

Intercultural Understanding in the IB Curriculum

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Abstract

The following critique discusses the International Baccalaureate's (IB) "Language A: Language and Literature" course curriculum, specifically focusing on the complexity of developing intercultural understanding through student centered teaching practices that are both culturally balanced and conscientious. The discussion also focuses on the benefits of the "Language and Literature" course in terms of validating multiple cultural discourses; it also addresses the dangers of employing culturally utopian and culturally passive approaches into the teaching and planning of this course.

Keywords: Intercultural Understanding, Cultural Discourse, International Baccalaureate

Marie-Thérèse Maurette (1948), French educationalist and international school pioneer, was of the mindset that education could be the key to a more peaceful future and world. She published a handbook, in conjunction with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), titled *Educational Techniques for Peace. Do They Exist?* Maurette (1948) discusses the need for education to address cultural interrelations on a scholarly level, as a method for future generations to gain the perspective needed to decrease, what Said (1978) would later call "otherness".

An International Baccalaureate (IB) Education

Maurette's (1948) handbook serves as a precursor for the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, established in 1968 (Tate, 2012). Post World War II, IB held a "strong focus on respect for others' national identity, inter-nationalism and the means to ensure peace between nations"; although this remains true, the program now places emphasis on "intercultural understanding" in a world that becomes growingly multicultural (Tate, 2012, p. 207). The IB mission statement highlights the development of "inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect" (IBO, 2013, p. 175). The aim of the programme is to "develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world" (IBO, 2013, p. 175). The IB curriculum aims to establish greater intercultural understanding; however, in order to accomplish this, IB teachers must seek and practice balanced consciousness towards the complexity of interculturalism.

Educational Philosophy in which IB Curriculum is Based

The IB utilizes philosophies of "[k]ey influential educationalists" to build the curriculum's framework (IBO, 2015, p. 5). These influences include: John Dewey, A.S. Neill, Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, and later, Robert Leach, John Goormaghtigh, Alex Peterson, and Kurt Hahn (IBO,

2015). All initial and early influencers for the IB curriculum are Western males of European descent, besides Maurette (1948), who is female, but also of European descent; this becomes important when reflecting on how curriculum promoting interculturalism may be subjective within Western culture.

Educators must question whose cultural ideals are woven within the building blocks of curriculum, and reflect on how multiculturalism is relative to personal beliefs teachers hold, establishing a reality of “the lived experience of curriculum” versus the written framework (Chan, 2006, p. 310). Jackson (1990) discusses lived classroom experience in terms of the official curriculum, what is officially stated, and the hidden curriculum, normalized ways of being as assumed practices in the classroom. The official IB curriculum promotes culturally inclusive student centered teaching practices, but normalized cultural biases may conflict with unwritten social rules for engaging with cultural diversity. The IB “Language and Literature” teacher has a unique opportunity to confront socially accepted hidden curriculums and to invite students into this shared experience.

Dewey’s (1929) curriculum influence is relative to this sense of confrontational togetherness, primarily because of his belief that a student is “a social individual; and that society is an organic union of individuals” (p. 34). The “Language and Literature” course discusses identity nuances of individuals and community and individuals in society so students remain open to other ways of being and reflect on their own identity (IBO, 2013). Dewey (1929) believed that the teacher’s role is not to “impose certain ideas” on students, rather to mindfully select influential ideas and scaffold student understanding. The “Language and Literature” course asks teachers to empower students’ own critical and open-minded inquiry, and to scaffold reflective learning surrounding intercultural inquiry (IBO, 2013).

Beneficial Gains of the IB “Language A: Language and Literature” Curriculum

Establishing Cultural and Intercultural Understanding. The “Language and Literature” course develops cultural understanding through studying literary and non-literary texts in context, creating “focus for developing an understanding [how] language works to create meanings in a culture”; this promotes “an understanding of how language sustains or challenges ways of thinking and being” (IBO, 2013, p. 4). IB wants students to develop open-minded, critical thinking skills to explore “the constructed nature of meanings generated by language and the function of context in this [meaning-making] process” (IBO, 2013, p. 4). The understanding of how context matters, and meaning is never fixed or static is crucial to this course. IB students are asked to contemplate how meaning must be understood within context, and how it is skewed when taken out of its context. This understanding is intended to transcend into topics discussed in students’ other courses, and also into their real-life experiences in society. The curriculum, therefore, attempts to limit socio-political marginalization of diverse groups because it “legitimize[s] multiple models of excellence” (Noddings, as cited by Greene, 1971, p. 146).

Curriculum Scaffolding of Multiple Cultural Identities and Discourses. IBO states that the course is not supposed to cover one culture or to be “of the cultures covered by any one language”, however, it is to study “literature in translation from other cultures” because this will gain “global perspective”, which conceptualizes how “cultures influence and shape the experiences of life common to all humanity” (IBO, 2013, p. 5). Text selection should vary from a range of cultures, places, and time periods so students are exposed to a diversified canon.

The IB embraces the disruption of culturally hegemonic and homogenous Eurocentric canon. The inclusion of culturally diverse authors allows marginalized identities to validly enter Academia, a world in which intellectuals often interact with and establish sociological power dynamics. To ensure diversification occurs, the IB places course text selection requirements of place (cultural and geographical) and time (era and/or social movements) through the implementation of a Prescribed List of Authors (PLA) and a Prescribed Literature in Translation List (PLT). These lists identify cultural identities of authors to guide teachers' author selection and navigate possible inherent cultural and gender biases teachers may, perhaps unintentionally, possess. Although not officially a course requirement, it is my professional opinion that teachers *should* include authors of diverse genders, because a same-gendered author selection may lack perspective on identity and context. For the same reason, when teachers consider the course requirement for place, I believe they should consider listed authors from the Global South; North American and European authors, even when expatriates, may still render a rather homogenized authorial viewpoint for the course.

The value of humanity, including all diverse identities, is a sociological resource, and one which IB says should be reflected in school curriculum; it should reflect society, and therefore, be student-centered while legitimizing multiple and different ways of being. At the heart of this curriculum is the child, as a current and future stakeholder in society, and there is "a need to connect disciplinary knowledge to [the] student's experience" (Doyle, 2012, para. 12). The IB suggests students should "acquire in-depth knowledge and develop understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines" (IBO, 2013, p. 175).

Criticism of the "Language and Literature" Curriculum

The IB's goal is, however, a tall order: to promote a more peaceful world in which individuals use critical thought and empathy to understand our world, while also validating the legitimacy of differing views is not an easy task. If this hope is to actualize within the complexity of interculturalism, it will require continual effort to ground the curriculum in open-minded and reflective practices on behalf of both teachers and students. Without this reflective grounding, the curriculum may develop into a *helium dream* for individuals to simply 'get along' in the cultural playground of our world. Such a dream, left unchecked by reflection, creates either a Utopian or Passive mentality, two approaches that cheapen and dilute the pursuit of peace this curriculum claims to scaffold (Tate, 2012).

The Dangers of Idealism and Cultural Utopia. While aiming for intercultural mindedness and hope for peace, the boundary between what is possible and what is Utopian is significant for IB educators. It is important to differentiate between *world peace* and a *more peaceful world*. The dream for world peace risks being idealistically superficial, whereas working towards a more peaceful world acknowledges continual cultivation. Tate (2012) indicates that "[i]nternational education emerged out of idealism" hoping to "contribute to the making of a better world" – something that the IB mission statement reflects (p. 211). Although educators want students to be socially active participants with notable ideals for the future, [t]here is a danger... in the West, where international education has its origins, that this idealism slips into utopianism" (p. 213). It is not the hope for a better world that is the issue; rather, utopianism becomes problematic when educators promote overly simplistic perspectives of the world, and present diversity in an ostensible, generalized cultural buffet (Tate, 2012).

Easterly (2006), satirically borrowing from Kipling's (1899) poem titled "The White Man's Burden", notes how *the white man's burden* has been culturally and socially destructive, especially in the developing world. The "burden" is the Western belief that all people need saving and access to freedom, however: *real* freedom is judged according to dominant, Western cultural ideals. Teachers' author selection becomes particularly important, because authorship is contextual within cultural values that influence textual perspective taught to students. Within American literature, for example, the Pursuit of Happiness, American Independence and Freedom, and the American Dream are nationally thematic; this alters for authors from differing cultures. Although the importance of *ethics* is important to all cultures, cultural *values* differ amongst them; students benefit from exposure to these differing ideas -- intercultural perspective disassembles Otherness (Said, 1978).

The "Language and Literature" course promotes intercultural understanding through diversification of texts; nonetheless, educators must continually practice personal and professional reflection regarding their own cultural assumptions. On a personal level, how do teachers perceive the relationship between mainstream and marginalized cultures? How do these personal cultural biases affect professional cultural decisions teachers make in teaching a framework for curriculum? Tate (2012) questions, "how much of our discourse and how many of our ideas were to a large extent determined by the social, cultural, political and ideological context in which we lived" (p. 216)? As teachers practice authentic awareness of personal contexts and cultural ideology, they gain better ability to identify how students' cultural discourses play a more complex role in the classroom than it may seem.

Chan (2006) reminds us that not only educators, but also students and parents have their own "cultures, shaped by the cultural and social narratives unique to their own situations" (p. 311). Utopian dreams for peace do not acknowledge the sheer hard work continuously required in interculturalism to navigate diversity. Cunha (2015) suggests that educators "have the responsibility of choosing between acting and not acting to bring about the Deweyan utopia" (p. 34). Problematically, this mentality is short-sighted and perhaps even professionally immature; the very definition of utopia is a non-existent perfect world, and to presume we could reach perfection would deny there is a hard road ahead. Utopian dreams gloss over and blind us from the complexity of intercultural mindedness. To restate Dewey (1929): he, himself, says that education "is a process", a journey, and not "preparation for future living", or, in this case, a perfect destination (p. 35).

The Dangers of Cultural Passivity. If cultural-efficacy in education is to be attained, it requires reciprocal and equitable efforts from all individuals involved; dominant cultural groups cannot expect marginalized groups to endure a cultural metamorphosis to transforming them into a homogeneous, *perfect* cultural cosmos while denying primary cultural identity (Gee, 1989; Appiah, 2007). We cannot accept cultural hegemony as *just the way things are* - rather, intercultural understanding requires a sense of active curiosity. Jackson (1990) states that this sense of curiosity is "antithetical to the attitude of the passive conformist"; cultural curiosity is necessary if cultural understanding is to occur in our classroom (p. 125). In order for international education to meaningfully understand *and* respect cultural diversity, we need to find ways of interconnectivity that is also "respectful of the differences" and continually work towards greater cultural understanding (Chan, 2006, p. 312). We cannot cheapen this work by assuming *togetherness* one day becomes easy, or that this continual effort will no longer be required towards progress.

Discussion and Professional Application

Dewey (1929) stated that in order to prepare students for the future, they need the “full command of [themselves]” and the “full and ready use of [their] capacities” (p. 34). Students’ multiple and multifaceted cultural discourses are powerful assets, and it is not sufficient when a teacher recognizes these resources but does not scaffold the empowerment to use them (Chan, 2006). There is a difference between acknowledging cultural difference and embracing it. As educators we must explore, and unpack the multiple cultures present both in our students and ourselves. Greene (1993) says, “[t]o open up our experience (and, yes, our curricula) to essential possibilities of multiple kinds is to extend and deepen what we think of when we speak of community” (p. 15). Interculturalism needs this opening of curriculum.

The “Language and Literature” course specifically contains course topics for this very purpose of deepening understanding of cultural identity. The curriculum guide indicates that: teachers are to provide “opportunities for student inquiry into the subtleties and implications of cultural contexts” (IBO, 2013, p. 14); students are to “explore how language develops in cultural contexts, how it impacts... the world, and how language shapes both individual and group identity” (p. 18); and, through literary analysis, students understand “historical, cultural and social contexts” in which texts are “written and received” (p. 21). If executed through meaningful and reflective pedagogy, the course allows teachers and students to “break through and even disrupt surface equilibrium and uniformity”, not to “[replace] one domination by another”, but to “[enrich] our understanding now only of our own culture, but of ourselves” (Greene, 1993, p. 15).

As a teacher of the “Language and Literature” course, I see three particular options before me when framing the course to promote intercultural awareness; two options would lead to destructive ends, one would provide more meaningful substance. Two of these options, cultural utopianism and passivity, have previously been discussed. If I employ a utopian approach to interculturalism, I will never empower my students to *disrupt* hegemonic equilibrium, as I would be preoccupied with the goal of a picture-perfect future, which tends to generalize cultural identity. The generalization occurs out of the idealization of cultural utopia, creating a normative standard by which all cultures are uniformly and destructively measured (Carrington, 2001). If my teaching practices are culturally passive, I will not spark any catalyst for change within the complex interweaving of cultural identities, because complacency will replace action. The optimal choice would be one of balance: a balance between idealistic perfection and complacency when dealing with complexities of cultural identities. Reflective teaching practices will keep me accountable when finding a balanced intercultural approach, because it creates the consciousness needed for meaningful teaching, learning, and empowering of intercultural understanding and mindedness. Cultural consciousness, therefore, is where the balance needed to journey along the edge of intercultural understanding can be found; cultural consciousness, therefore, is the guide through the labyrinth of multiple cultural discourses and identities that comprise intercultural societies.

Conclusion

Greene (1993) looks to literature as a means for gaining intercultural insight; this strategy also rings true for the “Language and Literature” course. It is the study of perspectives outside our own that provide building blocks for diverse cultural communities. Perspective exposes *otherness* for what it is; therefore, cultural tension is eased by relieving fear of things and people

different than our own cultural identity (Said, 1978). Literature is a tool that, when used effectively, can “[diversify] our experience, [and change] our ideas of time and life and birth and relationship and memory” (Greene, 1993, p. 16). Effective use of literature can expose cultural stereotypes that insist all subjects of one culture or ethnicity are the objective representations of that thing (Greene, 1993).

True intercultural understanding questions power dynamics of cultural capital present in our classrooms, and attempts to level the playing field of social and cultural power by validating multiple cultural identities; this breaks “symbolic violence of cultural imposition” that accompanies “increased physical and social pressure to conform” (Carrington, 2001, p. 276). Individuals should value their culture but it should “never be absolutized”, because that would also devalue openness to multiple cultural identities (Freire, as cited by Greene, 1993, p. 16).

The “Language and Literature” course employs literature, our *cultural Virgil*, as our guide to navigate and lead us through the validation of multiple cultural identities towards greater intercultural understanding. In this path, we encounter limiting circles of our own cultural assumptions: chains that must be broken in order to progress towards our never-ending goal of lifelong intercultural understanding. This path cannot be idealized or whitewashed by cultural utopianism, or muted by cultural passivity; it is a path that does not lead us to an end destination, rather, “to travel with a new point of view” (Peters, as cited by Mulcahy, 2012, para. 1). The key to intercultural understanding in the IB “Language and Literature” classroom requires meaningful reflection on the complexity of multiple cultural discourses and identities, which may, at times, conflict; but that is okay because within this confliction rests the notion “that other people, with their differences, can also be right” (IBO, 2013, p. 175). Greene (1993) makes an important closing point and call to action: “the community many of us hope for now is not to be identified with conformity... Something life-affirming in diversity must be discovered and rediscovered, as what is held in common becomes always more many-faceted - open and inclusive, drawn to untapped possibility” (p. 17). It is the aim of the IB curriculum to open the floodgates of intercultural understanding; however, it must be our mandate, as IB teachers, to embrace the multifaceted cultural identities present in both the texts we study and the students we teach, so that we can authentically and continually progress towards this understanding within our culturally diverse communities.

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