

Credentialed cosmopolitanism? Class and cultural closure in the International Baccalaureate in Australia

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Cosmopolitan education is seen as an important avenue for cultivating intercultural and international social relations, but different curricula are seen as unequally able to support cosmopolitan learning. In Australia, the International Baccalaureate Diploma is often portrayed as a flagship example of cosmopolitan curriculum, combining academic rigour with epistemic and cultural openness.

In this paper, I explore the tensions between perceived and effective cosmopolitanism in the case of the IB Diploma. To do so, I jointly examine the IB curriculum and social patterns of engagement in the IB Diploma. The study draws on a recent comparative analysis of high school students and curricula in Australian schools and offers a new analysis of IB student survey data to assess the different ways in which IB learning enables or falls short of meaningful cosmopolitan socialisation.

The results indicate that the IB's distinctive cosmopolitan status is explained neither by the cultural diversity of subjects in the curriculum, dominated by traditional forms of academic culture; nor by the significance of IB students' service learning activities, which most often revolve around mainstream musical and sports practices, nor by the international study trajectories of its graduates, who appear to mostly enrol in local higher education institutions. While IB students need to study two languages, this opportunity is equally available in state curricula. This leaves humanities and social science subjects as the main vehicle for the nurturing of cosmopolitan sensibilities. Yet, the overall density of the curriculum leads to the prevalence of routinised more than reflexive approaches to teaching.

These findings suggest that the cosmopolitan reputation of the IB is a general form of symbolic capital that, in some contexts, may not reflect students' learning experiences. Considering the intersection of class and cosmopolitanism is useful to make sense of this fact. In the Australian context, the IB is the purview of upper-middle and upper-class families mostly concentrated in elite private schools. It is in the context of its association with dominant social classes that the gap between perceived cosmopolitan pedigree and effective cultural closure becomes understandable. Research shows that elite engagement with cosmopolitan curricula is often driven by desires for cultural capital accumulation. As such, the articulation of the IB Diploma with traditional logics of academic distinction, which are integral to upper middle- and upper-class families' educational strategies, militates against both deeper consideration of cultural diversity in its curriculum and against its greater relevance for diverse social groups.