

## **The appeal of the International Baccalaureate in Australia's educational market: a curriculum of choice for mobile futures**

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In Australia there is growing interest in a national curriculum to replace the variety of matriculation credentials managed by State Education departments, ostensibly to address increasing population mobility. Meanwhile, the International Baccalaureate (IB) is attracting increasing interest and enrolments in State and private schools in Australia, and has been considered as one possible model for a proposed Australian Certificate of Education. This paper will review the construction of this curriculum in Australian public discourse as an alternative frame for producing citizens, and ask why this design appeals now, to whom, and how the phenomenon of its growing appeal might inform national curricular debates. The IB's emergence is understood with reference to the larger context of neo-liberal marketisation policies, neo-conservative claims on the curriculum and middle-class strategy. The paper draws on public domain documents from the International Baccalaureate Organisation and newspaper reportage to demonstrate how the IB is constructed for public consumption in Australia.

**Keywords:** International Baccalaureate; curriculum; marketisation; neo-liberalism; neo-conservatism; middle-class strategy

### **Introduction**

School curricula are not culturally neutral artefacts. Rather, they are heavily shaped by social designs on both the future and the past, and are closely implicated in the production of citizens and nationalisms. Currently in Australia there is a push for more centralist governance and bipartisan political interest in developing a national curriculum where historically there has not been one. A national curriculum might address increasing population mobility within the nation, but more controversially, it would replace the variety of matriculation credentials developed and managed by the eight different State Education Departments. Amidst this debate in the public media, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma is attracting increasing interest and enrolments in both State and private schools in Australia, and is under consideration as one possible model for the proposed Australian Certificate of Education (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2006). However, the IB is a curriculum originally designed to facilitate transnational mobility and internationalist perspectives – a curriculum for citizenship beyond the nation. The emergence of this curriculum as a curriculum of choice for some groups seems at odds with the concurrent push for a national curriculum.

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The IB is a uniquely transnational educational construction, a curriculum without borders, governed and operationalised beyond the nation, where so much of the institution of schooling is governed and operationalised within the nation. This curricular innovation has demonstrated a resilience over time, and a capacity to productively embed itself within a variety of national settings. Where existing research on the IB typically looks at the conditions within the curriculum to explain its relative success (e.g. Cambridge, 2002; Mathews & Hill, 2005; Phillips & Pound, 2003), this paper enquires into the IB's current emergence with regard to the external conditions, the macro context. Thus my interest here is not the object itself as an alternative curriculum, but more what it is imagined to be, how it is represented, and thus how it is produced and consumed (Ball, 1993) in the social climate and politics around school choice in Australian society. This gaze constructs the curriculum not as a stable transportable entity that produces uniform effects, but rather a more dynamic intervention that reacts with and responds to the ecology of local settings. This involves the global spread of neo-liberal educational policy and its marketisation discourse, middle-class strategy (Ball, 2003), and the reactionary demands placed on school curricula in the face of widespread social change.

These ecological conditions are not independent of each other. For Apple (2006, p. 21) the current macro context of social policy, education policy in particular, consists of the 'new alliance' between neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas, which is 'inherently contradictory' but nevertheless globally hegemonic. Where neo-liberalism privileges market values with less government involvement, neo-conservatism relies on a stronger, more assertive government to achieve its goal of nostalgic 'cultural restoration' (Apple, 2004, p. 175) through more centralised control of curricular content and outcomes. Apple suggests that despite the contradictions within this alliance, their 'umbrella' portfolio of reforms resonates with the fears of parents and their effort to protect their children's future in a more uncertain world. The policy environment thus facilitates 'self interest, competitive individualism' (Apple, 1993, p. 22) which displace more collective principles or strategies in educational reform. It is within this type of policy environment that I intend to understand the current appeal of the IB.

Like other parents, I am necessarily embroiled in my local educational market. With my third child approaching secondary school, I find I can choose not just among schools, but also among the curricula offered within each. My child can easily access four schools offering the IB: three State schools (one of which offers just the IB Diploma, the other two offering the IB Diploma alongside the Queensland State curriculum) and one private school offering IB curriculum alongside the State curriculum. This local ecology seems to have arrived at a 'tipping point' (Urry, 2003, p. 53), where if a school is not offering the IB, it will have to, in order to remain in the game of recruiting what are considered desirable students, 'the value-adding client' (Ball, 1993, p. 8).

This paper draws on public domain documents from the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) and newspaper reportage to illustrate how the IB is represented in public discourse. These representations are read against sociological theory of social change with particular reference to the interaction between forces of globalisation and reconstructed nationalisms and identities; global educational policy flows; and sociological theory of cultural capital and distinction as implicated in the dynamics of school choice and class reproduction. The paper is

presented in five parts. First, the school curriculum is reviewed as an object of study that has been understood both as an expression of national interests and as a mechanism for the reproduction of social class. The IB is then reviewed both as a uniquely global product, and as a local product through its uptake in Australian settings. The third section briefly describes the Australian context and the flavour of current media debates around secondary schooling curricula, and the work that references to the IB do in these debates. The next section enquires more closely into how the IB is being textually produced as a brand of distinction in media accounts and parent information, with a consideration of what gets glossed over in such treatments. The final section pulls these strands together to reflect on why the IB is increasingly appealing in the Australian context at the moment, and how it is implicated not just in geographical mobilities, but also in social mobilities and class strategies.

### **Interpreting the school curriculum**

The school curriculum has been recognised as a major tool, on one hand, for building the horizontal solidarity that constitutes the imagined community of the nation (Anderson, 1991), and on the other, for reproducing the vertical class structure within society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Teese & Polesel, 2003), thus potentially delivering identities within identities. School curricula are achieved through the temporary settlement of competing interests intent on shaping the citizens of the future (MacIntyre, 1995) through the selection (and de-selection) of knowledges, pedagogies and assessment regimes (Yates, 2006). Any curriculum constructs, transmits and legitimates certain versions of the desired group identity (Bernstein, 2000), be it local, class, national or cosmopolitan. Such constructions fuel and sustain the shared social imaginary as it evolves over time and generations (Anderson, 1991).

These are high stakes which explain the political investments in curricular debates. Such debates have become more problematic in times of globalising mobilities: 'People now live amid many social imaginaries, in addition to those that are dictated by the dominant national formations' (Rizvi, 2006, p. 197), and school curricular reform efforts have wrestled with achieving a global orientation while ensuring a strong national identity at the same time (Green, 1999; Koh, 2005). The IB, however, offers the unique promise of delivering a solution of nested national and global forms of citizenship within its premise of internationalism, and its mission of producing 'international-mindedness' (International Baccalaureate Organisation, 2006, p. 1).

Curricula reform has become increasingly instrumental and tied to the national interest (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 2001) with efforts to achieve better national alignment with, and positioning within, the knowledge economy, and to meet the human capital demands of the globalised markets in twenty-first-century capitalism (Marginson, 1999). There seem to be equal compensatory efforts to shore up local identities and affiliations (Hage, 2003) through nationalistic curriculum and pedagogy, particularly in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001 (Rizvi, 2003). Progressive humanist innovations have met with forceful neo-conservative reform agendas, in particular the brand of neo-liberal reforms that drive school reform through mechanisms of competition in increasingly privatised markets.

The neo-liberal discourse of school choice has allowed the anxious middle classes to pursue ‘strategies of closure’ (Ball, 2003) around privileged enclaves and niche markets of educational distinction (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996). Over a series of research projects, Ball and colleagues have built up a complex and rich picture of middle-class ‘prudentialism’ across a range of choice behaviours, and how these are socially conditioned by ‘position within a social network . . . against a background of material and social differences’ (Ball et al., 1996, p. 93). The patterns of individual school choices become a ‘micro-mechanism for macro-level class reproduction’ (Ball, 2003, p. 15). In other words, the tapestry of individual choices effectively produces a stratified market that reinforces relative class position.

This literature focuses on the choice of school or child care centre (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Vincent & Warren, 1998) where curriculum comes as part of the package. However, the situation emerging in my local school market is not just choosing the school, but choosing the curriculum within the school. In Australia, Teese (2000) and colleagues (Teese & Polesel, 2003) have analysed the ‘machine of the curriculum’ to demonstrate the class implications of subject selection within the secondary curriculum:

It is the story of how, within the expanding structure of the curriculum, certain kinds of knowledge conserve their pre-eminence and how this hierarchy operates as a machine, translating social power into academic merit and thus conserving the wider social structure itself. (Teese & Polesel, 2003, p. 18)

Teese and Polesel argue that the school market is inequitably structured not just at the school level, but also through the relative status of subject areas, and through who is channelled into which subjects.

The questions here are: how the IB curriculum articulates with these patterns and flows of relative advantage/disadvantage orchestrated through the social distribution of school curricula; whether the IB can deliver citizenship of a new order relating to more global collectives lived beyond the nation; or whether it has been enlisted and/or recontextualised locally to serve middle-class strategy. Rather than seeing these as independent ‘either/or’ conditions, this paper tries to hold these two drivers – structural reproduction and global citizenship – together to ask who in our community thus gets access to this more globally disposed curriculum?

### **The IB phenomenon**

The IB is managed by a transnational non-profit organisation, the IBO, based in Geneva with regional offices around the globe. The IBO’s initial and continuing mission is to offer and manage school curriculum for globally mobile students. The IB has been in operation as a Diploma for the final two years of school since 1970 (Fox, 1985; Hill, 2002) and is recognised widely for the purposes of university entrance (Sjogren & Campbell, 2003). The IB Diploma is premised on core values of active global citizenship, critical enquiry and intercultural understanding, with a strong tradition in the study of languages (Hayden & Wong, 1997). It is often described with reference to its ‘balanced’, ‘integrated’ and ‘holistic’ approach to education, in contrast to state curricula that encourage more streamed specialisation and disciplinarity at this stage of schooling (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2006). It requires the study of six subjects selected across both sciences and

humanities, including two languages – one being the language of instruction and the other studied as an additional or foreign language. Some of these subjects are studied in more depth than others, which allows the student a degree of specialisation. In addition the student is required to complete an extended piece of independent research, a course in the ‘Theory of Knowledge’, and a program of Creativity, Action or Service (CAS) activities. More recently, the IBO has also developed and offered curricula for the early and middle year phases of schooling (Hill, 2002).

Support for the IB concept grew from ‘internationalist’ ideals and the re-imagining of the world as more interconnected and interdependent post-World War I (Fox, 1985; Hill, 2002). More pragmatically, the expatriate employees of the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations, were anxious about the ‘denationalisation’ of their children (Fox, 1985, p. 54), and sought educational opportunities so their children were not disadvantaged by their mobility when it came to university entrance. Thus the IB has its origins and vision in facilitating routes for transnational mobility of a cosmopolitan middle class. Significantly, this group of parents were professionals whose life opportunities hinged on their educational qualifications, and they were intent on ensuring the same opportunities for their children. As a small but ‘disproportionately influential’ (Hill, 2002, p. 205) community, they attracted powerful advocates who won funding, public ‘leverage’ and patronage for their internationalist project.

Given the nature of this social catchment, and its ambitious focus on university entrance, the IB has built a reputation for elite, ‘academically challenging’ standards. This branding amounts to a global franchise (Cambridge, 2002) competing for students with other international curricula, such as the international examinations administered by Cambridge University. More recently, the IB has been implemented in competition with local curricula, being offered to local students as well as to internationally mobile students. For example, Mathews and Hill (2005) describe how the introduction of the IB was used to renew a residualised public secondary school in the USA and to draw middle-class students back to the school. In the UK, then Prime Minister Blair announced that from 2008, the IB will be offered in UK government schools as an alternative to a renovated ‘A’ level curriculum (Phillips & Pound, 2003). The IB now thus seems to be associated as much with vertical mobility and class politics as with horizontal or spatial mobility.

At the time of writing, the IBO’s webpage listed 47 schools offering the IB Diploma across Australia, 13 of these also offering the Early Phase curriculum, and eight also offering the Middle Years curriculum. There are yet other schools that offer the Early Phase or Middle Years curriculum but not the Diploma and many more schools reportedly in the process of applying for accreditation to offer IB programs in the future. Of the 47 listed Diploma schools, 39 are private schools (five designated ‘international schools’), the majority of these in NSW and Victoria, while the remaining eight are government schools (one designated ‘international’), in Queensland (four), ACT (two) and South Australia (two). In state school settings, there is the added dimension that students enrolling in the IB pay additional fees in the order of \$3000 to be registered with the IBO for examination purposes. These additional costs have necessitated the drafting of new clauses in the Queensland State Education Act to allow for additional fees to apply in such ‘specialised programs’ (Education Queensland, 2005). The IB is officially recognised as an alternative credential for regulated tertiary admissions. For example, the Queensland Tertiary

Admissions Commission (QTAC) website (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2007) ‘welcomes’ applications from IB graduates, and offers tables explaining how the IB aggregate score is ranked against the local curricular scoring system, with advice on how individual IB subjects may be mixed with State curricula to satisfy university prerequisites. QTAC and the IBO have established relations to allow for the automated lodgement and validation of results.

While the IB is thus embedded and accommodated within local institutional frames, it carries a moral discourse of ‘internationalism’ which ‘celebrates cultural diversity and promotes international cooperation and an internationally minded outlook’ (Cambridge, 2002, p. 228). As a curriculum focused beyond the local, it has been explicitly designed to achieve ‘the harmonious development of the child in relation . . . to his national cultural characteristics, as well as to the wider community of the world’ (International School of Geneva, *Student–Parent Handbook*, cited in Fox, 1985, p. 57). This design makes practical sense when the school offering the IB caters for mobile children of diplomatic families in Canberra. It is yet to be investigated whether and how this promise is realised when the curriculum is enacted for localised middle-class advantage.

Language education takes a central and symbolic place in this curriculum to ‘develop internationally minded people’ (IBO, 2007). Each student is required to study a second language for their Diploma. This requirement was flagged in the Australian Council for Educational Research (2006) report’s consideration of the IB model as having major resourcing implications, given the current limited number of students pursuing language in their final years of schooling across Australia. Carr and Pauwels (2006, p. 43) similarly describe the ‘monolingual mindset’ which is ‘the traditional disinterest in other-language learning which has always characterised – and continues to characterise – the major Anglophone countries’, affecting male students in particular. According to Teese’s (2000) analysis of Australian curricular offerings, there is an additional distinction between the high-status ‘elite languages’ (p. 24) which attract and reward students with the requisite cultural capital, and ‘community languages’ which allow migrant groups to study their heritage language, without parallel status accorded. By mandating the study of languages, the IB design similarly works to deter some and sequester other students as an elite within a privileged higher-status curriculum. My point here is not to argue whether or not students should study a language to develop international-mindedness, but rather how the IB, in the Australian ecology, will appeal to, and select, certain students while deterring others, so that what it has to offer will not be distributed evenly through the mechanism of ‘choice’. This selectivity in itself will be appealing to some parents.

This section has outlined the history, vision and structure of the IB as it was originally designed, then described its uptake and recontextualisation within the current conditions of Australia’s secondary schools. In summary, the IB has been operating globally since the 1970s, but it has recently attracted the interest of public-sector administrators as a strategy to win back the drifting middle classes. To this end, its extra fees, and less popular requirement of second-language study, do not necessarily impede this strategy, but rather may help to distinguish it as a curriculum of choice for more privileged groups.

### **Interpreting the IB in local Australian ecologies**

The current appeal and uptake of the IB needs to be understood in the broader context of public debates over curriculum matters. While the Commonwealth government in Australia has a Department of Education with broad policy functions, the provision and governance of public schooling has been the constitutional responsibility of the six states and two territories. Historically, this has produced multiple solutions to the same problem, each with jealously guarded traditions in curriculum, assessment, teacher registration, and even the age of commencement. There are currently nine senior school certificates (the state of Victoria offers two). Rather than viewing this as an embarrassment of riches in its diversity, the recent Liberal government pursued an explicit campaign of exerting increasing control and standardisation on State schooling systems over its 11-year incumbency. Manufactured crises around literacy and numeracy standards (Woods, 2007) have given birth to national testing schedules, and policy debates around teacher-performance pay. As in other public sectors, various Commonwealth directives have become State policy through the device of tying States' compliance to funding rounds, thus 'steering at a distance' (Henry et al., 2001, p. 31). Significantly since the 1960s, the Commonwealth government has also accrued the 'state aid' (Connell, 2002, p. 321) role of subsidising private school options in competition with the State public sector. More recently, such funding has been increasingly used as a lever for 'shifting enrolments toward the private sector' (Campbell, 2005, p. 11).

To exacerbate these tensions, the recent Liberal Commonwealth Minister for Education and Prime Minister often publicly attacked state curricula on several fronts. They disparaged the post-modern history curricula developed in different states, with a view to reinstating a more nation-building narrative (Madigan, 2006). They denounced English curricula, with a view to reinstating a celebratory national literary canon (Perkin, 2007). They criticised integrated social science subjects, with a view to re-instating the traditional disciplines of history and geography (Ferrari, 2007a); and they disapproved of school-based assessment systems in Queensland and the ACT, with a view to re-instating a regime of external exams in the final year (Ferrari, 2007b; Livingstone, 2007). Such 'radically conservative' (Apple, 2001, p. ix) interventions in what is constitutionally State government business played out through media releases and editorial comment in the conservative national paper, *The Australian*, more than through debated policy platforms and election mandates. The common thread across these agendas is their neo-conservative zeitgeist, and their 'retrospective' orientation (Bernstein, 2000, p. 205) intent on reinventing some nostalgic golden past where communities and knowledge were more stable and secure through tighter control of the curriculum. The school curriculum thus is being asked to serve as the brakes on social change, slowing down the rate of change, reproducing the younger generation in the image of the older as much as possible. The new Labor government has also expressed interest in a national curriculum, with a similarly conservative back-to-basics approach ('Dumbing Down', 2007).

### ***Pushing for a national curriculum***

There had been previous unsuccessful efforts to mount a national school curriculum framework in Australia between 1988 and 1993. This became a battle between state

and Commonwealth government rights, and the decisions made were ‘political, not educational’ (Grundy, 1998, p. 165). Recent discussions to this end centred around the idea of an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE). Initially this was envisaged as not necessarily displacing state curricula but rather as an alternative curriculum to end ‘each state’s insistence on a monopolistic position in its schools for its own curriculum’ to quote Kemp (2006, p. 12), a past Commonwealth Minister of Education in the Liberal government. It is possible to see here the contradiction between the neo-liberal push for market choice, and the neo-conservative move by a centralist federal government. In the same article, the IB was invoked as a trail-blazing solution to a number of endemic ‘problems’:

Instead of the state curriculum, schools can now use the International Baccalaureate, and that curriculum has not been negotiated with the unions or the states. It is an internationally accepted curriculum with high academic standards that some students prefer to do because its assessment is recognised internationally. It is not a big jump to allow schools to choose a national curriculum as well... The case of the IB is instructive, because it shows it is possible for schools to offer more than one curriculum. It also shows that schools can use curriculum to attract parents and establish a reputation for quality. (Kemp, 2006, p. 12)

This text masterfully pushes lots of conservative buttons. The teaching profession is represented only as ‘unions’, industrial adversaries, not the educational experts capable of teaching to ‘high academic standards’. The goal of ‘more than one curriculum’ invokes the market model and its rubric of choice to ‘attract parents’, foster competition and enhance quality.

In contrast to the consideration of alternative curricula to break the states’ ‘monopoly’, a report, commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training, and conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (2006), recommended that ‘the most desirable long-term outcome would be the emergence of a single Australian Certificate of Education in place of the existing nine certificates’ (p. ii). The IB was again considered in this exercise as a possible prototype for the Australian Certificate of Education (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2006). The features that were highlighted as making the IB model particularly desirable included its international standing for university entrance across the world, its reputation for academic rigour, its required breadth of studies, and its non-academic core assessed through ‘authenticated completion’ (p. 44). The committee ultimately evaluated the IB model as not capable of providing enough flexible pathways to accommodate all students, being better suited to contributing to an alternative curriculum ‘only for those students planning to continue to tertiary study’ (p. 44).

This evaluation amounts to a high-profile endorsement and validation of the IB curriculum’s reputation as the niche curriculum of choice for the academic elite, in the public discourse surrounding Australian educational policy. Part of the IB’s appeal, as reported, stemmed from its assessment processes and their resonance with the conservative preferences of the then government for standards, comparability and external examination. In the report’s reflections on what the mooted Australian Certificate of Education might learn from the IB model, the standardised external assessment is held up as exemplary practice.

### ***Curricula for mobile populations***

The most obvious and convincing rationale behind the centralist push for a national curriculum is the increasing population mobility across state borders, and the difficulty the varied curricular regimes present for the mobile student (Kemp, 2006). Across the five years between June 2001 and June 2006, there were approximately 1.87 million interstate movements recorded in a population of approximately 20 million, of which Queensland received the highest volume of net migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a). In addition to internal mobility, the enterprise of cultivating international enrolments has spread to the school sector. The Queensland Education Department now ‘caters for over 1800 international students from 75 countries’ and ‘over 41 Queensland government schools . . . offer full-time programs for international students’ (Education Queensland, 2007). In the spirit of marketisation, some State secondary schools have pursued accreditation with the Council of International Schools (CIS) to flag their interest in international catchments.

These national and international mobilities make it increasingly difficult for the State systems to sustain local particularities as they orient their vision, and become answerable, to communities beyond their state boundaries. Campbell (2005) argues that the local comprehensive public secondary school evolved ‘with post World War II social reconstruction in mind. It had a “neighbourhood” rather than a “market” to serve’ (p. 20). Such a focus on addressing local needs through local curricular solutions was further developed in the wake of the Karmel Report (1973), but has now arguably been replaced by the efforts of the marketised school (Connell, 2002) to seduce and attract the desirable but mobile ‘value-added’ student. To be competitive in this ecology, the curriculum therefore has to play to a broader audience and promise/reflect a wider world.

### ***Curricula for drifting populations***

Australia’s schooling sector has a well-established historical pattern of public schooling for the majority and private schooling for religious (in particular, Catholic) or elite minorities: ‘Social inequality was hardly a problem: it was built in to the system from the start’ (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982, p. 15). The proportion of students attending public government schools has slipped from 70.7% in 1996 to 66.8% in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007b). This schism is particularly marked in secondary schooling, where, as Table 1 shows, government enrolments are now less than 62% of total secondary enrolments.

This loss of confidence in the public sector and ‘drift’ towards the private sector, ultimately threatens to reduce the comprehensive state high school to residual status – the school of ‘last resort’ (Campbell, 2005, p. 3). This effect could be seen as the result of the neo-liberal marketisation policies that have been rolled out in the various state systems since the 1980s (Lingard, Hayes, & Mills, 2002), encouraging schools to diversify and specialise in response to competitive market pressures as a mechanism for improving quality (Marginson, 1997). This is a familiar story, all the more remarkable for its resonance across national borders (Stromquist, 2002), albeit with local twists (Astiz, Wiseman, & Baker, 2002; Green, 1999). In Australia, the recent Liberal government pursued an

Table 1. Enrolments in secondary schools, 2001–2006, by category of school.

Year	Government secondary total enrolments (%)	Non-government secondary			Total secondary enrolments
		Catholic (%)	Independent (%)	Total enrolments (%)	
2002	865,587 (63.2)	291,174 (21.2)	213,642 (15.6)	504,816 (36.8)	1,370,403
2003	880,669 (62.9)	295,742 (21.1)	223,321 (16.0)	519,063 (37.1)	1,399,732
2004	871,653 (62.2)	299,450 (21.4)	229,372 (16.4)	528,822 (37.8)	1,400,475
2005	875,703 (61.8)	304,137 (21.5)	236,130 (16.7)	540,267 (38.2)	1,415,970
2006	881,970 (61.6)	308,582 (21.6)	241,366 (16.9)	549,948 (38.4)	1,431,918

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007b).

explicit program of increasing funding to the private schooling sector in the interests of promoting ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘the right to choose’ (Liberal Party of Australia, 2007, p. 15).

State systems are responding to ‘the retreat of the middle class’ (Campbell, 2005, p. 9) differently. Of particular interest here is the Queensland government’s tactic of creating a new suite of ‘Smart Academies’ offering not the State’s own curriculum but the IB as their chosen senior years curriculum. The three academies, clustered in the densely populated South East corner of Queensland, are selective and specialised (one in maths, science, technology, another in creative industries, and the last in health sciences opened in 2008), with each specialisation intellectually resourced through a partnership with a local university. The launch and first intakes in 2007 were supported by a prominent advertising campaign building the ‘smart academy’ brand and articulating the vision in which the IB featured prominently:

students graduate with the world-recognised International Baccalaureate Diploma, and, depending on course structure, advanced university credit and entry.<sup>1</sup>

In comparison, the adjoining NSW state system will not endorse the IB in any of its public schools (Patty, 2007), while Victoria’s state Labor government has recently formally shifted policy to allow alternative curricula, including the IB, to be offered in public schools (Rood, 2006).

This brief survey of the current Australian ecology in terms of political agendas, market tactics and demographic flows has depicted the conditions of possibility behind the increasing uptake of the IB. From this reading, the IB appears to serve: as a comparative foil to highlight the perceived shortcomings of state curricula; as a higher authority when it comes to curricular and assessment design; as a mechanism to override state rivalries; as an exemplar of choice policies in action; and as a brand of distinction to mark niche programs in order to expedite the mobility and capture of desirable students in competing systems.

### Producing the IB in textual representations

Ball et al. (1996) apply Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of distinction to school choice. ‘Distinction’ captures the variety of ways in which ‘the cultivated disposition and

cultural competence . . . are revealed in the nature of the cultural goods consumed' (Ball et al., 1996, p. 91). Thus school choices, and by extension curricular choices, carry symbolic meanings being the 'socially pertinent properties attached to each of them' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.19). Baudrillard (1988), in his treatment of the 'system of objects' and the semiotics of choice in consumer society, similarly but more provocatively argues that any consumer choice also carries 'the "social standing" of the object' (p. 15), which in turn, will 'induce categories of persons' (p. 17) ordered in a hierarchical code. In my everyday world, this is the meaning taken when acquaintances enquire what school my children attend. My answer serves as an efficient indicator, giving them the measure of the woman, from which they might read my relative position in their world. The IB, as a rare commodity and curriculum of choice in Australia's education market, with its reputation of internationalism and academic excellence, seems to operate as such a product of distinction whose choice displays the cultivated taste and social distinction of its consumer.

When choosing curricula, parents are not necessarily dealing with detailed knowledge about how the curriculum might be enacted. Rather they may well be dealing with the affect and connotations associated with the brand – the 'hot' reputational knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998). There have been previous studies of the IB as such a commodity. Whitehead's (2005) analysis of 40 advertisements for South Australian schools that mentioned IB programs concluded that 'these schools were selling social advantage rather than social justice' and 'the IB was deployed as a commodity that increased their advantage in the education marketplace' (p. 1). Bagnall's (1994) earlier survey study of the IB in Australia and Canada, for the period 1980 to 1993, similarly concluded that:

The parents and students of the IB program are aware of the potential cultural capital that the IB offers them. The selection of the IB program is more than a casual choice made the year before beginning the program. The advantages offered by this international diploma are likened by Bourdieu to trumps in a card game. (p. 3)

To add to this literature, in this section I briefly describe how the IB has been represented in 20 recent stories in Australian daily newspapers. I am particularly interested in the intertextual resonances – how a limited and therefore defining set of descriptors and associations circulate across and through these representations and apply to (1) the curriculum design, (2) the curriculum's recruit, and (3) the IB graduate. The texts were identified through an Australia/New Zealand newspaper database. The most recent 20 articles in Australian newspapers at the time of writing which mentioned the 'International Baccalaureate' in some way were compiled and analysed in terms of two questions:

- what stories are being told about the IB?
- what attributes are regularly invoked for the IB, its potential students and its graduates?

These aspects are then used to address the more general question of how the IB is being textually produced for public consumption in Australia, and what selling points are featured in such public discourse. For ease of reference, Table 2 numbers the articles and their sources, and the analysis refers to the articles by number.

Table 2. Australian print media articles selected for discourse analysis.

No.	Article
1	'Classroom: Asia' by S. Robinson, <i>The Age</i> (Melbourne), 30 July 2007.
2	'A worldly experience' by M. Ham & Y. Nielsen, <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> , 26 July 2007.
3	'A real eye-opener', <i>Northern Territory News</i> , 25 July 2007.
4	'Attack on the school couch potato' by X. Kleinig, <i>The Advertiser</i> (Adelaide), 24 July 2007.
5	'Finding your way', <i>Herald Sun</i> (Melbourne), 23 July 2007.
6	'Creativity challenge', <i>The Courier Mail</i> (Brisbane), 17 July 2007.
7	'Fees threat: Schools act over Government funding cuts', by X. Kleinig, <i>The Advertiser</i> (Adelaide), 12 July 2007.
8	'Reform must be justified', by A. Lewis, <i>The Australian</i> , 9 July 2007.
9	'When worlds collide' by A. Jackson, <i>The Age</i> (Melbourne), 3 July 2007.
10	'Ill-prepared for the rigours of uni', by K. Donnelly, <i>The Australian</i> , 27 June 2007.
11	'Unis free to boost their full-fee places', by J. Metlikovec, <i>Herald Sun</i> (Melbourne), 16 June 2007.
12	'On a growth mission', by D. Ryan, <i>The Age</i> (Melbourne), 4 June 2007.
13	'New campus for leaders of the future', <i>The Courier Mail</i> (Brisbane), 2 June 2007.
14	'Blackboard jungle', by D. Rood, <i>The Age</i> (Melbourne), 25 May 2007.
15	'Great success, broadly speaking', by P. Kershaw, <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , 24 May 2007.
16	'Tick for national testing', by T. Livingstone, <i>The Courier Mail</i> (Brisbane), 25 April, 2007.
17	'The philosophers' zone', by B. Reeves, <i>The Age</i> (Melbourne), 16 April 2007.
18	'Principal broadened scope of education', <i>Herald Sun</i> (Melbourne), 12 April 2007.
19	'Immigrant Sampson shows he's not here for a haircut', <i>The Australian</i> , 24 March 2007.
20	'Labor's standard threat to schools', by K. Donnelly, <i>The Australian</i> , 21 March 2007.

In these news stories the IB cropped up sometimes as the central newsworthy focus itself, sometimes as an incidental attribute of a character or as a comparative example to further arguments in opinion pieces. As a story in itself, the 'news' about the IB was its rapid increase around Australia (2) and the fact that it was now to be found in state public schools (2, 6, 12, 13) outside its more usual setting in private schools. These news stories included the testimonials of satisfied customers – be they staff, parent or student. Another similar story announced that Melbourne University will be 'the first' to offer a teacher education program dedicated to producing 'specialist' IB teachers (11). The IB also featured in school advertorials, for example showcasing students' CAS projects (3). As an incidental topic, it frequently figured as the exemplar of how choice is possible despite the operation of state curricula, or more generally, public-sector systems (8, 10, 16), and as a positive comparative foil highlighting the shortcomings of state curricula (4). It was mentioned at length in articles devoted to the importance of teaching languages (15) and to the innovation of teaching philosophy (17). It is mentioned incidentally as an established alternative in a news item about tertiary entrance process (5), and in an article about a public school forced to charge fees for 'anything above the standard' (7). Two articles (14, 15) presented the uptake of the IB as the matter of fact solution to student drift: 'too many senior students moved to other schools, so this year it introduced the International Baccalaureate' (15). It also emerges as a significant background feature of high achievers – in obituaries (18 and 19), or in the profile of a high-achieving

individual (9). From this spread, it can be seen that the IB is currently very much a 'good news' story, even when it means higher fees. It also discursively serves as a symbol and archetype 'alternative' for 'choice' advocates, resonating with neo-liberal values.

As a curriculum, the IB is described as a strong-handed, authoritarian regime with 'compulsory', 'required', 'mandated' features (2, 4), thus resonating with the 'cultural restoration' (Apple, 2004, p. 175) values of neo-conservatism. This prescriptive nature is considered its strength in contrast to the permissive, student-centred, interest-driven flexibility of state curricula. The prescriptive charter achieves its other defining characteristic of breadth, and its 'wider scope' (2): 'If I had done the HSC, I would have just been doing sciences but now I am studying a wide range of subjects' (2). It 'forces kids to excel in different areas' (1). One account (15) tells of collateral success with male students doing languages 'inspired by the fact that we do the International Baccalaureate, and there are a number of boys who will maintain a language to get that option'. The IB curriculum is also linked a number of times to the prospect of accelerated university entrance (6, 13, 15). The wordings that keep echoing across the articles are 'rigorous' (10, 12, 2), 'challenging' (6) or cognate wordings such as 'tough', 'intensive', 'hard to pass' (1) – a curriculum that 'drives' its students (2). Other recurrent wordings characterise the IB as 'alternative' (11), 'international', 'recognised', 'standardised' (8), and it is repeatedly associated closely with 'university'. The assessment system is reported as a selling point in itself: 'Exams are criteria-marked and are not scaled, so the boys know exactly what marks they achieved' (15).

The students associated with the curriculum across the articles are clearly distinguished from the masses: 'The diploma is not designed for all students . . . but for those destined for university' (2). The IB students profiled included cosmopolitan expatriates in international schools (1), 'leaders of the future' (6), and high achievers 'at a much higher level academically than their peers' (1). The IB candidate is also portrayed as ambitious, 'we want to prove ourselves to our teachers and our parents' (2). The IB graduate invoked across these texts is above all else, 'well-rounded' (3) and relatively advantaged: 'set . . . up for a great future' (2), given a 'good leg-up' (15) for university studies, 'able to engage critically . . . rather than to fall passively in line with another's view' (17).

Though this paper has examined a limited corpus of articles, the analysis gives the flavour of how the IB is currently being produced for public consumption in Australia and makes it possible to understand the current appeal of the IB. It is represented as all 'good news', with no whisper of critique. However, as the desirable and celebrated alternative, it casts a shadow on others and intertextually builds an implicit criticism of local curricula which become the parallel 'bad news' stories. If the IB is seen to 'own' the qualities of 'academic rigour', 'challenge', 'well-roundedness', such claims create and promote a perception of their absence in other curricula.

### **Conclusion: the appeal of the IB**

The articles and their links build a picture of a school curriculum that has positive impacts on its students (value-adding with its global brand of distinction), its schools (recapturing the drifting middle class) and the larger educational system

(demonstrating how alternatives can work in a market). It is produced as both attractive and repellent: attractive in the ambitious sights it sets, and the promise of advantages to reap beyond graduation; repellent in the way it discourages certain types of students from choosing it, which in turn makes it a more attractive enclave to those it fits. It is clearly portrayed as an alternative for a particular type of student, so not everybody gets this choice. The students do not just choose the curriculum – the curriculum chooses the students.

These public texts are not considered benign but rather are understood to be doing important work – steering the undesirable students away from the IB. This in effect guarantees the IB's relative success as a brand of distinction, as it inevitably delivers high-achieving graduates from its selective intake. It seems ironic that the forceful, prescriptive charter of the IB curriculum has become a symbol of choice in Australian market dynamics, but such is the contradictory nature of the neo-conservative and neo-liberal alliance dominating educational environments. By having successfully embedded itself in pockets of advantage around Australia, it can now be opportunistically promoted to occupy or exemplify the imaginary space created by the political debates around a national curriculum. Its traditional, establishment sensibilities around assessment practices resonate with the political zeitgeist with its neo-conservative, retrospective orientation, and offer a palatable, ready-made 'solution' to the 'problem' of state 'monopoly' curricula. However, the IB brand of distinction may well suffer if it becomes too popular, and too widely spread.

What gets lost in this public debate around 'choice' is the previous moral sensibility that argued a curriculum should be developed locally to address local needs. Population mobility erodes this to some extent as localities become more permeable, fluid and entangled, however the import of an internationally designed and examined curriculum seems to be an over-reaction and an abrogation of the responsibility of a civil society to debate and design its own template for citizenship. Such citizenship could well embrace both local and global frames for citizenship and their articulation, but the point is that no collective soul-searching around what constitutes Australian citizenship will inform the design of this curriculum. Whether and how the IB delivers 'international-mindedness' remains to be explored in further research, but the public texts reviewed deploy its international branding as a marker of distinction, a proxy indicator of quality, in the tradition of antipodean cultural cringe.

In conclusion, this paper was not an analysis nor a critique of the IB Diploma curriculum per se, but rather an analysis of the variety of conditions in the Australian educational ecology that make the IB an appealing choice now, and to help explain the phenomenon of its current escalating enrolments. I do not want to diminish what the IB may offer its students, but I do want to highlight how its current appeal stems not so much from its internal design as from its opportunistic fulfilment of a number of current political agendas. It is a curriculum that was developed with cosmopolitan middle-class interests in mind, and is now being strategically deployed to engage the local middle-class consumer. Parents will be buying the gift-wrapped promise constructed in the media before sampling the actual product, and having invested in that choice, will carefully protect and promote their chosen brand and their high-stakes investment in its forms of distinction.

## Note

1. Advertisement for the Queensland Academy for Creative Industries in *The Australian*, 6 July 2007, and *The Courier Mail*, 23–24 June 2007.

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