

One School's Experience of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years

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Charlotte Gregson shows how implementing the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme has taken their primary curriculum to the next level.



At Southbank International School, we have been offering International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes since 1997 and we have recently added the IB's Primary Years Programme (PYP) to our curriculum, enhancing our already developed focus on independent and critical thinking.

The PYP is where our students start their educational journey; a foundation that ultimately dictates their progression through the IB's Diploma Programme, further education and life beyond. With such weight being placed on these key developmental years for children by government and research, it seems strange that many curriculums appear to dismiss children's learning capacity at this age. The PYP, contrastingly, facilitates a great amount of personal and academic development in the primary years, instead of limiting it.

Our strong belief in the IB harks back to 1979, when our school was opened and established with three key principles; that it would be democratic, it would be international and it would use the surrounding area, London, as a classroom. Our school's founders believed, as we still do now, in the idea of a 'school without walls', in both a literal and metaphorical sense. So, in line with this, not only do we ensure our students are learning in environments beyond the four walls of the classroom, we ensure that their thought processes transcend the subject and learning borders built by knowledge-focussed curriculums.

As such, when we implemented the IB at Southbank International School, it was less like adopting a new curriculum, and more like matching with a style of curriculum that enabled and enhanced the ethos we had already put in place. Our ethos focuses on instilling values such as cultural understanding, mutual respect and critical thinking, and with the support of the PYP framework, we are able to do this from a very young age—something we feel particularly lucky to do.

Independent Thinking

The PYP framework is designed to nurture these important qualities through its inquiry-led, transdisciplinary way of learning; ultimately, it challenges students to think for themselves about ideas that are much bigger than they are. While this might seem a lot to ask at such a young age, the age between three and 11 is probably one of the most naturally inquisitive times in a person's life and we need to nurture that! In order to do so, we need young people, as young as possible, to have confidence in the value of their thoughts, questions and voices, and to have equal respect for the thoughts, questions and voices of others. If students respect their own thoughts, the thoughts of others, and are driven to learn, the results are fascinating.

The idea of education as a process is part of our school's ethos and is reinforced by the IB's own mission statement and programmes. For example, the PYP framework means that we are able to teach our young students in a way that places as much weight on the learning process as it does the educational outcome.

Our subject groups include language, mathematics, science, the arts, social studies and personal social and physical education. Within these subjects, the students collect data and report findings, make and test theories and experiment and play with possibilities. On top of this, they are allowed to explore and question, take and defend a position and, most importantly, use their own critical thinking to understand all of these concepts to a deeper level.

Transcending Borders

This approach allows an all-encompassing education; for example, when we teach students about a historical event, such as a revolution, we ensure they also understand the concept behind the knowledge, including aspects of the changes that the particular revolution caused, and we relate it to the world around them now. We ask them 'what would you change now, if you could?' Of course, the educational knowledge is essential, but by also teaching the approaches to learning, we ensure our students are well-rounded, critical thinkers.

In that sense, we are ensuring our students' learning transcends borders that are created with the separation of curriculum subjects, and that it is breaking down the walls built in students' minds because of this. There are two stages to achieving this; the first is in a literal sense, which then affects the second, more metaphorical change. By taking our learning outside of the classroom physically, we allow students to connect their ideas across subjects and within the real world.

So, when we look at governmental systems in the classroom, we complement this with a trip to the Houses of Parliament; when we look at structure and design, we visit Tower Bridge; when we study beliefs and values, we take a trip to a local Mosque, Synagogue, or other religious building, and so on. By allowing these literal connections with the real world, we facilitate the mental connection between learning and life—which helps to break down the metaphorical boundaries within education. It's a huge privilege to be able to do this and visit so many fascinating places in our local area in order allow students to make physical, real-world connections with their learning—something that the freedom of the PYP framework and the IB as a whole allows us to do.



Making Real-World Connections

This connection with real world issues is best demonstrated in a specific feature of the PYP, the exhibition, which is one of the most rewarding elements of the entire programme. It takes place in the final year of the PYP and, as suggested by the name, is an opportunity for the students to exhibit their skills as collaborators, researchers, inquirers and problem solvers, as the students come together to conduct an in-depth study of real life issues.

A recent exhibition that was a favourite of mine was one which showed a clear process of learning within the group; it wasn't about a final product, it was the progression made throughout that my colleagues and I were completely fascinated by. The group, made up of four students, chose the topical issue of plastic pollution as a focus for their inquiry and, immediately, went in four different directions with regards to how the project should be approached. In a sense, it was positive to see the independence and variety of thinking that each student showed—but, it was ultimately most rewarding when they realised that, despite their differences in opinion, they needed compromise, common-ground and understanding to achieve a solution to the bigger picture, which in this case was plastic pollution. This exhibition, and the work of the group behind it, could not better showcase both the school's and the IB's mission to instil in students an understanding that the bigger picture, and their contribution to this picture, is the aim of their education.

Simple Transitions

Ultimately, the PYP framework makes up the essential building blocks of our curious, well-rounded learners. The skills that they need to develop throughout the rest of their education, into further education, and then onwards throughout life are being instilled in them from the age of three. Since introducing the PYP into our school, we have seen the students develop into strong communicators, confident individuals and independent

learners. As an international school, many of our students are bilingual or trilingual—language is the key to cultural understanding, and this is a skill that we are proud to enhance as part of our education framework from the age of five. In my opinion, the PYP is unrivalled in ensuring the success and progression of students, in the classroom and the wider world.

When onboarding the PYP, we experienced very few issues in terms of teaching or learning. There were, of course, changes brought about by it, as the curriculum is a rigorous one, but these changes were all positive in terms of the progress of our educational approach and the school. The IB brought with it a good balance between ensuring the students are active in their learning, while also working within a framework that connects their learning with the wider issues of the world and the core elements of any approved curriculum—and this has filtered down into our school's curriculum within the PYP framework.

Implementing the PYP curriculum enabled us to continue with the direction of education in which we wanted to lead, while providing us with the tools and recognition to do so. We've had an extremely positive experience with the implementation and running of the programme and few teething issues; while this is partly down to the level of experience our staff have with the PYP and IB as a whole, it is also simply because this style of learning is one that is well received by the curious, young minds we are teaching.

Seeing the PYP programme in action for over 20 years and watching our students thrive as they progress through and beyond it, with their PYP skills in hand, is why I am so proud to be a part of this forward-thinking style of education and a school that facilitates this. The PYP is an educational framework fit for the young minds of the 21st century, the young minds who will evolve into the leaders and change-makers of tomorrow. We are developing students who want to make the world a better place; students who understand that they are active participants in the way the world works. As far as education goes, I can't think of anything more important for a young person to learn.

Southbank International School is an IB World School based across three campus sites in London at Hampstead, Kensington and Westminster. The School was the first school in the UK to offer the Primary Years Programme, and the fourth school worldwide. Alongside the Primary Years Programme, it also offers the Middle Years Programme and Diploma Programme.

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