Student Perceptions of the Non-Academic Disadvantages of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program
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The International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB) program is an educational program that has become increasingly popular in recent years among high schools across North America. Most research claims that IB students strongly believe that it is an academic advantage for them to take the program due to an advanced learning environment, a challenging curriculum and the promotion of critical thinking among other factors. However, there is a lack of research on student perceptions of the non-academic disadvantages of being enrolled in the IB program. The high rigor and demanding expectations of the IB program led me to question whether the heavy workload could be at times too much for the students to handle. Most research suggests the possibility that the IB program has negative effects on its students such as stress, anxiety, and sleep deprivation. Therefore, although the IB program may benefit students academically, non-academic disadvantages of the IB program may in fact exist.

Knowledge Gap

Findings that students perceive taking the IB program to be academically advantageous are common and well established in research. Despite this, there is a lack of knowledge of non-academic disadvantages of the program – what kinds of negative effects exist and their commonness among students.

Research Objective/Hypothesis

The aim of this research paper is to examine IB students’ perspectives of the non-academic disadvantages of the IB program through IB student interviews. I intend to look at what kinds of non-academic disadvantages IB students face as a result of the program as well as the prevalence of these disadvantages among IB students. The IB program involves a vast curriculum full of material. The more demanding workload and increased difficulty of the IB program compared to a regular high school program could in fact bring increased pressures onto the students. It is therefore possible that IB students are subject to non-academic effects of the
Background

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program is an educational program offered to high school students 16-19 years of age worldwide that strives to provide a world-class education that is academically challenging and promotes critical thinking and understanding of different cultures. IB students study six courses at either a higher level or standard level, with at least one course in each discipline, ensuring a varied curriculum that covers languages, social sciences, experimental sciences and mathematics. Additionally, the program requires that students write an independent 4,000 word research essay; take a Theory of Knowledge course that encourages students to critically reflect on their knowledge; and participate in a 150 hour creativity, action and service community involvement program. At the end of the program, students sit IB examinations throughout the course of a few weeks to one month.

The IB program has been sought by gifted North American students as a way to meet their academic needs in high school (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Mathews & Kitchens, 2007; Culross and Tarver, 2007), and since its inception in 1968, the program has grown rapidly and is now offered in 2,016 IB World Schools in 135 countries worldwide (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2009). The growth in popularity of the IB program means that more and more students will be enrolled in the program, and consequently the effects of the IB program will be felt by an increasingly significant amount of students. The growth of the IB program raises questions such as whether the program is appropriate for all students, and whether the program can have negative effects on the students.

Assessment of the State of Knowledge

Most research tends to agree on the existence of at least some non-academic disadvantages attributed to the IB program, but this issue has yet to be studied in depth. Holly Hertberg-Davis and Carolyn M. Callahan (2008) in “Gifted Students’ Perceptions of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Programs” say that IB students perceive the IB program to be academically challenging, but surprisingly that its curriculum does not meet the
learning needs of all students. In their study, Hertberg-Davis and Callahan interviewed approximately 300 IB students semi-structurally from 23 U.S. high schools and collected responses to assess the program’s appropriateness for students. The study found that most IB students believed that the challenge level, quality of instructors, and learning environments were much more enriched than regular courses. Despite this, some IB students felt that the program’s curriculum was overly rigid and the workload overwhelming, which led to insufficient sleep and a deprived social life. However, Regan Clark Foust, Holly Hertberg-Davis, and Carolyn M. Callahan (2008) in “Having it all” at Sleep’s Expense: The Forced Choice of Participants in Advanced Placement Courses and International Baccalaureate Programs” say instead that IB students maintained their social life and academic achievement by sacrificing sleep. Foust et al. note that previous research suggests the limited social interaction of advanced students, subsequently questioning whether IB students feel forced to choose between social acceptance and academic success. In their study, Foust et al. conduct semi-structural interviews with 84 students at four U.S. high schools. They found that IB students surprisingly did not experience the dilemma of choosing between academic success and social acceptance, commonly by sacrificing sleep, which often led to chronic fatigue. They found that some students did not socialize with non-IB students due to class schedule differences. Similarly, Rita Culross and Emily Tarver (2007) in “Teacher and Student Perceptions of the International Baccalaureate Program: A First Year Perspective” say that IB students felt that the IB program benefited them academically, but that although challenging, they did not find the workload overwhelming. The study noted the commonness of the IB program as an option for gifted students in the U.S. and subsequently they question what students think of the program’s effectiveness. In their study, Culross and Tarver conduct interviews at a U.S. high school towards the end of the first year of implementation of the IB program to examine student perceptions of the program’s effects on student social life and academic life. Out of the 25 IB program participants in that school, they interviewed 24 IB students. They found that IB students felt that the IB program increased their breadth and depth of knowledge and improved writing skills and study habits.

**Method**

In order to gather evidence to answer the question of how students perceive the non-academic disadvantages of the IB program, I will examine relevant student interview responses
in research papers. To gather sources for my research, I searched for articles the MetaLib search engine on the UBC Library webpage.

Findings

Due to the significant increase of course workload in the IB program from a regular high school program, IB students perceive the program to have non-academic disadvantages. The consensus among IB students is that the IB program brings a challenging academic program, enrichment of knowledge, faster pace in covering course material, and good preparation for university (Matthews & Kitchen, 2007; Suldo, Shaunessy, Hardesty, 2008; Hertberg-Davis and Callahan, 2008). Thus, it would only make sense that students experience increased negative effects of work if they feel overwhelmed. (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). In an IB student interview by Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008), one student response regarding workload was: “It seems like there’s just not enough hours in the day sometimes. I’ve got so much work to do” (p. 203). Another response was: “. . . it seems like the teachers are always working to get us full of the knowledge that we need for the tests. So, I feel like we’re always pushing for it” (p. 203). Clearly, the faster pace of covering the course material is demanding of the student. Students were likely to complain about the workload, noting either or a combination of too much work or too little time. Similarly, Culross and Tarver (2007) found that students found the Creativity, Action and Service component of the IB program and essay requirements initially overwhelming. Therefore, not only does the main IB coursework contribute to IB students’ perceptions of the program involving overwhelming work, but all aspects of the IB program requirements possess some degree of overwhelming challenge to students. The increased course load that IB students experience therefore probably has some negative effects on the students. From my research, I have found that the non-academic disadvantages that are most common among IB students are sleep deprivation, inhibition of social life, and increased stress levels.

IB students often endure sleep deprivation as a direct result of the heavy coursework faced in the IB program. One IB student interviewed by Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008) says: “I can’t quite enjoy the material when I’m like... How much homework do I have? Am I going to sleep tonight? And it’s usually no” (p. 203). From this, it is evident that many IB students are aware of the lack of sleep they are getting, as well as why – they are frequently
overburdened by the work that the IB program requires. Another student says: “Yes, it’s a lot of hard nights. And yes, you may not get a lot of sleep... And you challenge yourself and find out... what your body can take or not take” (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008, p. 203). IB students therefore perceive one of the struggles of succeeding academically in the program to be physical – this particular student specifically referred to the body’s ability as a factor in determining success, which may seem quite absurd. Also, Foust, Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008) conducted IB student interviews and found common themes relevant to sleep tabulated below:

**Table 1: Common Themes of Sleep and their Frequency by School (Foust et al., 2008, p. 124)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Themes</th>
<th>Percentage of Interviews that Included Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ignacious (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sleep/fatigue</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sacrificing sleep in order to maintain social life and academic success</td>
<td>44</td>
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In both IB schools in the above table, approximately half or more of the interviewed students noted frequent problems with sleep and fatigue while in the IB program. Furthermore, students admit that they sacrifice their sleep in order to maintain their social life as well as academic success in the IB program, with Crayton Heights having all 100% of interviewed IB students admitting to this. The perception that the IB program causes sleep deprivation is very apparent, and quite prevalent among students.

Student social life is also affected as a result of being enrolled in the IB program. In this context, social life refers to the interactions between the IB student and the people around him. Interestingly, Foust et al. (2008) say that IB students maintain their social life and academic success by sacrificing sleep. Conversely, Culross and Tarver (2007) say that students perceive the increased workload in IB to negatively affect family time, extracurricular activities, and sports. Although there is little doubt that IB students must sacrifice sleep in order to maximize time for studying and socializing, it is still plausible that some IB students would sometimes need to sacrifice part of their social life as well. There is also a large concern among IB students about interaction between IB students and non-IB students (Culross & Tarver, 2007; Matthews & Kitchen, 2007). Some of the concern expressed was about stereotyping of IB students by other students or vice versa. One IB student says: “Other students call us ‘gifties’ or ‘nerds’ and resent
us” (Matthews & Kitchen, 2007, p. 265). Clearly, there are apparent tensions between some IB students and non-IB students caused by their segregation. On the other hand, another IB student says: “There were a lot of complaints about the IB people feeling superior and people being like, ‘Ughh.’ So we just came to an impasse because it’s a ‘school within a school.’” (Foust et al., 2008, p. 124). This shows that IB students are aware of the “pervasive concern about segregation and elitism” (Matthews & Kitchen, 2007, pp. 266-267) at the schools. This also illustrates that the rift between the two groups is due to contributions from both sides. Another IB student says: “You really don’t get a chance to socialize with the other people here who go to regular classes. It’s like you don’t know them really” (Foust et al., 2008, p. 124). In this case, the concern is that due to segregation of the two groups, they are unable to socialize, leading them to sense the barrier between them. The IB program has an evident negative effect on student social life, by lessening the time students can socialize with friends and family; creating tensions between IB students and non-IB students of the same school; and segregating IB students from non-IB students which inhibits socializing between them.

Stress is something that IB students attribute to being enrolled in the IB program. Stress is significant because high stress levels have been linked to depression, suicide, substance abuse, aggression, academic underachievement and diminished quality of life among other negative symptoms (Suldo, Shaunessy, Hardesty, 2008). Stress is commonly felt among IB students because increased workload, decreased social life and sleep deprivation bring increased pressures to the IB students. Foust et al. (2008) found in general that interviewed IB students complained about experiencing a great deal of stress due to demanding schedules, but also that they believed that stress was something they must accept as intrinsic to the IB program. Shannon Suldo, Elizabeth Shaunessy, and Robin Hardesty (2008) conducted interviews with 139 IB students and 168 non-IB students at a school to examine differences in perceived stress levels. They found that on a perceived stress scale of 1 to 5, the mean score for IB students was 3.42 while the mean score for non-IB students 3.11. Considering the range of the scale, it is clear that IB students report a significantly higher perceived stress level than non-IB students which supports the claim that the IB program brings increased stress to its students. However, Suldo et al. (2008) also found that the average GPA for IB students was higher than the average GPA for non-IB students, which contrasts with the idea that increased stress levels decreases academic
performance. Nonetheless, increased perceived stress levels are easily observable in IB students from the regular program, and therefore IB students are more likely to be affected by negative effects such as depression and diminished quality of life than non-IB students, but IB students are unlikely to experience academic underachievement.

Conclusion

Students perceive that the International Baccalaureate Diploma program does have non-academic disadvantages, the most common being high stress levels, sleep deprivation and inhibition of social life. A large portion of IB students are likely to mention high stress levels, as they must deal with the stress from the challenging IB coursework on top of the typical stress experienced by adolescents. Furthermore, the vast majority of IB students note that since joining the IB program, they have experienced constant fatigue due to the little sleep they receive, since they must sacrifice sleep in order to maintain academic success and any social life at all. Finally, a large portion of IB students believe that the IB program has caused either tension between IB students and non-IB students; lack of socializing between the two groups; or simply a decrease in time for socializing in general with family or friends. It is logical that IB students would perceive these three negative effects in the IB program due to the challenging and demanding nature of the IB program, which applies not only to the main IB curriculum but other requirements as well.

The negative effects of the IB program are significant because they affect a large percentage of IB students, and therefore should be minimized. Parents, teachers and counsellors should actively provide support for IB students who initially struggle with the workload, and it could be better for prospective IB students if they were prepared for increased workloads ahead of time to ensure a smoother transition into the program. IB students’ timetables could also be made more flexible to allow more socializing with non-IB students. Subsequent research that addresses this topic could and should show student perceptions of other non-academic negative effects of the IB program. It would also be useful to examine how IB students cope with these negative effects, and how effective the coping is in order to understand what kind of coping is best in general for students in an academically advanced educational program.
References


