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IB position paper

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# Reflections and projections on the IB learner profile

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and Dr Farid Panjwani**

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# Introduction to IB position papers

This paper is part of a series of papers written by IB practitioners and endorsed by the IB.

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McClean, T. 2013. *Education for sustainable development: Students lead the way.*

Walker, G. 2010. *East is East and West is West.*

## Abstract

This position paper was inspired by a review of the IB learner profile. Three expert consultants for the review share their perspectives on the learner profile. Dr George Walker reflects on the interplay between the IB learner profile and the development of international-mindedness, and he continues to provoke thinking around that concept as it is understood in the IB and beyond. Professor Wing-On Lee reflects on the learner profile as representing an ideal learner in a world that is both dynamic and transformative, and he explains how the learner profile can be viewed as a series of “ways of being”. Dr Farid Panjwani reflects on the dynamic relationships between the role of the learner profile, international-mindedness and imagination. Finally, the paper poses key questions about the future development of the IB learner profile.

## Introduction

This paper is the last in a series of IB “position papers”, the first of which was published in 2010. Appropriately, this concluding paper reflects the values inherent throughout the IB continuum of international education: the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programmes (MYP), the Diploma Programme (DP) and the IB Career-related Certificate (IBCC). These values are described through the attributes expressed in the IB learner profile (2006, 2013).

The IB website states that the “IB learner profile is the IB mission statement translated into a set of learning outcomes for the 21st century”, underscoring its importance to the IB community. This foundational publication sits firmly at the heart of IB educational principles and practices. The attributes expressed in the learner profile represent a trusted core of values for the IB community. In 2012, IB undertook a comprehensive review of the IB learner profile across the IB continuum for the first time.

All IB curriculum elements have a formal review cycle, reflecting an ongoing commitment to collaboration and continual improvement. After 15 years of implementation in IB World Schools it was time to review the learner profile. Engaging in a critical, multicultural review of the IB’s core values demonstrates the IB’s commitment to respecting the diverse voices and perspectives in the IB community.

Planning for the review began in 2011 with the vision of providing multiple collaborative opportunities in which all members of the IB community could participate. The review was launched in March 2012 and resulted in a think tank of IB educators and expert consultants in December 2012. Over 1,000 people participated in face-to-face activities—designed to gather information about their understanding of and aspirations for the learner profile—through global focus groups, IB regional conference sessions, virtual communities and IB staff meetings. Approximately 6,000 people from 61 countries and 272 cities responded to an online survey available from March to October 2012. All data and feedback were then compiled and IB’s global research team helped to analyse the data in preparation for the final stage of the review.

In December 2012 a learner profile think tank was convened in the IB’s global centre in The Hague. Participants analysed the findings and debated key questions regarding the learner profile’s future development. Recommendations and suggested modifications were outlined in the final report, which the education committee approved in April 2013. A full report on the learner profile review and an executive summary is available on the IB online curriculum centre (OCC) and available on request by emailing [continuumdevelopment@ibo.org](mailto:continuumdevelopment@ibo.org).

After the publication of the revised learner profile in July 2013 we invited the three expert consultants from the think tank to share their reflections about the review and the ongoing development of the IB learner profile: Dr George Walker, former Director General of the IB; Professor Wing-On Lee, Dean of Educational Research, National Institute of Education, Singapore; and Dr Farid Panjwani, Centre for Research and Evaluation in Muslim Education,

Institute of Education, UK. Their insight, analysis and hopefulness provide further validation of the IB's commitment to help create internationally minded people who are mindful of their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet.

These three short essays, born of personal conversation and a meeting of minds, circle gently around an essential question for the human community: how we deal with people who are different. The differences between people, cultures and nations (with their competing demands) have engaged both philosophers and armies. George Walker critically considers how the learner profile might underpin the development of values that span the local and global, the IB's own cultural heritage and the wider world. Wing-On Lee explores the sociological function of values and sees the emergence (or, perhaps, the continually re-recognized and re-interpreted existence) of an "ideal man" who can not only survive but prosper in the world. Farid Panjwani focuses on the essential role of an "educated imagination", which stands at the centre of any quest for empathy, universal ethics and an aesthetic appreciation of our own cultural experience—as well as the cultural experiences of others.

From very different personal, cultural and intellectual starting points, these three scholars reach towards a common understanding. Their quest reflects a common commitment to search for truth and to approach others with honesty, open-mindedness and a critical respect for differences. In that sense, their reflections are evidence of the power of the values expressed in the IB learner profile, and they are a statement of hope about the learner profile's potential influence in the field of international education and beyond.

**Dr George Walker** is a former Director General of the IB, noted author in the field of international education, and a distinguished thought leader for the IB community.

### Three key questions

In the relatively brief period of its existence, the IB learner profile has acquired an almost iconic status within International Baccalaureate and its influence is increasingly apparent in the rapidly expanding field of international education. For example, Tate, who chairs the influential IB education committee, writes:

The IB learner profile is a noble and idealistic document, given the long history of education systems failing to transform humanity. It should be the basis of everything that an IB World School does to promote intercultural awareness.

(Tate 2011)

Meanwhile, Hill (2007) draws our attention to the similarity between the IB learner profile and the proposals made for education in the 21st century by UNESCO in the so-called "Delors Report".

I believe it is important that the revised learner profile should retain some seeds of the tough debate that has been such a significant feature of the almost year-long review. The IB learner profile must, at one and the same time, offer a reassuring, stable platform of shared understanding while provoking further scrutiny and argument. This is a process at which the IB excels: balancing the reassurance of the status quo with the risk associated with an on-going search for improvement—the mark of the true skeptic.

I therefore offer three fundamental questions which are designed to focus continuing discussion about the nature and content of the IBLP. The first two questions were very much in the forefront of my mind when I participated in the think tank in December 2012 in The Hague:

- What are the distinctive qualities associated with the IB continuum of international education?
- How does the IB learner profile encourage the development of those distinctive qualities?

To which I now add a third question:

- Is the IB learner profile's interpretation of "international education" truly international?

### **What are the distinctive qualities associated with the IB continuum of international education?**

Although there is a significant overlap between the IB's programmes and other curriculums worldwide, it is clearly to be hoped that there is something distinctive, different, and perhaps even unique, about the IB. In an internal paper (Walker 2012) I suggested that the development of "international-mindedness" is the distinctive feature of international education and I noted how the phrase "internationally minded" is used extensively in IB literature—and specifically in the preamble to the IB learner profile:

The aim of all IB programmes 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.

I therefore offered the following simple definition of the concept:

International-mindedness is the motivation and the capability to study issues from different national and cultural perspectives.

I included "national perspectives" because many of the world's contested issues arise from disagreements between formally recognized nations implementing national policies approved by national governments. I added "cultural perspectives" because, increasingly, conflict between groups is arising **within**, rather than **between**, nations.

Thus IB sets out to achieve, through the mediation of its learner profile, a change in the learner's mindset from its default position of the **local** (personal, family, community, national) to the less comfortable position of the **global** (multilingual, multicultural, international). The learner is not required to surrender her/his local identities but to acquire "the motivation and the capability" to rise above this cultural foundation level to examine issues from a global perspective and a shared humanity.

This, then, is what defines the distinctive nature of the IB's vision of international education, and we must therefore look to the IB learner profile for a description of the knowledge, skills and values that will underpin the concept of international-mindedness.

### **How does the IB learner profile encourage the development of those distinctive qualities?**

The second question to occupy our continuing debate should be the relationship between the IB's over-arching goal—the development of international-mindedness—and the attributes described in the IBLP. We must continue to be persuaded that the latter are wisely chosen to achieve the former, acknowledging the considerable act of faith that often sustains our confidence in making such connections.

This relationship is likely to be of two kinds: first, a direct linkage (for example, open-minded learners are likely to be more receptive to alternative interpretations of an event), and second, an indirect relationship (for example, we are likely to conclude that reflective learners will acquire the means to weigh up better those alternative interpretations). However, Wells (2011) usefully reminds us of the professional challenge of designing IB classroom practices that will be effective in the acquisition of the 10 attributes.

In the paper quoted earlier, I expressed concern that some of the attributes of the IB learner seem to have little connection with the development of international-mindedness. However, the discussions that took place within the think tank persuaded me to make two additional observations. The first is that although some of the attributes may lack an obvious international flavour, (for example, "balanced" and "principled") they will, nonetheless, contribute to the general

development of a confident and critical learner who will have the courage to venture away from her/his cultural moorings. The second is that the report of the six focus groups, set up as an important component of the IBLP review, encouraged me to agree that qualities such as “caring” and “open-minded” are “particularly ideal in being more effective in international education programs”.

### **Is the IB learner profile’s interpretation of international education truly international?**

When the draft IB learner profile was first published in 2006 (previously it was known as the PYP student profile) I unkindly commented that it seemed to describe the congenial kind of person whom I would want to invite to dinner. The observation was cruel but it contained an important germ of truth. I would feel wholly at ease with such stimulating IB learners. Why? Because we would share a set of common values: nothing would ruffle the cultural dinner table; I would feel entirely at home.

Not everyone shares this sense of familiarity. According to Pritchard (2013), writing from a Chinese perspective:

In some non-Western cultural contexts, the learner profile is seen as flawed or incomplete, reflecting a strong, individually-oriented, Western liberal cultural bias that omits values considered to be essential in other contexts.

My own paper (2010), arguing along rather similar lines, has been widely quoted. Al Farra (2012), on the other hand, challenges the assumption that “internationalism” is incompatible with the Arab world:

...through studying the two value systems one can clearly conclude theoretical compatibility in many values between the Arab heritage and an “international education”.

But Tate explains how strongly the concept of international education is linked to the values of the Western Enlightenment.

Despite the huge support for the learner profile within the professional educator class, which runs international education—a class which embraces many cultures, religions and nationalities—and despite the efforts of the IB to involve people from different backgrounds in its interpretation and review, it remains unmistakably an ideology marked both in time and place.

(Tate 2013)

The debate continues and, indeed, the debate must continue if the IB learner profile is to achieve its enormous potential as a contentious working document rather than a polished tablet of stone.

**Professor Wing-On Lee** is currently the Dean of Educational Research at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. He is a widely-respected scholar in the fields of comparative education, citizenship education, and moral and values education.

The IB learner profile was developed over time, emerging from experience and the growth of IB. It has become a significant brand for IB and is iconic of IB. The emergence of the IB learner profile is also a historical development process—a process of distilling the values that are important to the IB community. It is by itself a philosophy of education. It is also an education ideology—creating an “ideal man” for society. According to Emile Durkheim, the fundamental nature of education is

reflected in the notion of an “ideal man”, and the “ideal man” represents the ideals of the society of the time.

When these fundamental values were formed, they represented the evolution of the fundamental ideals of the community, and thus the learner profile at the same time becomes the “ideal man” for the IB society. According to Durkheim, a society is formed when, generation after generation, the fundamental values of the society perpetuate. This does not mean there will be absolutely no change in the values of any society. However, it does mean that despite change, these fundamental values continue to be there, maybe reinterpreted, redefined, expanded, adapted and understood in a new light so that they would be relevant to the needs of the times.

Various countries have recently tried to define a set of core values for themselves. In 2005, Australia put forward nine Australian values—care and compassion; integrity; doing your best; respect; fair go; responsibility; freedom; understanding, tolerance and inclusion; and honesty and trustworthiness. In the United Kingdom from the mid-1990s onwards, the country promoted its shared values; Sir Bernard Crick proposed the significance of social and moral responsibility, political literacy and community involvement. In China in 2003, the country propagated eight glorified values—patriotism; serving people; being scientific; hardworking; united and cooperative; honest and trustworthy; law-abiding; and perseverance and resilience. In 2002, Hong Kong’s curriculum reform also set five values as priority values to be learned through the curriculum—perseverance, respect for others, responsibility, national identity and commitment. In Singapore, the proposed curriculum for 2015 specified four core values for 21st century learners—being a confident person, a self-directed learner, a concerned citizen and an active contributor. (For the above information, please refer to my keynote speech on citizenship education presented in November 2011 in Singapore, which has just been published).

The IB learner profile can be understood from the core values perspectives once we are aware that core values have been actively consolidated in various communities, organizations and jurisdictions. Keeping in mind that the IBO is both an organization and a learning community, it is more and more convincing to me that the learner profile has been developed in an historical process to emerge as the core values of the IB community.

### **Learner attributes in the IB learner profile**

As argued above, the IB learner profile represents an “ideal man”, or more appropriately as the ideal learner in the IB community. I agree with the literature that was circulated to us for the think tank meeting, which described the learner profile as reflecting the ideals of an enlightenment period, and in many ways reflecting the values of the educational philosopher John Dewey.

In the main, the ideal learner as from the IB learner profile can be categorized into the following:

1. A learning being (inquirer, open-minded, knowledgeable) with intrinsic enthusiasm to learn (as an open-minded inquirer) as a necessary learning motivation, and becoming knowledgeable as a necessary outcome.
2. A social being (caring, communicator) who cares about others, and who would seek to share what he/she has learned or knows—to be a good communicator, the learner must understand others and seek to tune into a wavelength that achieves effective communication.
3. An action being (risk taker) who applies knowledge to action and seeks to go the extra mile to blaze a trail both in learning and in action, and who is willing to risk uncertainties in the process of learning and action.
4. A wisdom seeker (thinking, reflective) who strives to think, reflect, and go beyond information and knowledge, seeking to rise above understanding, interpretation and conceptualization.

5. A principled being (principled) who would convert all their learning and experience into principles—upholding those principles, feeling proud of them and unafraid of being different from others who hold different views or beliefs.
6. A balanced being that intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally combines the above attributes.

### **Core and additions**

The IB learner profile describes learners and how they function in other aspects. In the above section, I have tried to expand the individual learner attributes into social and action characteristics. This does not require a change in the IB learner profile. As the IB develops and expands—given the growing role of globalization and internationalization in many social and economic spheres, including education—international-mindedness is regarded as increasingly important. This was not originally written in the learner profile, but as George has argued powerfully, international-mindedness can penetrate into the interpretation and elaboration of the various aspects of the learner profile.

As I have mentioned, the world of education has changed. Today, there are strong demands for service learning. There is an increasing emphasis on collaborative learning and team building. This can be built into the social being and action being learner aspects described above. There are other aspects coming in as expected learning outcomes from schools, such as self-confidence, perseverance, leadership, etc. I think they can also be developed into expanded definitions of the core values.

Finally I applaud the IB for its courage and sincerity in conducting a fundamental review of the fundamental values. What I tried to do as a recap after the think tank meeting in December 2012 is to suggest how we can maintain the core values, yet expand its definitions so that we can cater for the changing needs of the changing times, as well as the changing expectations for education and learning outcomes.

**Dr Farid Panjwani** is a Senior Lecturer and Director of the Centre for Research and Evaluation in Muslim Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. His recent work focuses on the philosophy of education, particularly on the conceptions of knowledge and personhood in Muslim and modern Western traditions.

If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination (and this I do need), I can enter into a value system which is not my own, but which is nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have some common values—for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do

(Berlin 1998).

The following ideas explore the relationship between international-mindedness, the IB's learner profile and the cultivation of imagination. The aim is to discuss briefly the importance of an educated imagination in the development of students who will recognize "their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, [and] help to create a better and more peaceful world" (preamble to learner profile).

International-mindedness as defined by George Walker is "the capacity and motivation to study issues from different national and cultural perspectives" (*The IB learner profile revisited*, November 2012). At its heart is the ability to make sense of and grasp another person's world. This



imaginative engagement to be in another person's shoes is often called empathy. Several elements of the learner profile—e.g., communicators, caring, open-minded—also assume an empathetic understanding of others. But is it possible to understand another human being?

### **Empathy and the problem of other minds**

It could be argued that though we have direct access to our own mental states—being in pain, being happy, etc—we have no direct access to other people's mental state or minds. We can see their behaviour and hear what they say about their mental state but we do not have access to their inner lives. This raises the question how we know that those we consider other people are not just zombies or robots, as it is often provocatively put. This is called the "problem of other minds" and it raises questions about the almost universal belief that other people also have an inner life and can feel, think and believe.

There are responses to this problem, such as the analogical inference, which states that because others behave similarly to me in many situations, I can infer that they too have emotions, beliefs and feelings similar to mine. None of these responses, it must be said, commands universal assent. There is no received argument justifying our belief that other people have minds. Yet the belief in other minds is so central to our identity, experience of selfhood and everyday life that nobody seriously doubts it, despite a lack of irrefutable justification. Most people, if they see someone in pain, will wince because they believe, despite the possibility of philosophical doubt, that the behaviour is caused by pain that the person experiences. In fact, many prominent philosophers resolve this issue by taking humans to be social beings who experience the world as shared with others who are necessary in the very formation of our sense of selfhood. In short, we are justified to assume that other people have an inner life of which we can make sense—not fully and not always, but enough to share a common humanity while being different in many ways. It seems, therefore, that it is reasonable to believe that empathy is possible.

### **Potential of imagination**

Empathy is rooted in human faculty of imagination—the ability to manipulate symbols and images in mind. It is the capacity to make images and to move them around in our heads, playing out events that are no longer present to our senses and may never have been. It helps us recognize that things can be different from what they are, and this includes the possibility of imagining different sets of values, ways of life and cultural codes than those to which we are accustomed. Imagination enables us to understand issues from perspectives other than those we grow up with. As Greene notes, "the extent to which we grasp another person's world is also dependent upon our own ability to make poetic use of our imagination". It can thus be argued that as international-mindedness requires empathy, a necessary element that should go into it is the education of imagination.

Perhaps we can go a step further. In helping us to transcend "the present and the particular", imagination is a source of freedom. Mary Warnock observes that "our ability to imagine is a necessary condition of our freedom; if we could not think of a future that was conceivably unlike the present, or the past, we could in no way change the present in a deliberate fashion" (1983:77). With regard to international-mindedness, this means that an imaginative mind would not only be able to grasp issues from various perspectives but would also have the capacity to imagine a different and better future. An internationally minded person would carry hope for a better world, which can then serve as a point of reference to reflect upon the world that is in fact there and to act on it while balancing between the tyranny of certainty and the paralysis of doubt. At a more personal level, hope acts as a buffer against resignation and apathy in the face of tough going.

### **Imagination and ethics**

Here, we must note that imagination is ethically neutral. In itself, it cannot provide the moral compass to ascertain what to do with what one imagines. There is no inbuilt censorship in imagination. Torture, fraud and war are also acts of imagination. Murder plans are as much products of imagination as great medical discoveries that save lives and ease pain; a novel has a hero and a villain. An imaginative person may not be necessarily caring.

From an educational point of view, this brings up the question of ethics and the idea of **educating** the imagination, rather than simply letting it go. Alongside making imagination powerful, we also need to equip students with the capacity to recognize the obligations that privilege creates. The solitary imagination must dialogue with others to be reminded of its impact on them. International-mindedness is best developed when aesthetic imagination intertwines with ethical imagination. This brings us back to empathy, which is the capacity to identify oneself with the condition of others—a fundamental basis for the attitude of caring.

In recent years, much scholarly attention has been paid to exploring ways of educating imagination. The resulting scholarship has shown that contrary to popular belief, imagination is integral to all human activities, including our understanding of the past, scientific activities and social life. Without imagination, no historical narrative is possible. In science, the generation of a hypothesis is an imaginative act. Our language is deeply imbued with imagination. Educationally, thus, imagination can be expanded across the curriculum.

### **The power of literature**

Given the limited space, I will use literature as an illustration to explore the possibility of a dialogue between aesthetic and ethical imaginations. A good story, drama or novel has the potential to take the reader into the inner and hidden lives of character, thereby imaginatively giving access to the thoughts, feeling and beliefs of other people, including those from cultural backgrounds other than one's own. In other words, in literature we have a people-centred imagination intertwined with ethical issues. As Nussbaum (1977) notes, engagement with literature can help develop capacities “that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (p 85).

It is with a belief in these empathetic possibilities of literature that in 2006 a book was published in the United States titled *Literature from the Axis of Evil*. It is an anthology of short stories, novels and poems from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, Cuba, Libya and Sudan. The book brings together literary pieces from the writers affiliated with these countries. The editors of the book note that their aim was to “stimulate international conversation through literature” because it can allow us to “participate in some intimate ways in other lives rather than melding them into shapeless abstractions” (p xvii).

Literature may not only help reflections on the other, but can also ignite and enlarge students' conceptual and emotional repertoire as they grapple with concerns of identity, meaning, love and justice in their own lives. In stories, the young minds can meet characters facing the great perennial mysteries of life, journeys of emotions and unsettling discoveries. Furthermore, in many parts of the world where people live under authoritarian rules, the symbolic language of literature often serves as an expression of dissent and protest. Such literature is an embodiment of risk-taking in an uncertain and often hostile world. It can help build a vocabulary for critiquing manipulation, exclusion and invisibility to help students realize the universality of human suffering, aspirations and the quest for justice.

As age appropriate well-chosen works of literature will speak to the students directly, the role of a teacher in a literature class is truly that of a facilitator, or a pedagogical mid-wife, as Socrates would put it. Here the IB schools have a particular advantage as they often have students from a range of cultural backgrounds. This richness is itself an asset, particularly in engaging with literature, as a wide range of interpretations are likely to emerge when texts interact with such diverse readers. The teacher's key role is to participate in the lives of students by recognizing and encouraging creativity, “helping the child to discover a form for his thoughts and to become expert in applying it” (Weston 1973: 883).

A range of ideals articulated in the IB's learner profile, as well as the overall goal of international-mindedness, are underpinned by the capacity to understand the complexities of the world from multiple perspectives, to imagine a better world and to act in a meaningful way. For this to happen, empathy seems an essential capacity that students should have. From teaching and learning perspectives, this means that we should aim for a pedagogy that enables students to process knowledge across the curriculum within the dialectic of aesthetic and moral imagination.

## Conclusion

The perspectives shared by Dr Walker, Professor Lee and Dr Panjwani no doubt will continue to inspire and provoke thinking about the IB's vision for international education. One aspect of the IB learner profile that cannot be truly captured in any paper or report is the passion expressed by the IB community about its impact in their schools and on their educational philosophy. Amid the challenges that many schools face to provide a relevant and meaningful education for future generations, the IB learner profile represents for many educators a beacon of hope and humanity.

In our fast changing, dynamic world, what does the future hold for the learner profile and its attributes? If the learner profile holds such value for IB World Schools should it be made accessible beyond the borders of the IB community? Could these values inspire partnerships and collaborations that might grow beyond IB World Schools? Will the development of new insights, and the influence of other cultures, continue to affirm these institutional and personal values, or offer challenges that might lead to fundamental change? How will educators and educational systems engage further to develop their critical understanding of the crucial roles that values play in primary and secondary schools? How will we negotiate differences in values, and seek common ground in a world that seems to grow both more homogenized and more fractured with every passing year?

The review of the IB learner profile stimulated many other important dialogues and debates. We hope this position paper will continue to provoke and challenge thinking around the values inherent in an IB education.

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## Acknowledgements

### **IB World Schools contributed to the review of the learner profile in 2012**

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