" level concept):

- Language A1 (including World Literature studied in translation);
- Second language;
- Individuals and societies (for example Psychology, History, Geography, Environmental Studies);
- Mathematics (a variety of levels) and Computer Science;
- Experimental Sciences (for example Chemistry, Biology, Physics);
- The Arts (for example Music, Visual Arts, Theatre Arts).

The core experiences include:

- an enquiry based subject, 'the Theory of Knowledge' (TOK) which compares and contrasts 'ways of knowing' across the disciplines;
- an extended essay on a self-selected topic within a disciplinary field; and
- a self-driven program of 'Community, Action and Service' (CAS) activities.

The 'risk' perspective developed above serves to unpack these various signature parts of the IBD brand which necessarily come together to ask which elements of the package are perceived as negatively or positively risky when students enrol in the whole experience, particularly when considered in relation to the alternative local curriculum. In Australia, the required spread across languages, mathematics, science and humanities 'which is designed to ensure general education' (Peterson, 1972, p.15) distinguishes the IBD from the more typical specialisation encouraged in senior school years. Students in the alternative, local curriculum can choose to drop a subject in which they are not strong or not interested (Maths often being the culprit here) to 'optimise' their tertiary entrance score (Doherty, 2010). Being locked into the required spread may then appear to carry a negative risk for some students.

Similarly, we would also suggest that the requirement that IBD candidates study a second language may appear 'risky' in the Australian context. Australians on the whole are not that interested in learning second languages, suffering 'the monolingual mindset ... the traditional disinterest in other-language learning which has always characterised - and continues to characterise - the major Anglophone countries' (Carr & Pauwels, 2006, p.43). Second language study, once considered a prerequisite for tertiary study, constituted a core part of the academic curriculum in the past, but has since lost that status and become a more marked, elite choice (Teese, 2000), to the extent that completion of a second language now attracts 'bonus points' for tertiary entrance at some universities.

The requirement of six subjects plus the additional extended essay, TOK and CAS tasks also presents as a more demanding, more intense workload when compared to Australian state curricula, which typically require six subjects, five of which ultimately count towards the tertiary entrance score. Whether or not the perception is valid, the IB's reputation for a greater workload may appear risky in a negative sense. The assessment regime for the IBD involves some internally assessed tasks that are then externally moderated, with heavily weighted, culminating external examinations assessing student achievement over the two curriculum years. While some states use a similar format, the culminating external exam can present as a very different assessment regime in other states, risky in its intensity and high stakes.

In this section, we have suggested that different aspects of the IBD 'package' may appear comparatively riskier in some contexts and to some candidates, and that by 'risking' the choice of the IBD for its potential benefits, the parents and students may have taken on a degree or aspect of negative risk associated with compulsory elements of its design. The analysis that follows investigates how parents assessed both the positive and negative risks of the IBD choice in their local curricular market.

## **Methodology**

The larger study involved online surveys of parents, teachers and students in 26 schools across Australia that offered both the local curriculum and the IBD in 2008 and 2009, and case studies of 3 such schools conducted over two week-long visits across 2009. This paper analyses survey responses from parents in the 26 school communities. Of the 184 responses, 144 were from parents who chose the IBD and 40 from parents who chose the local curriculum. The survey design was informed by a pilot study involving focus group interviews with parents, teachers and students at such a school offering both the IBD and a local senior curriculum. The survey questions were developed from concerns and topics raised in the pilot study and literature review. The online survey instrument was then trialled with a sample of parents of high school children. Invitations to parents to participate in the online survey were distributed after first obtaining ethical consent from the school principals and the respective state government departments as necessary.

Survey design offers the capacity to capture and depict an overview of group characteristics, attitudinal patterns, and their interplay with demographic categories. However, it also presumes common ground, which in this case can gloss over both the different local curricula and assessment regimes in each state, and the particular modus operandi adopted by schools in their implementation of curricular choice. To this end, opportunities for open-ended qualitative comment were purposefully included so respondents could elaborate beyond pre-coded responses where they saw fit. The particularities of the qualitative insights help flesh out and illuminate the larger scale depiction of the quantitative analysis.

The online survey collected data from both the IB and non-IB parent groups relating to family demographics, attitudes to broad social issues, and to facets of school choice in Australia including the choice of the IBD as an alternative curriculum. Attitudinal questions were designed as statements, inviting the respondent to indicate on a 1-7 Likert scale to what degree they agree or disagree, with an open-ended section where respondents could add further comments. The overriding aim was to gain a better understanding of the many factors that impact on parental choices in curricular markets and to explore their rationales and risk assessment behind the choice exercised in each case.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. Firstly, aggregated responses to relevant survey questions are described statistically to explore patterns emerging between the responses of IB-choosing and non-IB choosing parents groups, and how the elements of the IB package are unpacked in terms of their relative weightings for desirability and risk as reported by the IB choosing respondents. Secondly, a thematic analysis of the qualitative responses to relevant open-ended questions offers more insight and examples of how parents 'unpacked the IB package', with particular attention to comments about perceived risks or deterrents taken into account when arriving at a decision, or emerging at a later stage with subsequent experience. While a range of attributes are associated with the IBD, one of the aims of the survey was to measure the emphasis and importance placed on each by the parents of prospective students. To what degree do parents primarily want their children to become open-minded world citizens who understand and respect cultures other than their own, looking to the IB curriculum to afford this opportunity? And to what degree do they have an eye on more prosaic, pragmatic benefits such as global employment opportunities, and relative advantage in higher education opportunities?

### Analysis A - statistical patterns

The two groups of parents were sampled within the same school communities, that is, schools offering both the local curriculum and the IBD, hence underlying demographic differences such as social class or parent education, are considered to be controlled to some extent here by school choice.

Parents were asked to indicate how important a range of factors were 'when you chose this school for your child' on a scale of 1 (not a consideration) to 7 (a major consideration). Table 1 summarises responses to two of these factors, 'its location' and 'because it offers the IB Diploma' by the IB Choosing and non-IB choosing parent groups. Location was selected as a default consideration, something that all parents would factor into their choice to some degree. The IBD offering is considered to test for a more strategic, 'market active parent-citizen' (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 5) who is alert to choice opportunities.

**Table 1: Considerations in parental choice of school**

How important were the following factors when you chose this school for your child?	Mean responses (SD)			T test (df) *p < .05	Effect sizes Cohen's d
	Total respondents	IB Choosing	Non-IB Choosing		



(1 = not a consideration; 7 = a major consideration)	(N = 179)	(N = 144)	(N = 35)		Pearson's <i>r</i>
its location	4.43 (1.993)	4.58 (1.970)	3.77 (2.045)	2.171* (177)	<i>d</i> = 0.403 <i>r</i> = 0.197
Because it offers the IB Diploma	4.58 (2.245)	5.17 (2.005)	2.31 (1.641)	7.821* (177)	<i>d</i> = 1.561 <i>r</i> = 0.615

(Effect sizes: small  $r = .1/d = .2$ ; medium  $r = .3/d = .5$ ; large  $r = .5/d = .8$ )

There is a significant difference between the means of responses from IB-choosing and non-IB-choosing parents on both items, the IB-choosing parents showing a higher degree of consideration, with a small to medium effect size for location, and a large effect size for 'because it offers the IB Diploma'. It may appear self-evident that responses for this latter item are higher for those who subsequently chose that curriculum. The point here is the IB Diploma offering seems to serve to attract these more strategic parents who are willing to entertain that choice as a possible scenario for their child.

Another question asked parents to indicate how much a range of aspects figured in their choice of curriculum within the school, from 1 (not a consideration) to 7 (a major consideration). Table 2 summarises the responses to this question.

**Table 2: Considerations in parental choice of curriculum**

When considering your child's enrolment either in the IB Diploma or another curriculum offered at the school, how did each aspect figure in your thinking? (1 = not a consideration; 7 = a major consideration)	Mean responses (SD)			T test (df) * $p < .05$	Effect sizes Cohen's <i>d</i> Pearson's <i>r</i>
	Total respondents (N = 179)	IB Choosing (N = 144)	Non-IB Choosing (N = 35)		
Future university entrance	5.98 (1.396)	6.10 (1.264)	5.51 (1.788)	1.821 (42.615)	
Class size	5.13 (1.635)	5.28 (1.567)	4.49 (1.772)	2.635* (177)	<i>d</i> = 0.472 <i>r</i> = 0.229
Matching the student's characteristics	5.83 (1.319)	5.92 (1.298)	5.46 (1.358)	1.862 (177)	
To support the student's choice	5.83 (1.297)	5.89 (1.269)	5.57 (1.399)	1.301 (177)	
The student peer group	4.44 (1.751)	4.48 (1.738)	4.26 (1.821)	0.672 (177)	
The intellectual quality demanded	5.79 (1.266)	5.87 (1.194)	5.46 (1.502)	1.762 (177)	
The way student achievement is assessed	4.80 (1.733)	4.86 (1.688)	4.54 (1.915)	0.974 (177)	
Competitive edge for tertiary scholarships	4.18 (2.0)	4.30 (1.929)	3.69 (2.233)	1.633 (177)	
Future international mobility	5.27 (1.856)	5.63 (1.608)	3.80 (2.098)	4.815* (44.192)	<i>d</i> = 0.979 <i>r</i> = 0.4396
The explicit values of the curriculum	5.43 (1.55)	5.57 (1.412)	4.86 (1.942)	2.042* (43.132)	<i>d</i> = 0.418 <i>r</i> = 0.2046
The reputation of the curriculum chosen	5.62 (1.395)	5.78 (1.247)	4.94 (1.748)	2.688* (42.774)	<i>d</i> = 0.5532 <i>r</i> = 0.2666
A traditional approach to	4.06	4.09	3.94	0.463	

curriculum	(1.678)	(1.718)	(1.571)	(177)	
An innovative approach to curriculum	4.79 (1.627)	4.85 (1.582)	4.54 (1.804)	1.015 (177)	
The specialisation possible	4.40 (1.684)	4.40 (1.674)	4.40 (1.752)	0.009 (177)	
Dissatisfaction with alternatives	3.76 (2.043)	3.78 (2.028)	3.66 (2.127)	0.331 (177)	

(Effect sizes: small  $r=.1/d=.2$ ; medium  $r=.3/d=.5$ ; large  $r=.5/d=.8$ )

IB Choosers as a group showed a higher mean on all items, except 'the specialisation possible', which had the same mean. This pattern of heightened deliberation suggests this group are on average more careful, judicious consumers considering the range of variables in their decision. A significant difference between mean responses by IB choosers and non-IB choosers was found to four items: 'class size' (a small to medium effect); 'future international mobility' (a large effect); 'the explicit values of the curriculum' (a small to medium effect); and 'the reputation of the curriculum chosen' (a medium effect). These aggregate patterns suggest that IB choosers are purposefully investing in the positive 'risks' of the IBD's international recognition, reputation, and typically smaller class sizes, as well as endorsing its professed values.

Parents whose children had enrolled in the IB Diploma, were then asked another set of questions, to unpack the IBD package as discussed above. Table 3 summarises how IB choosing parents assessed various aspects of the IBD curriculum, from 1 (a major deterrent) to 7 (a major attraction). The last three columns show the frequency counts of responses recoded into negative, neutral and positive assessments, which are then visually represented in Graph 1.

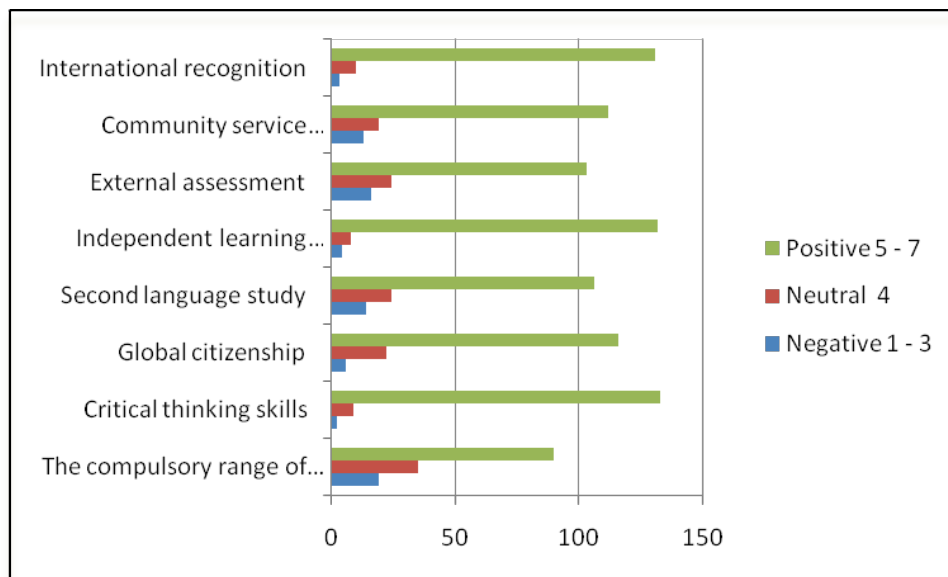
**Table 3: Parents' assessments of aspects of the IBD package**

Community service requirements (g)	Mean (\$351)	Negative responses (1-3)	Neutral responses (4)	Positive responses (5-7)
or deter you from choosing the IB Diploma? (1 = a major deterrent; 7 = a major attraction)	N = 142			
The compulsory range of subjects (a)	4.99 (1.422)	19	35	90
Critical thinking skills (b)	6.01 (1.045)	2	9	133
Global citizenship (c)	5.70 (1.259)	6	22	116
Second language study (d)	5.42 (1.410)	14	24	106
Independent learning expectations (e)	5.94 (1.019)	4	8	132
External assessment (f)	5.22 (1.415)	16	24	103
Community service requirements (g)	5.33	13	19	112

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Graph 1: Parents' assessments of aspects of the

## IBD package



These responses only reflect the risk/benefit assessment by those who ultimately chose the IBD, hence the weighting towards positive responses would be expected. Notwithstanding this pattern, each aspect attracted some negative and neutral responses. Graph 1 makes more evident that within this group of parents, some aspects of the IBD package drew more positive overall assessments: international recognition, independent learning and critical thinking skills, suggesting these are the features that typically draw parents to this choice. Similarly, some aspects drew more negative 'risk' responses than others, in particular: the compulsory range of subjects, external assessment, and second language study, as predicted in the earlier discussion. In other national settings, these features may be less remarkable, and not as 'risky' if they are taken for granted in the local curriculum (for example the French Baccalaureate's breadth; or the Taiwanese examination culture). These statistics are merely explorative but indicate that the IB choice will incorporate some degree of risk in the way its multiple components are packaged together.

The perception and assessment of risk in the IBD choice can also be traced in parents' responses to the survey question, 'When choosing the IB diploma over another curriculum with your child, what kind of potential problems did you consider in your decision-making process?' The items had been developed from anxieties and problems reported by parents in the pilot study focus groups. Respondents were asked to indicate whether each item was considered no risk or a major risk on a scale of 1-7. Table 4 reports mean responses and frequency counts of responses recoded as 'low risk' (1-3), 'mid-range' (4) and 'high risk' (5-7). Graph 2 represents these proportions for each item visually.

**Table 4: Parents' assessments of potential problems in IBD choice**

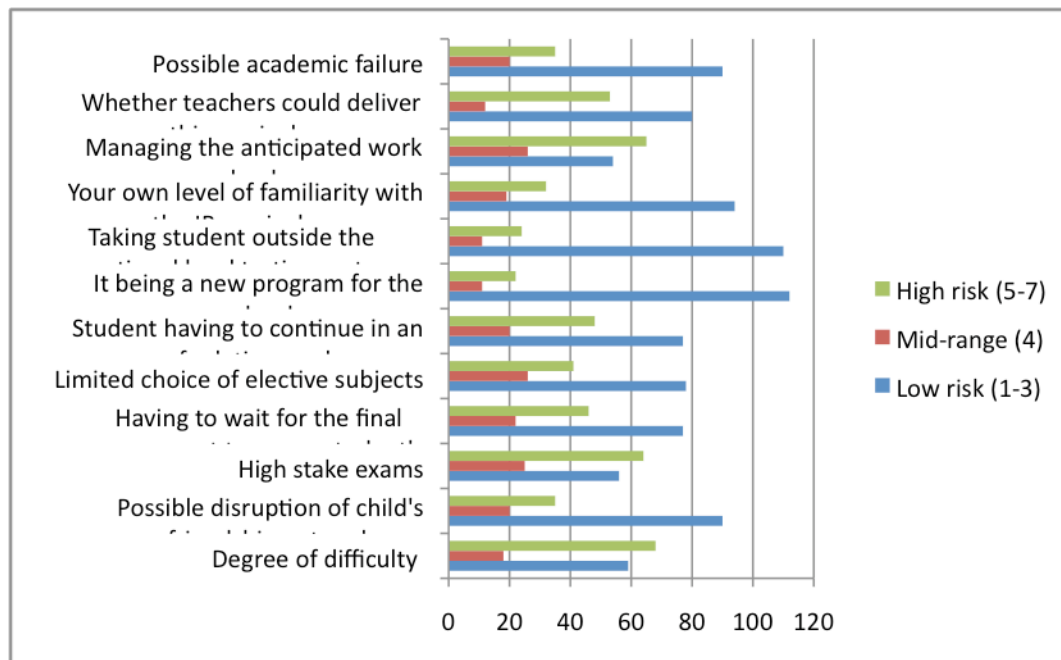
'When choosing the IB diploma over another curriculum with your child, what kind of potential problems did you consider in our decision-making process?' (1= not considered a risk; 7 considered a major risk)	Mean( SD) N = 144	Low risk (1-3)	Mid-range (4)	High risk (5-7)
Degree of difficulty	3.92 (1.974)	59	18	68



Possible disruption of child's friendship network	2.93 (1.884 )	90	20	35
High stake exams	4.06 (1.875 )	56	25	64
Having to wait for the final assessment to gauge student's progress	3.45 (1.972 )	77	22	46
Limited choice of elective subjects	3.37 (1.775 )	78	26	41
Student having to continue in an area of relative weakness	3.54 (1.867 )	77	20	48
It being a new program for the school	2.35 (1.877 )	112	11	22
Taking student outside the conventional local tertiary entrance system	2.35 (1.774 )	110	11	24
Your own level of familiarity with the IB curriculum	2.90 (1.855 )	94	19	32
Managing the anticipated work load	4.21 (1.740 )	54	26	65
Whether teachers could deliver this curriculum	3.48 (1.986 )	80	12	53
Possible academic failure	3.12 (1.870 )	90	20	35

All items attracted some 'high risk' responses, while considered 'low risk' by other respondents. The items with the highest means, indicating a typically mid-range perception of risk, include: 'High stake exams'; 'managing the anticipated work load', and 'degree of difficulty'. From the graph the other 'risky' factor seems to be whether teachers could deliver this curriculum.

#### **Graph 2: Parents' assessments of potential problems in IBD choice**



These statistics are exploratory and may not be relevant to other national settings, given the relational nature of curricular alternatives. There will also be a filter in the nature of the child in any parent's risk assessment, so 'anticipated work load' may or may not be a risk given the nature of the student involved. However, for this study, the spread of ratings across items indicates the practice of conscious risk assessment in curricular choices, weighing negative and positive risks. The discussion now turns to explore the additional qualitative comments respondents offered on these survey questions.

### Analysis B – Qualitative themes around risk

The survey questions reported above pertained to school choice, curricular choice, perceived attractors/deterrents, and potential problems. Each question was followed by an open-ended optional question asking for additional comments. In addition, IBD-choosing parents were asked a more global optional question, '*How would you describe the IB Diploma to another parent*' which allowed for an extended response. All qualitative comments thus captured were compiled and any comments about assessing anticipated problems or negative risks and balancing these against perceived benefits or positive risks were identified and coded according to their thematic content. The discussion below focuses on comments which display this balancing of pros and cons in the IBD choice, that is, curricular risk assessment. The parents' analyses are necessarily multi-dimensional, juggling not just the inherent nature of the curriculum, but also how it is known to operate in their local school, with regard to what kind of student their child is.

Some parents shared their initial fears and misgivings about aspects of the IBD package, despite making that choice:

- *We were particularly attracted to the international recognition, to the TOK component, emphasis on second language and the opportunity to study Psychology. We were concerned about the minimal percentage of the final mark that comes from ongoing assessment but are very pleased with the education our children received.*
- *I was worried about the academic level required to pass the IB, was my child clever enough? The fact that it was an acceptable qualification at any university in the world was the major decider.*

- *We had concerns about our child's reasons for choosing the IB which included small class size, potentially superior teachers, reduced likelihood of classroom disruptions and dislike for continuous assessment. While these are valid reasons, we were concerned that the increased workload and the assessment by final examination might outweigh the benefits that she perceived.*
- *If illness happens during final exams then there are not many backup procedures in place for assessment to counteract poor performance which poses potential problems.*

These comments highlight concerns about assessment in particular. For many respondents, the IBD's attributes, both positive and negative, had to be assessed and interpreted in relation to the individual child's attributes and capacities:

- *Older sibling was very happy with the IB education and highly recommended it but class size most important for this child.*
- *The compulsory range of subjects limited my son's choice of subjects but I believed that the benefits for him outweighed the disadvantages*
- *High stakes exams for child 2 who does better on assessment, however this child always works hard and consistently and appreciates a smaller class size.*
- *I wondered if my son had sufficient organizational skills to achieve high grades in IB but he has a high academic ability which helped substantially.*

For some, the positive and negative attributes of the IBD choice were represented not so much as qualities of the curriculum, but as a choice between the comparative learning environments and conditions constructed by tandem offerings within a school:

- *I really had very little say in the matter - my son decided he was going to do it. He also said that all the bright people were doing IB, and he didn't want to be stuck in a class of less able boys.*
- *deterrents - less "free" periods during school day; less flexibility in subject choices because of school's limitation in providing certain classes if limited numbers of students selected the particular class; timetabling issues within the school.*
- *The attractions were smaller class sizes. Highly qualified teachers. After school tuition. However the facilities could be better.*

The capacity of schools to staff and sustain the IBD program was explicitly considered or reported as a significant risk factor:

- *When the school is as good as [School A]- IB is great. But if in incapable, inexperienced hands, it can be a disaster.*
- *A couple of Teachers were weak in key subjects of maths (which my daughter struggled with) and chemistry (not an elected subject but was given no option). ... As a consequent in yr 12 I paid for private maths tuition, without which my daughter would have failed maths, but now has a chance of passing.*

Some parents were wary of being in the first cohort to undertake the IBD at a particular school, that being risky in itself:

- *Being the first year of IB at this particular school the range of subjects is limited which deterred myself and partner. Just being the first group and not having many students. Not knowing anyone who has or is doing the IB so we could talk with them*

Parents' accounts were also mindful of risks and benefits in their curricular choice for tertiary entrance purposes, and competition for desirable placements, that is whether their risky venture will pay off in terms of life opportunities:

- *Once a student has finished IB they are a more 'rounded person' than [state curriculum] students, independent learners who will succeed better at Uni, but major disadvantage of choosing IB is, it is much harder to get good grades and the conversion into [tertiary entrance score] is less valued so it's for IB students much more difficult to get high [tertiary entrance score] score, thus some studies might not be possible to reach for example, medicine, while if the same person does [state curriculum] he has more chance on a higher [tertiary entrance score].*
- *Our daughter wants to attend uni in the US. Since the IB demands more academically than other programs, many unis give kids advanced standing. She went back a semester when we moved to Oz, so advanced standing would both help her catch up with her age mates, and save us several thousand dollars in uni fees.*

Of particular interest in the qualitative data is the frequent use of the word 'challenge' and its derivatives to capture the combination and frisson of both positive and negative risks together. Parents' comments depicted the double-edged sense of 'challenge' as essentially an attractive feature in curricular choice, evidenced by the following comments in the online survey:

- *quite challenging, and worth it.*
- *We wanted a broad based education that was challenging and which encouraged initiative in learning, critical analysis and questioning and independent thought.*
- *[The IBD] provides the student with possibly a broader set of challenges - better development of independent thought processes.*
- *[The] challenge of it attracted him and has held him.*

In the balance, many parents summarised their risk assessment in their advice to other parents, in terms of what type of student the IBD suits, for example:

- *I would not hesitate in recommending the IB to any parent whose child is in the least bit academically inclined.... if your child does not perform in an exam environment, forget it.*
- *it is suitable for self motivated and keen students who are willing to work at a fairly consistent pace over the two years.*
- *An excellent and challenging program for the more academic student.*

This qualification of who the IBD might suit serves as a mechanism to protect less able students from the negative risks of its 'challenge'.

In summary, the thematic analysis suggests that parents faced with choice in a neoliberal curricular market will carefully consider and weigh pros and cons, not just on the premises of what the curriculum demands, but also how the particular school operates, resources and staffs the curriculum, the comparison of such conditions to the other curriculum's conditions within the same school, and on the individualised premise of who their child is. These 'good parent-citizens' (Campbell et.al, 2009) appear astute and strategic consumers with their eye on the end game, being the high stakes conversion of senior secondary schooling to tertiary education opportunities and its rewards. The IBD comes as a suite of components packaged as non-optional requirements, some of which carry degrees of negative risk which parents will knowingly bear, but monitor carefully as the risk-managers of their children's lives (Pusey, 2003). The negative risks of the IBD will be managed by filtering which students are considered candidates for its perceived 'challenge'.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how parents perceive, consider and assess both positive and negative risks implicated in their choice between senior schooling curricula offered within the same school. The study was situated in the context of globalisation's reconfiguring of curricular goals, and neoliberalism's reconfiguring of parental roles. Both developments have rendered the IBD an attractive alternative proposition. At one level this paper offers an exploration of the parent rationales behind the growing uptake of the IBD in the context of Australian schools, and has shown how, in the Australian context, particular facets of its holistic package are considered to run a greater negative risk than others. This will not necessarily apply in other national settings where external exams, second language learning, and curricular breadth are neither contested nor marked choices. The differences displayed between the IB choosers and non-IB choosers also suggest that some parents are more inclined than others to take up the role of discriminating 'market active parent-citizen' (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 4).

More generally, this study illuminates the emergent condition of schooling markets which now can offer curricular choice as well as school choice. New globally branded products are entering local markets promising new benefits but also posing new risks and confounding complexity. Curricular reputations built on the strength of the marketing discourse, anecdotes, hearsay, subjective impressions and received wisdom that circulate within school communities can never be objectively tested, because no child can undertake two curricula as independent experiences holding all other variables constant. Thus these risk assessments have to be done as pre-emptive hypothetical exercises, "simplifying heuristics" for guiding action in face of the irreducible indeterminism of complex social processes' (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 21, quoting Heyman & Henriksen). Senior high schooling is a high stakes enterprise, with important ramifications on the life trajectories of students. New alternatives make these decisions more complex and vexed. The rate of contextual change means that parents are often deciding on options they have no prior experience with, in changing conditions, hypothetically projecting into unknown futures, making decisions based on their fallible predictions of positive and negative risks associated with each alternative. This is getting harder, not easier.

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