

# ***The Double-sided Impact and Reflection of the International Baccalaureate on Educational Equity in China***

Rui Xue<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom*

*a. k21026748@kcl.ac.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is now a powerful global education brand and a major player in the education system, however, more and more educators and countries in China are becoming cautious about it considering its impact on the education system of nation states, especially on educational equity. Finding a balance between the national education system and the IB has been a constant issue. Therefore, the research topic of this study is the impact of IB on educational equity in China, both negative and positive aspects. Finally, this study analyzes and draws on the experiences of other countries and regions in introducing the IB to gain some insights into how the IB and the Chinese education system can balance each other and develop better. The significance of this paper is that while discussing the negative impact of IB on educational equity in China, it also explores the positive implications of IB on students' educational rights in the Chinese context and makes suggestions to better leverage its positive impact.

**Keywords:** international baccalaureate, international education, education equity, class

## **1. Introduction**

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) originated in the West was founded in 1968, and has expanded rapidly to the Asia-Pacific region over the past 20 years. Today, it is a powerful global education brand and a major player in education systems and is of interest to a growing number of middle-class families in many parts of the world [1,2]. However, as IB programs spread globally, the education systems of nation-states have been affected by them to varying degrees. On the one hand, they may be seen as a threat to the formation of strong national and cultural identities [3], as the program's curriculum, unlike the national core curriculum, conveys global values that may contrast with a sense of nation-state identity. On the other hand, there is a growing number of scholars who believe that the introduction of IB programs with elitist nature in the national education system may trigger educational stratification within the national education system and a series of educational inequities [4]. In mainland China, the IB program has rapidly attracted attention and developed rapidly after its introduction in 1991. In particular, China's accession to the WTO in 2001 opened up space for the global education services industry to penetrate the Chinese education market and created opportunities for affluent Chinese families to use their capital to enter the international education market. The international education market has flourished with the increasing demand for Chinese students to go abroad and policies that support the internationalization of education. Public high schools have also experimented with IB to develop international curriculum programs. However,

considering issues such as national identity and educational equity, the Chinese government's attitude toward international schools has evolved, from initial support to increased oversight and regulation, and now has begun to strictly regulate their development. At the same time, with strict governmental scrutiny and restrictions on various aspects of IB schools, including the introduction of IB schools, accreditation, curriculum, and materials [5], IB schools in China have not only slowed down their development but even face an uncertain future. Understanding and coordinating the increasingly tense relationship between the IB program and the Chinese government has become increasingly important for educators today.

In this context, this study dialectically examines the impact of the IB program on educational equity, which both threatens and maintains educational equity in China. Because the IB program threatens the educational rights of most Chinese students on the one hand and safeguards the educational rights of some students on the other, it can be said that the IB program leads to absolute inequity while there is also some relative equity. In discussing the threat of IB to educational equity, this article mainly analyzes the four levels of education context, education input, education process, and education product, which involve the current situation of China's educational development, and student background. This paper will focus on four levels: education context, education input, education process, and education product. In discussing the need for the IB and the extent to which it guarantees educational equity, the analysis focuses on the educational opportunities and models offered by the IB program, with an emphasis on China's household registration system (where one is born often determines one's access to social services and power) and the reasons it makes international schools popular among the large upper-middle class with precarious social status. Finally, the positive and some negative effects of current Chinese educational policies are presented in the context of current Chinese attitudes and policies towards IB. More importantly, by examining other regions' or countries' policies and experiences regarding the IB, some insights are drawn to promote better development of the Chinese education system.

It should be noted that in mainland China, three types of schools offer the IB program: schools for children of foreign workers, private international schools, and international departments of public high schools. The latter two categories (72.3%) are "non-traditional" international schools [6], which some educationalists call "China's international schools," enrolling primarily Chinese citizens [7]. The policy restrictions and implications for educational equity noted in this article apply primarily to private international schools and international sections of public high schools, which is the focus of this study.

## **2. IB Schools as a Threat to Education Equity**

### **2.1. Education Context**

In the post-compulsory sector, there are two major types of high schools - general high schools and vocational high schools. General high schools are divided into ordinary and key high schools. At the end of compulsory education, Chinese students are faced with the choice of whether to enter a general high school or a vocational high school. Whether students get into their ideal high school depends largely on the scores they achieve on their secondary school graduation exams. The ideal high school for students is usually a key public high school with a high score because attending such a school increases the likelihood that students will enter one of China's top universities [8]. In this context, IB schools become an alternative for some upper middle class. As mentioned by Young, for families who are unable to obtain an elite education in the competitive local education system, international education can serve as a "second chance" to obtain an elite education [9]. On the one hand, IB programs offer an alternative way to complete high school for students who have failed in secondary school exams. Research has shown that for the majority of students who attend international schools,

failure to be accepted into a key public high school due to low secondary scores is the most important reason for choosing an international division or an international program offered by a key public high school [8]. On the other hand, these students who graduate from international schools are often not required to take the college entrance exam and can eventually gain admission to top international universities. The fact that there are two different education models in the same country has led the public and educationists to ponder the negative impact of the rapid growth of international schools on educational balance and education equity.

## **2.2. Education Input**

When exploring the impact of the IB on educational equity, education input is an important aspect that cannot be ignored. Many issues of educational inequity arise along with the inequity of educational input. Because of the high cost of tuition, IB programs are not affordable for most families. Only the children of the “successful” have access to international schools, and they are mostly top executives and professionals, entrepreneurs, or government officials with high economic, social, and cultural capital [8]. Students in rural areas, and even most students in urban areas, have difficulty accessing this opportunity because their families do not have the financial and social status to support their choice of international schools. In addition to differences in families’ ability to invest, the school’s input is another important aspect that gives rise to inequity. Whether it is an international school or an international division that starts in a major high school, they have more money compared to regular high schools. These lucrative funds come from high tuition fees on the one hand and investments from independent capital on the other. More funding, in turn, means more and better educational resources, including school environment, quality of teachers, and teaching facilities.

## **2.3. Education Process**

The content and format of teaching and learning, as well as the standards and forms of assessment in international high schools, are very different from those of regular high schools in China. Compared to the Chinese education system, which is exam-oriented and tends to trigger excessive competition and academic pressure, IB is a student-centered, inquiry-based education [1]. IB introduces a variety of foreign courses, such as the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-Level), the Advanced Placement (AP), and the Global Assessment Certificate (GAC), to prepare these students to apply to universities abroad. And IB curricula are more attractive to students because such schools are designed to help students pursue individualized learning plans compared to the test-based instruction of Chinese high schools. In addition to the difference in curricular arrangements, the international perspective of students is an implicit but very important factor. Internationalized schools focus on enhancing learning and broadening students’ horizons rather than teaching content. These international schools are better able to help students improve their overall quality and ability as opposed to the exam-based education of regular high schools.

## **2.4. Education Product**

What is most controversial about the International Baccalaureate is actually that it gives students better educational opportunities. Young pointed out that international education is often seen as a strategy to obtain elite academic credentials [9]. This is because it is an easier way to obtain a high academic diploma compared to the local Chinese education system. The competitive pressure for admission to key high schools and prestigious universities is always intense, especially in countries with large populations like China. International programs offered by key public high schools open up a new pathway to prestigious universities, and world-class universities, which are more popular than prestigious Chinese universities, are what their students strive for. ‘Sanctuary’ is how Waters

describes international schools, which he argues can avoid fierce local competition and is a less risky path to elite education [10]. This easier way to get into higher-ranked universities is popular and sought after by the elite, but is unaffordable to the average family because of its high tuition costs.

Moreover, the impact of such inequities is not only reflected in the differences in academic achievement brought about by educational opportunities, such as a degree from a world-class university, but also in the future development of students. Students with study abroad experience at world-class universities are typically more competitive in the professional world because of their highly ranked international university degrees, higher English proficiency, and international perspective. This competitive advantage in the labor market also includes the cultural capital they have acquired through their international education [11], which includes, but is not limited to, proficiency in multiple languages and the ability to communicate and interact with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

### 3. IB Schools as a Guarantee of Education Equity

Although it is well established that IB schools cause educational inequity, some research remains positive about the impact of international schools on educational equity. Equity is a relative concept, and while IB schools cause a range of educational inequities, they also preserve the educational power and interests of some groups.

The most intuitive point is that while the high cost of international school tuition deters most students, it does provide the opportunity for some failing students to complete a basic high school degree. This is because Chinese policy states that if a student does not achieve a specific score on the high school entrance exam, he or she will not have the opportunity to continue their academic education and will have to go to a vocational school. International schools have more autonomy and flexibility in admissions than public high schools in China, and their applicants may not even take the high school entrance exam. And some international departments that operate in key public high schools will resort to lowering their admissions scores to attract students studying for the IB. It can be argued that international schools provide a pathway to high school and university for Chinese students who do not perform well on entrance exams. In this case, students and families who choose to study the IB are not motivated by the pursuit of an elite education, as it is driven by their need to complete a basic academic qualification.

Furthermore, although terms such as “privileged families” and “elite group” have been used to describe families who choose international schools. However, it has also been shown that many international school students are disadvantaged relative to the privileged families described in the literature [9]. While these families have high economic capital, they may have lower educational attainment and precarious social status. Therefore, these families lack the cultural capital to drive their children’s educational achievement, especially in the highly competitive and high-stakes Chinese education system. Educational achievement, however, may be a key component in determining whether a child will inherit the social status and advantages of his or her parents. In this context, the elite education offered by international schools is a better option for them. In addition, the risks associated with the household registration system in China are the primary factor for these families in choosing to enroll their children in an international school.

In China, a person’s place of birth often determines his or her access to and power over social services [9]. In terms of education, student enrollment, and school choice are influenced by hukou (household registration) system. This is especially true in China’s first-tier cities, where highly developed economies and cultural levels mean more job opportunities and better educational opportunities. As a result, a growing number of migrant populations are choosing to move to these areas, however, the problem is that the process of transferring hukou registration in highly developed level areas like Beijing and Shanghai is very complicated and expensive. Families moving to first-

tier cities without local household registration do not have the same educational opportunities and rights as local students, and they must return to their household registration to take the college entrance exams. Therefore, once they move into these highly developed cities, these students face discriminatory school and college admissions policies. Many high schools do not accept immigrant students, and their admissions screening is often more complex and rigorous. More importantly, in many cases, the household registration system also affects educational equality. For example, residents of Beijing and Shanghai are more likely to be admitted to prestigious universities than students from elsewhere. According to data from the official Education Institute [12], the acceptance rate for prestigious schools such as 985 and 211 in Beijing and Shanghai will be nearly 21 percent in 2022, compared to just 5 percent in regions such as Guangdong and Henan, and hardly more than 10 percent in most other regions. And while international schools run by private capital have expensive tuition thresholds, they are more flexible in recruiting immigrants. In addition, enrolling in an international school also saves these students from experiencing the restrictions imposed on them by non-local hukou, such as unfair geographical treatment and the hassle of taking the college entrance exam back to their hukou location, since they are not required to take the college entrance exam and overseas universities do not care about hukou registration.

In addition to the guarantee of enrollment opportunities, IB in some ways defends the interests of some students who do not fit into China's current model of teaching to the test. It is well known that Chinese parents and students bear a disproportionate amount of pressure because of the Chinese promotion model and the long history of test-based education. Test scores are the core evaluation criteria for Chinese students, so almost all Chinese students' behavior revolves around college entrance exams and preparation for getting into a good university. International schools offer a more relaxed and tolerant atmosphere, and most of their students can apply to gain admission to top international schools. It is important to acknowledge that many children have difficulty adapting to the teacher-centered, test score-based model and atmosphere of exam-oriented education, and are more eager for creative knowledge and an inclusive, respectful learning environment. IB schools can provide children with a "transnational mind" [13] and 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration [14,15], which help develop the talent needed to succeed in international competition. This is not only a complement to the current Chinese model of teaching to the test, but more notably, it provides an alternative learning model for these children who do not adapt to teaching to the test, which is a way to preserve their educational rights and repair educational equity.

#### **4. Attitudes Toward IB in China and Elsewhere - Implications for China**

The above two-part analysis confirms the two-sided nature of international education, which raises several issues of educational inequity while safeguarding the rights of some students. Therefore, how to monitor and control the development of international schools in China is a complex issue.

Currently, the Chinese government's attitude toward IB programs has evolved from initial support to increased oversight and regulation, and has now begun to strictly regulate their development, out of concern for the country's educational sovereignty, cultural values and national identity, and the preservation of educational equity. China introduced the Regulations on the Implementation of the Law on the Promotion of Non-State Education in 2021 to provide for the implementation of private education while upholding the public interest in education. These policies provide stricter oversight of the legal personality of international schools and the use of teaching materials, reiterating that foreign curricula and materials should not be introduced [16]. Teng argues that this revision of laws and policies eliminates the educational bubble created by capital interests, which will affect the current overall development model of international schools in China [17]. These measures have indeed worked in many ways and have reduced many of the negative impacts of the IB program, such

as the excessive influx of private capital, the over-profiting of public schools that operate international versions with public resources, and the blind introduction of foreign materials and curricula by some international schools without review. However, it is interesting to note that despite the restrictions on the development of IB schools in China, the demand for IB programs in the market has not decreased. At the same time, the strict policy restrictions have caused problems for IB program directors, teachers, parents, and students. On the one hand, IB programs have less autonomy, their curricula and materials have to be “localized” and the national curriculum needs to be given a more central place, which not only puts pressure on students but also makes teaching and learning more difficult [18]. On the other hand, the sudden policy leaves IB schools with no time and energy to organize their curriculum, their teaching quality may be reduced, and new educational anxieties may emerge. The current policies in China for the IB program have caused different degrees of distress to parents, students, teachers, and schools participating in the IB. Therefore, it is worth considering how our policies can be further developed and improved to safeguard the educational rights of different stakeholders as much as possible and thus further maintain educational equity.

International schools do offer an alternative pathway for students and families who are underperforming academically but have the high economic and cultural capital to pursue their education. At the same time, international education, known for its liberal and progressive pedagogy [2], can indeed be seen as a complement to China’s current educational model. However, not all students and families can afford and qualify to attend international schools given their high tuition fees. The policy of Hong Kong, which is also part of China but introduced the IB earlier, may provide good inspiration for mainland China. Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools are major players in the adoption of IB programs in the local schooling system in Hong Kong [1]. This policy gives high-performing schools more flexibility and autonomy in curriculum, student admissions, and tuition while retaining government support through subsidies [19]. In mainland China, however, international schools are largely privately run, and most international departments in public high schools are also privately involved and self-sustaining. One suggestion is that the Chinese government could perhaps participate in the international departments of some of the high-performing public schools in the form of government funding, as well as funding for high-achieving students who lack financial and cultural capital. At the same time, to ensure that there is no brain drain from the country, an agreement could be made with the sponsored students that the government could provide scholarships to students who are high achievers and from poor families but want to study international programs, with the condition that they return to work in their home country after graduating from a prestigious international university.

In addition, considering the rights of some students who are forced to join international schools because of the hukou system or the Chinese educational model, the development of dual language diplomas may add to the vitality of China’s existing educational system while providing more options for these students. Countries such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea have initiated programs to develop dual language programs [1], in which students can enter domestic universities by completing the IB without necessarily taking a national exam for university admission. Perhaps this initiative could repair the existing schooling system that has long suffered from a competitive college admissions system. At the same time, given the realities of China, the launch of this program must take into account the status of the national curriculum versus the IBDP curriculum, the quality of the IB curriculum, and whether this will raise new issues of educational injustice.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, through the analysis of IB in the four stages of education quality assessment (education development, education input, education process, and education product), this paper finds that international schools and international departments in public high schools do raise a series of

educational equity issues. Firstly, in light of the current development of Chinese education, the fierce competition between high schools and universities has largely contributed to the popularity of IB programs in China. This is because the IB provides a pathway to a basic high school credential for families with poor academic performance but with financial and cultural capital. Meanwhile, students who participate in IB programs are freed from the brutal progression model in China, and they can enter top international universities in a more relaxed manner. Secondly, regarding education input, this article analyzes both student background and school input. On the one hand, the difference in students' family and class backgrounds determines whether students are qualified and capable of studying IB, which also directly affects their learning opportunities. On the other hand, there are differences between international schools and ordinary schools in terms of input, which involves school environment, teacher quality, learning equipment, and other aspects. Thirdly, the education process section compares the curriculum content of IB programs with that of regular high schools and the different assessment methods and formats for students. The comparison reveals that IB programs are more attractive to students in the context of China's unified university entrance examination model because they focus on students' learning plans and better develop students' international perspectives and overall quality. Finally, the education product includes both the academic achievement and the future career competitiveness of the students. In terms of academic achievement, students who participate in the IB program are more likely to gain admission to prestigious international universities. The creative thinking, language skills, communication skills, and other cultural capital learned in the IB program can give students a competitive edge in the labor market. In summary, the negative impact of IB programs on Chinese students' educational equity rights involves various aspects such as access, environment, quality, assessment, and outcomes.

However, the negative impact on educational equity is not all that the IB organization has given to the Chinese education system. In fact, the IB program's role in defending the rights of parents and students has been largely overlooked in China. On the one hand, international schools provide a pathway for some Chinese students who do not perform well on high school entrance exams to enter high school and complete basic academic qualifications. On the other hand, IB programs meet the needs of a segment of the upper middle class with precarious social status. These parents often have lower educational attainment and lack cultural capital, making it difficult to pass on the economic capital they possess to the next generation to maintain their social status. Of concern is China's special hukou registration system, which allows students without local hukou registration to face discrimination when enrolling in school, while international schools provide a shortcut for them to attend school and enter university locally. In addition, the difference between the Chinese education model and the IB education model are also taken into consideration, where a more relaxed and creative IB program may be more popular and appropriate for some students than a Chinese education where exams are the core assessment criteria.

By analyzing the positive and negative impacts of IB programs on educational equity in China, this paper identifies the complexity of monitoring and controlling IB programs. While the Chinese government's current approach to strictly regulating the IB program has had some positive effects, including issues such as private capital crowding out the education market and the blind introduction of foreign teaching materials and curricula. At the same time, however, it has also led to several problems, such as increased student stress, increased teaching difficulties, unstable teaching quality, and new educational anxiety. Therefore, taking into account the dual impact of the existing education policies for IB in China, this paper tries to explore more possibilities of international education by pointing out its positive effects at the same time. First, by introducing the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) in China's Hong Kong, this paper gain insight that the Chinese mainland government may be able to participate in some international departments of the well-performing public schools in the form of government funding, as well as funding students who are high achievers but lack economic

and cultural capital while ensuring that there is no brain drain in the form of signed agreements. Second, borrowing from the experience of other countries in developing dual language programs is intended to provide more options for Chinese students and add to the vitality of China's existing education system.

In summary, international education raises some issues of educational inequity while safeguarding the educational rights of some students and families. Therefore, how to monitor and manage the implementation of IB programs in China is a complex but meaningful topic. Perhaps instead of attacking the problems caused by the IB, it would be more correct to see its positive value and try to develop its advantages while analyzing the pros and cons of the IB and introducing relevant policies. A more positive and feasible path is to maintain educational equity for the majority while not threatening the educational rights of the minority.

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