



# The IB is a curriculum for the modern world

*With an abiding philosophy and growing following, the International Baccalaureate is the best way to prepare students for their future lives, a headteacher argues*

MICHAEL CARSLAW

HERE'S A question I am sometimes asked: "Why is a proud Scot the headteacher of a Scottish school that chooses not to teach the Scottish curriculum?"

At St Leonards, we follow the International Baccalaureate (IB) because we want to contribute to the enhancement of the place of Scots and Scotland in the world – it has nothing to do with not being Scottish. (And some may be surprised by the IB's Scottish connections: the first director was renowned Edinburgh-born educationalist Alec Peterson.) For me, it's all about giving students deeper learning, wider options and richer minds.

Throughout my career, I've taught a variety of curricula and qualifications. None is right for every student – to mix metaphors, there is no one-size-fits-all magic bullet. When I was at school, I could study both Highers and English A levels in the same subjects at the same time, but the divergence of national curricula has made this impossible. It is the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP), and its sister qualification the IB Career-related Programme (IBCP), that suit the most students.

A fellow IB head described the IBDP by invoking that old tagline for a well-known beer, as "probably the best sixth-form education in the world". He's absolutely right. Coupled with the IBCP, it wins hands down. You can tailor it to your strengths (and weaknesses) while laying a strong foundation for next steps, whether university or the world of work.

St Leonards Junior School is also the only school in Scotland that follows the invigorating primary version of the curriculum. Our pupils are being ideally prepared for anything that an uncertain world can throw at them.

## Immune to flip-flopping

Many parents and employers tell me they are either unaware of or don't understand the different qualifications on offer nowadays. Their points of reference – exams they took at school many moons ago – have been consigned to history. Most national curricula around the world are subject to regular revisions, resulting in changes to underpinning philosophies as well as programmes of study, as subjects and fads come and go.

But the IB – with exams taken every year by 150,000 students around the globe (and counting) – is immune to this flip-flopping, having remained constant in philosophy and approach for almost 50 years.

The IB stops students becoming over-specialised or over-assessed too early. I get alarmed when I hear how easy it is for pupils to drop what many would view as key subjects early in their secondary schooling. What's the outcome? If I had a pound for every adult stuck in a job or career that they don't enjoy, or even loathe, because of a subject choice they made in their mid teens, I would be a rich man.

I also take with a pinch of salt those parents who say: "My son/daughter is going to be an X, Y or Z, and that's that." The world doesn't work like that any more, if it ever did. We need to be preparing our boys and girls for life in the mid-21st century, not for the later part of the 20th century. In this world, how you learn is becoming vitally important.

Ian Leslie, in his book *Curious: the desire to know and why your future depends on it*,

compares the fox (capable of many things) with the hedgehog (highly specialised in knowing how and when to roll into a ball). He posits that young people today need to develop the capacity to be a mixture of the two – a "fox-hog" – by coupling a breadth of knowledge and abilities with a high level of specialism.

How does the IBDP fit this bill? For a start, it involves an approach to teaching that emphasises knowledge acquisition in the most effective way possible, combined with those essential "soft" skills: teamwork, collaboration, and communication.

## Personalised approach

From an early age, IB pupils become independent learners with a strong base of acquired knowledge. This isn't a wishy-washy

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junior school, is fizzing with innovation and ideas, and this continues through to the final two years of schooling.

The philosophy of the IB is that everything you do (and not just in the classroom) is a learning opportunity that will be recognised. Students create a personalised online learning portfolio on an easy-to-use app called ManageBac. The highest points score anyone can achieve is 45; the University of Oxford typically requires 38 or 39, and a pass is 24.

For teachers, too, the IB is enriching. St Leonards' head of sixth form, Aileen Rees, says that it leads to teaching staff who are "a cohesive unit, all working towards the same goal", and a "very powerful" sense of common purpose. She adds: "Lots of schools have excellent co-curricular programmes, but the IBDP is unique in making it a core part of the qualification." This, she says, is an approach that enhances academic ability and achievement more than any other qualification.

The Howie report of 1992 went over a lot of this ground, concluding that the education system should provide more breadth, depth and rigour in the final years of secondary, offering all students a demanding qualification that would be recognised internationally. Since 1992, there has been a transformation in our understanding of how young people learn. The curriculum that has clearly kept pace the best with these developments, having been taught in thousands of state and independent schools around the globe, is the International Baccalaureate. ●



Dr Michael Carslaw is headmaster of St Leonards School in St Andrews

JO BRIGHOUSE



## A page-turner of a lesson

I LOOKED in horror at the iPad as the audio was cut off mid-sentence. This couldn't be happening! It was *The Archers'* hour-long trial special and the jury were about to return a verdict. Even Mr Brighthouse (who has been known to comment that listening to *The Archers* must be what being dead is like) was showing a vague interest in the outcome. The suspense had been building and building and now, at this crucial point, I was being denied narrative closure thanks to a dodgy wi-fi connection.

As a teacher, you should never underestimate the power of stories. Whether it's playground gossip or the life of Henry VIII, our need to know what happened next is hardwired. I used to spend hours planning "wow factor" lessons and assemblies, collecting props, music and computer effects to try to sustain children's attention when all I actually needed to do was read them a story.

Extracts don't have nearly the same impact. When I was a newly qualified teacher, the restrictive timings of the literacy hour often forced teachers to use text extracts and save whole-class novels for story time at the end of the day. The rise of guided reading (with the dreaded daily carousel activities) allowed children to read whole books but often at a snail's pace. And while top readers were getting stuck into Michael Morpurgo, some children ventured no farther into language than Biff and Chip's magic key would allow them to go.

Getting children to study a text that is beyond their reading ability should be a no-brainer. We do it with young children all the time. My preschooler has no idea what the black marks on

the page mean, but he can recite *The Gruffalo* pretty much verbatim.

And it makes teaching so much more fun. Sharing a book can transform your classroom. Their delight in the gruesome descriptions of *The Twits*; the collective gasp when they realise what Bess has done to save the Highwayman; the palpable

relief when Aslan comes roaring back to life. The premise is simple: take one great book by one great writer and read the hell out of it. Don't

kill it stone dead by getting everyone to read a bit out loud: read it to them. Call on your most confident readers for help and throw in a bit of whole-class choral reading to mix it up.

Great children's books are the ultimate textbooks. Everything you need for a good English lesson is here: vocabulary, grammar, characterisation, comprehension and inspiration for writing.

Beg, steal or borrow to ensure every pupil has their own copy of the book (nothing kills a great read like sharing it with a fidgety classmate). And when your children write their own stories, don't even consider commenting on grammar or spelling until they've had a chance to read you the whole thing – however flawed and zombie-filled the plot.

Put simply, if you want to be a good primary teacher, you can't do it without some good books. End of story.

*Jo Brighthouse is a primary school teacher in the Midlands*