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Questioning the enduring impact of international education – insights from alumni

By Shona McIntosh

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The start of a new decade is as good a time as any to pause and reflect. Here the reflections relate to research that can prompt consideration about the purpose of international education today. In particular, I attend to that aspect of international education which claims to concern itself with the long-term aim of producing people whose education and international perspectives will lead them into action for the betterment of life on the planet. With the climate emergency gathering increasing momentum, acting on issues of international significance seems more important than ever. While it is not solely the obligation of alumni of international schools to do so, arguably their education may have invested in them some feelings of responsibility, even entitlement, to act. To date there is little evidence about the long term effects of an international education and how alumni have been changed by it. This article draws on some findings from recent research with International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma alumni to prompt questions about the long-term impact of this form of education.

The type of international education to which I am referring throughout the rest of this article is that which is undertaken in IB World Schools offering the IB Diploma. The research attends to one aspect of the IB DP which is useful as a case which incorporates the essence of the tensions presented above. That aspect is the mandatory experiential-learning element known as Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS). Although international education is an endeavour that has been underway in some form for around one hundred years, the introduction of the International Baccalaureate in 1969 was the first instance of international education formalised in a curriculum (Hill 2010). Today, as then, the organisation had twin aims: to provide an internationally recognised university entrance qualification and to support the development of students who will help to make the world a better, more peaceful place (ISCR 2016). These dual aims present a potential for competing demands on students while undertaking the IB Diploma: while their immediate focus is on the achievement of a diploma score high enough to gain access to a leading university, the rather more abstract issue of improving the world might recede in importance. While the six subject areas contribute to the academic qualifications required for university entrance, the IB Diploma has encapsulated, in some form or other since its inception, a compulsory experiential learning component aiming to shape the

characters of its students (Hayden and McIntosh 2018). Today this component is known as Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) and is emblematic of the IB's commitment to forming students who are well-rounded individuals, not just scholars, and is a key contributor to developing international mindedness as well as the ten Learner Profile attributes: the IB's mission in action (IB 2015a, p.7). As such, successful completion of CAS has the potential to shape the characteristics of students who, once adults, become responsible global citizens (IB 2015b, p4). Not only is there little currently known about the long-term impact of CAS, recent changes in the international school sector make it extremely important to understand.

Trends underpinning the globalisation of education are shaping the international school sector. Recent evidence suggests a growth in the number of international schools around the world (ISCR 2019) as well as a change in their nature (Bunnell 2019), and there are increasing numbers of schools that call themselves international without some of the previously identified characteristics associated with international schools (Hayden and Thompson 1995; Hayden, Rancic and Thompson 2000). Others point out the complex entanglement of capitalism and education that both sustain aspects of the sector whilst eroding some of its basic principles (Hughes 2019). This has led some to question the changing purpose of international education (Tarc and Mishra Tarc 2015; Bunnell, Fertig and James 2016), specifically contesting the existence of the kind of idealism associated with the peace promotion in the early days of international education in schools that arose out of a will to peace in the post-war era (Walker 2011; Sylvester 2015). Some go further, and claim that an international education distinguishes individuals in highly competitive global markets (Ball and Nikita 2014). Meanwhile others argue that, when an education transcends the mono-cultural (Harwood and Bailey 2012) and encourages students to attend to issues beyond national borders (Hill 2012), it has the potential, through achieving lasting transformation of students, to produce active global citizens of the future. These arguments clearly have implications for those whose attendance at international schools has influenced priorities in their adult lives. While an idealistic view of international education might frame alumni as global citizens of the future, a more utilitarian view frames outcomes in terms of individual benefits, in the shape of access to highly-ranked universities around the world and the opportunities that follow for their graduates (Resnik 2008). The question that is important to ask is about the extent to which an international school education yields solely individual benefits or whether graduating students (also) become adults willing to act on matters of international significance.

It is therefore timely to reflect on the cl/aims of the IB and to do so in relation to evidence from recent research into the impact of an IB education based on data collected from DP alumni. Impact is conceptualised as the extent to which long-lasting or enduring characteristics are instilled in

students who have had an IB education. Simply put, once students have left school with their diploma and moved on with their life, to what extent do they embody the principles claimed by the IB? This is directly related to asking about the effectiveness of the kind of international education offered by the IB and the fulfilment of both aspects of its mission: the individual gains, for those achieving the diploma *and* the internationalist aims of peace and global improvement which benefit the world as a whole? Does an international education serve the individual or the global? These issues might be summed up as a quandary related to the purpose of international education today: is it aimed at improving the situation for *me* or, more broadly, for *we*?

It should be noted that CAS forms one element of the tri-partite core of the DP curriculum which, along with Theory of Knowledge and the Extended Essay, is designed to complement the six academic subject areas and support the IB Diploma aims as well as the IB mission (IB 2015b, p2-3). CAS is, however, unique in that it offers learning through experience. Students engage in a range of activities which fulfil the requirements of CAS in each of the three strands. Its current iteration, CAS requires students to engage in activities that are creative, that require physical activity, and that involve service, and/or volunteering, in relation to an authentic identified need. They also have to combine two or more of the strands in the completion of a CAS project. The aims of CAS are set out as seven learning outcomes, related to development of the Learner Profile attributes. Most pertinent to the issues under consideration here is that concerning the development of the understanding in students that they are members of local and global communities with responsibilities towards each other and the environment (IB 2015b p.10). This is highly relevant when considering the climate emergency, and how it would benefit from the understanding of those with a global perspective as well as a sense of responsibility for individual actions in relation to the environment. The enduring impact of CAS, as defined above, can therefore be considered an indicator of the success of the IB Diploma in developing alumni to actively embody such principles, as well as informing some of the debates around the changing purpose of international education.

A recent study on the impact of CAS concluded that it was perceived by the large majority of stakeholders to have positive impact with respect to the stated aims of the programme (Hayden *et al.* 2017). This extensive study included a survey of IB diploma staff (n = 533) and students (n = 7,973) at IB schools in 89 countries, as well as diploma alumni (n = 903) who had graduated between 1979 and 2015. An online questionnaire, comprising both open and closed questions, was completed by these three groups. Impact was understood in relation to the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with a range of statements related to particular aims of CAS. Respondents selected one of four responses (from definitely agree to definitely disagree) to statements beginning 'Participating in CAS helped me become more...' or 'CAS made me more...'. These stems were followed by learner

profile attributes (such as 'principled', 'knowledgeable', 'collaborative') as well as other aims of CAS including 'aware of my responsibilities to the environment'. The responses of alumni showed the weakest levels of agreement about the impact of CAS, quantitatively, and prompted analysis of the qualitative data arising in the questionnaire. The results from the alumni data can shed light on the quandary outlined above.

A key finding is the alumni response to the question 'What do you believe the enduring benefits of CAS have been to you?' Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the open responses revealed a range of themes. The most abundant related to personal development, including transferrable skills, realisation about self or potential, and, pragmatically, gaining an IB diploma. As well as this, well-being and having new experiences were identified by many, whereas fewer suggested that enduring benefits could be related to responsibility to communities. The conclusion was that *enduring* benefits of CAS are skewed towards individual advantage. In other words, alumni see the outcomes of international education more in terms of *me* than *we*.

The questions this raised prompted a follow-up study of alumni population that aimed to shed further light on the enduring impacts of CAS, understood to be those aspects of CAS which students take into adulthood (McIntosh 2018). The alumni study followed a mixed methods design, revisiting the survey data from the earlier CAS study, as well as collecting new qualitative data in the form of focus groups and interviews. The focus groups aimed to explore a range of views about the inter-relation of the IB mission statement and the experience of CAS whilst the interviews recruited self-confessed CAS fans: those who felt that CAS had changed their lives for the better.

Analysis of the survey data concentrated on outcomes of CAS that were identified as 'enduring', such as CAS influenced my choice of university/career; I am still doing Creativity/Activity/Service today. Cross-tabulation categorical analysis tested for relationships between these outcomes and variable categories, which included parental and staff support, perceptions of the CAS experience as, for instance, enjoyable, difficult or challenging but rewarding. This found some significant relationships: both the continuation of CAS activities and perceptions that CAS influenced career choice were significantly related to support from parents and school staff. Furthermore, when CAS was perceived as challenging but rewarding, or even difficult, CAS was perceived as transformative. In addition, CAS perceived as challenging but rewarding was significantly related to learning about one's own *and* others' potential, as well as increasing feelings of responsibility to other people *and* the environment (McIntosh 2018). This suggests that the type of CAS experience will influence the enduring impact of the programme, and that transformative experiences have the greatest potential.

Thematic analysis of the new, qualitative, data supports and elaborates on these findings to tell us more about the way in which transformation can be achieved. Alumni who had found CAS to bring lasting changes to their lives identified as transformative those activities which changed their perspectives, inculcated a sense of their own potential, and gave them a sense of their social responsibility (McIntosh 2018).

The findings of the alumni study suggest that CAS has the greatest potential to effect profound and lasting change when students are engaged with CAS activities that it are challenging but rewarding, or even difficult for them. This impact has further potential when CAS includes the opportunity to do important work with others.

However, there is more to say with respect to the IB aim of supporting the development of people who might go on to help address global issues such as the climate emergency. Kurt Hahn, an early influencer of the experiential learning aspect of the IB, was intent on strengthening the moral courage of young people in order for them to stand against the reprehensible actions of the powerful (Hayden and McIntosh 2018). Arguably, the current climate emergency falls into this category, and, if Hahn's theory is correct, we can expect alumni of the IB DP to be informed, motivated, and able to act against the threat that climate change brings to all on this planet. We can, therefore, seek to know whether alumni see themselves as responsible in relation to the environment. The alumni study includes relevant data to serve as a test case for the problem under consideration: does international education promote issues that benefit *me* over those that contribute to benefits for us all?

To do this, I returned to conduct new analysis of three relevant parts of the quantitative data. These were chosen to specifically examine how alumni (n = 903) perceived their CAS experience to have had an impact on how they understand their responsibility towards the environment. Firstly, as a proxy-indicator of the extent to which alumni see themselves as upholders of principles associated with moral and ethical personal choices, are levels of agreement with the statement "Participating in CAS has made me more principled (honest and respectful)" (figure 1). Second, as an indicator of a quality that is necessary if one is concerned to act to alleviate suffering and injustice, is agreement with the statement "Participating in CAS made me more caring" (figure 2). And thirdly, are responses to the statement "CAS made me more aware of my responsibilities to the environment" (figure 3). Presentation of the results will be followed by some discussion before the closing remarks.

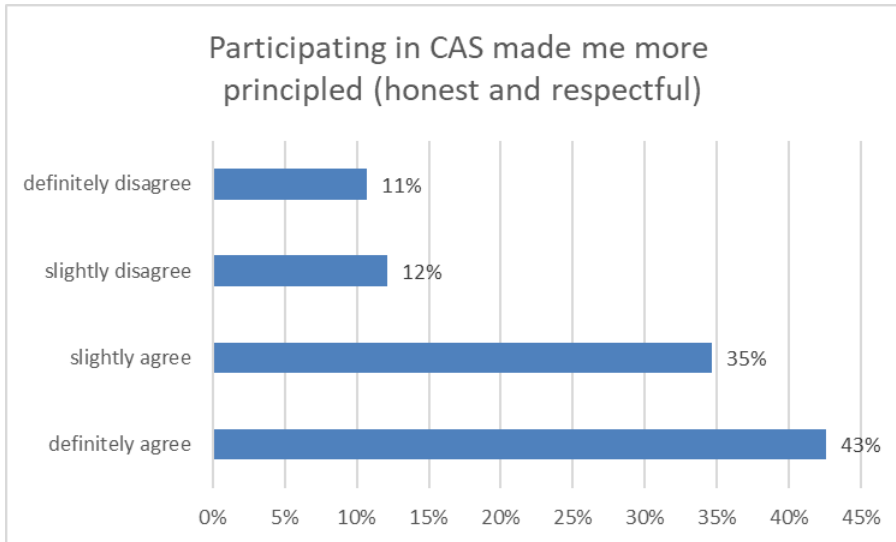


Figure 1: Participating in CAS made me more principled (note: total percentages rounded up)

While only 11% of the alumni sample disagree that CAS made them more principled (Figure 1) – which is not, in itself, a small number given the sample size of 903 – when adding together the responses in agreement, we find that 78% attribute the CAS experiences to making them more principled. A similarly positive result can be found when considering the percentage responses to the question about the role of CAS in helping them become more caring (Figure 2).

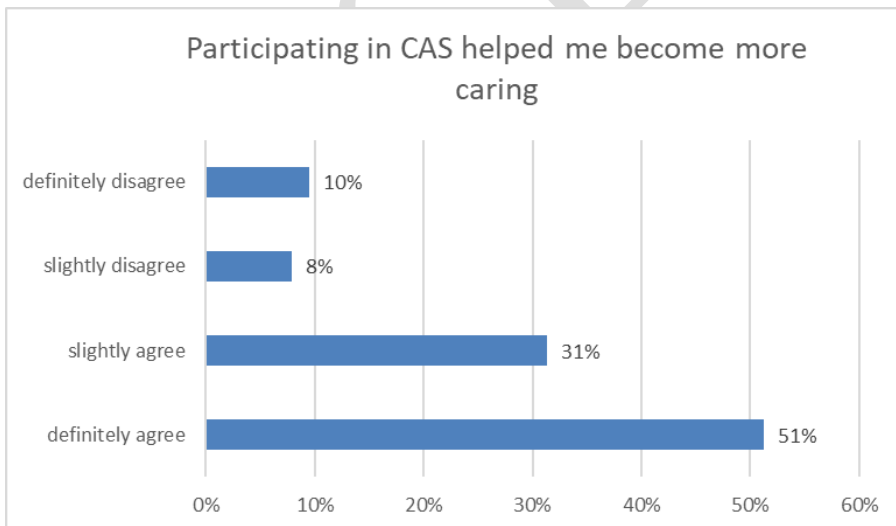


Figure 2: CAS helped me become more caring

Again, and even more overwhelmingly, the respondents' agreement with the statement, whether slightly or definitely, strongly suggests that the enduring impact of CAS has the potential to shape personal characteristics that may foster a morally protective attitude that could prompt action on

climate issues. However, these two figures are only indicators of the types of attitudes that might be expected to incline one towards acting on principles of concern. Contrast, then, with the direct responses about responsibilities towards the environment (Figure 3).

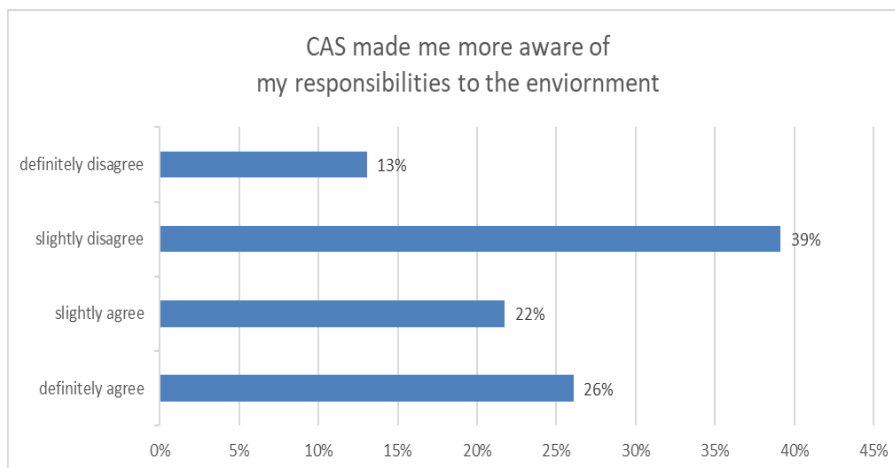


Figure 3: CAS made me more aware of my responsibilities to the environment.

Combining the responses that express disagreement with the statement, we see a majority found that CAS did not increase their awareness of responsibilities to the environment, whilst just over a quarter definitely agree that this was fostered by CAS. This queries the extent to which the alumni are principled and caring, perhaps restricting the reach of these attributes to a more personal scale. It should be noted that it is not possible to claim that CAS failed to develop environmental awareness, given that it is not known whether these alumni already considered themselves to have a highly developed sense of environmental responsibility, to which CAS did not greatly add. These results can only point towards further questions, although it is worth bringing these findings together with those of the preceding study.

Hayden et al. (2017) found that responsibilities to communities was perceived by a minority to be an enduring impact of CAS, adding weight to the conclusion that CAS outcomes support individuals, rather than wider groups. Meanwhile, McIntosh (2018) found that when CAS was challenging but rewarding, there was a significant relationship between transformation in oneself *and* how far it extends beyond oneself, through meaningful social interaction with others. Furthermore, she found that alumni who learned about their own *and* others' potential also developed responsibility towards other people *and* the environment. The implication is that the potential for a broad socially-just perspective to emerge in Diploma alumni rests on the way CAS is experienced in international schools.

Applying this evidence to reflect on the purpose of international education today, in the growing international school sector, some cautious suggestions can be put forward as a series of reflections related to the title question. Firstly, although an international education may well develop some new characteristics in its students and that these may endure beyond school days into adult life, there are few, if any, studies that attempt a long-term evaluation. This is as true of international education as it is to national educational policies. This leaves education vulnerable to unaccountable experimentation, with the potential for long term consequences for students. Secondly, it is important to argue that research needs to acknowledge a more theoretically nuanced view of international education than the oft-repeated idealist/pragmatist dichotomy presents. Convenient for academic arguments the either/or proposition may be, but it cannot do justice to the complexities and wide variations across the international school sector. Rather, as the evidence presented here suggests, it may be possible that the outcomes of an international education will develop in bi-fold or multi-fold ways, that may be highly dependent on parents' social aspirations, family socio-economic status, race, and gender, all of which are gaps in the field of research that need attending to, although there is a contribution to the first of these currently under review (McIntosh forthcoming). Thirdly, and as Hughes (2019) reminds us in an earlier issue of this journal, the reality of international schools is that they are accepting funding from some of the multinational corporations whose form of exploitative capitalism is contributing to the climate emergency that they are educating their students about. Whether it is realistic, as Hughes (2019) suggests, for teachers in international schools to educate for activism, is debatable. However his point indicates a debate that is increasingly pressing, as predicted shortages of teachers in the 'big business' (Bunnell 2020, p2) of international schooling may lead to the recruitment and training of teachers in economically efficient ways.

Finally, and if we can learn anything from the past, it is that CAS, as it stands, appears angled towards a set of experiences that benefit the individual. This may be due in part to the underpinning theoretical premises being individualistic in intention rather than rooted in encouraging social engagement (McIntosh 2019). This prompts the question about whether the acronym might be changed to better represent the kind of globally-aware and socially engaged outcomes that the programme has the potential to nurture in its students. Rather than Creativity, Activity, Service, what would the effect be if the words indicated the kinds of activity that supports long-lasting change with the intention of encouraging active engagement in matters of international importance? What if CAS activities were organised to give DP students experiences aimed at:

- Changing perspectives
- Activism

- Social responsibility

With these at the forefront of CAS, alumni could shift from perceiving the benefits of an IB Diploma in individualistic terms to seeing it as fitting them to actively address concerns of global importance. CAS for *me*, rather than *we*, could therefore make more realisable the IB goal of creating a better, more peaceful world than it is at present.

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Biography

Shona McIntosh is a Lecturer in International Education at the Department of Education at the University of Bath. Her interest in learning processes, sociocultural contexts and their relation to human development are fundamental to her work to date, and have been applied to early career professional development of trainee teachers as well as to adolescents in international school contexts.

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