

## STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF JAPAN AND CHINA

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2024.0803>

### ABSTRACT

This study presents a comparative analysis of student perceptions and experiences within the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs in Japan and China. Through qualitative interviews with 25 Chinese and 21 Japanese students, the research explores motivations for pursuing the IB, challenges faced during the Diploma Programme, and the impact of IB education on university admissions and career choices. Findings reveal that while parental influence and the desire for international mobility are common motivations across both countries, distinct differences exist in the students' educational experiences, with Chinese students encountering more language barriers and greater reliance on private tutoring. Japanese students, many of whom are returnees, often use the IB as a route to bypass traditional entrance exams for local universities. The results highlight both the strengths and limitations of the IB program in preparing students for higher education and international opportunities, particularly in how it is perceived and integrated within national education systems.

**Keywords:** International Baccalaureate, Student Experiences, Japan, China, Educational Mobility, University Admissions, Parental Influence, Private Tutoring.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program has become a widely recognized pre-university qualification designed to foster academic rigor and promote intercultural understanding. As globalization drives educational change, more students from diverse cultural contexts, including Japan and China, are enrolling in the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP). However, while the IB aims to prepare students for global citizenship and academic success, the experiences of students from different national settings can vary significantly based on cultural, linguistic, and educational factors.

Previous research has highlighted the benefits of the IB program in developing critical thinking skills, fostering international-mindedness, and providing students with pathways to prestigious universities. However, much of this research has focused on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how students in East Asia, particularly Japan and China, experience the IB. Given the growing interest in the IB in these countries, it is essential to explore how students perceive the program, what motivates them to pursue it, and what challenges they face along the way.

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the perceptions and experiences of students in Japan and China who have completed the IBDP. Using qualitative interviews, the study seeks to uncover key motivations for choosing the IB, the challenges students encounter, and the impact of the IB on their university admissions and career aspirations. The findings of this study will

contribute to a broader understanding of how the IB is adapted and experienced within the unique cultural and educational landscapes of Japan and China.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate students in Japan and China to pursue the IB program?
2. What challenges do IB students face during their studies, particularly in language and course content?
3. What are the broader implications of undertaking the IB for students' university admissions and career pathways in Japan and China?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to provide valuable insights into how global education frameworks, like the IB, are experienced by students in non-Western contexts and to offer recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the IB program in diverse educational settings.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 the International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program is a globally recognized educational framework that provides a comprehensive and challenging curriculum for students from primary through secondary school levels (IBO, 2022). The International School of Geneva was established in 1924 as the first international school in the world (Iwasaki, 2007). This institution was founded to cater to the needs of employees' families from diverse national backgrounds working for the recently established League of Nations and International Labour Office. More specifically, it was created to address the need for an internationally recognized educational certification that could have global relevance (Abrioux and Rutherford, 2013).

Expatriates in other regions also came together to establish international schools for children. For instance, the Yokohama International School was founded during the same period (Yokohama International School, 2019). The need for a global curriculum was not sufficiently pronounced until the conclusion of World War II (Abrioux and Rutherford, 2013). The aftermath of World War II led to the establishment of various international organizations, including UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), and the World Bank (Dolby, 2008). After the war, a greater number of individuals were moving across borders internationally, and many also experienced displacements due to conflict. The demand for a widely recognized educational certification grew significantly following the increased mobility after the war (Abrioux and Rutherford, 2013).

Desmond Cole-Baker and a group of idealistic teachers worked on the concept of International Baccalaureate (Matthews and Hills, 2005). Funding for the program remained insufficient until American Quaker Bob Leach engaged UNESCO in the initiative and secured a limited amount of funding for a brief period. Schools offering multilingual programs faced significant financial challenges, particularly in funding and the cost of providing education in different mother tongues. This was a primary concern for the International Baccalaureate during that period.

In 1967, the International Schools Examination Syndicate (ISES) renamed itself as the IBO (Fox, 2011). After receiving a grant from the Twentieth Century Fund, which was founded in 1964, the International Schools Examination Syndicate established its initial office to initiate the IB program (Paterson, 2003). ISES aimed to examine the possibility of implementing globally recognized

curriculums and tests (Iwasaki, 2007). The IB program aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect (IBO, 2022).

In Japan, the IB program has gained popularity over the years, with an increasing number of schools offering the IB curriculum. Similarly, in China, there has been a growing interest in the IB program as an alternative to the traditional education system. This section will explore the specific ways in which the IB program has been implemented and received in both Japan and China, including its impact on students' learning outcomes and its alignment with the values and priorities of the respective education systems.

The IB curriculum expanded to include six subjects following the 1965 curriculum meeting and continued to evolve. The conference in 1967 concluded the formulation of the current DP program, which consists of three Higher Level subjects and three Standard Level subjects (Iwasaki, 2007). In the same year, the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) was integrated into the curriculum in 1967. A year later, Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) was added in 1968. In 1974, the Extended Essay (EE) became a part of the curriculum as well to finalize the current IB program.

The initial reception of the IB's DP was largely unfavourable, with only seven schools in six different countries - Switzerland, Denmark, USA, Lebanon, Iran and UK - participating in the project (Osako, 2013). Hill (2002) stated that the works of Martin Mayer in "Diploma: International Schools and University Entrance" and Robert Leach in "International Schools and their involvement in international education" were instrumental in gaining global acceptance for IB.

The International Baccalaureate opened its North American office in 1975. The Netherlands hosted an intergovernmental conference in The Hague in 1976, during which financial backing for the IBO was established. Participating nations were asked to contribute \$15,000 US dollars each to support the program. The assistance facilitated the continued expansion of IB. Over the subsequent years, IB grew and evolved. This was followed by the establishment of the Middle Years Programme (MYP) in 1994, the initiation of the Primary Years Programme (PYP) in 1997, and finally, the introduction of Career-related Programmes (CP) in 2012. The contemporary IB developed into the current IB through this process (IBO, 2017; Iwasaki, 2007). As of May 2024, a total of 8,000 programs are available globally, offered by 5,800 schools in 160 countries (IBO, 2024a).

## 2.2 IB in Japan and China

### 2.2.1 IB in Japan

Japan's first IB accredited school was St. Mary's International School which was approved in 1979. In 2000, the first Article 1 School to get approval was Kato Gakuen Gyoshu Junior and Senior High School (Iwasaki, 2018). The first national school to be approved was the Tokyo Gakugei University International Secondary School in 2010, and the first public school approved was Tokyo Metropolitan International High School (Honda, 2018).

The economic crisis in the early 1990s and the civil collapse that followed led the government to recognize the need for globalization (Arai, 2003). According to Arai, the state needed an alternative way to create a labor force that could accelerate globalization, and young people seemed to be the answer to the problem. In the 1990s, 30% of the school curriculum was cut and replaced by a 'comprehensive study'. One of the aims of this curriculum reform was to relieve students' feelings of pressure (Saito, 2004). The government also managed to cut down the

education budget through this reform. However, the burden of additional education was borne by private households.

The responsibility of deciding the content of the “comprehensive study” was assigned to schools (Arai, 2003). Under these circumstances, students and parents, as consumers of education, had to choose schools at their own risk.

At the same time, schools are also trying to introduce the IB in order to meet demands of the wealthier classes. Schools started to improve the quality of education and offer more attractive classes to get the attention of more students (Akiyama, 2016). As Resnik (2012) pointed out, in a liberal education market, schools are in a fierce competition for customers, namely students and their parents. In this context the IB is used as advertisement and a means to increase schools’ attractiveness. The IB thus started to spread in Japan among the specific groups of students whose schools chose the program.

Despite the economic recovery following the 'lost decade' of the 1990s, Japan's economy has stagnated, posing challenges for its participation in the ever more competitive global market. The educational response to this situation was asserting the need for ‘global human resources’ (jinzai), who will be the leaders of Japan's future. Although this solution has since come to be questioned in Japan, as a result of the globalization debate, IB has begun to attract attention as an educational program for training such global human resources.

According to MEXT (2019c), Japan considers individuals who have obtained an IB Diploma since 1979 and are at least 18 years old to possess equivalent or superior academic capabilities compared to graduates of a standard upper secondary school.

MEXT only began to take notice of the International Baccalaureate in the 2010s. (MEXT, 2019c). Hoshino (2017) points out that after the release of the final report of the International Exchange Policy Roundtable in March 2011, there was a growing interest in the International Baccalaureate in Japan. As per Hoshino (2017), it was mentioned for the first time at a governmental level. Subsequently, in June 2012, the Global Human Resource Development Strategy set a specific goal to increase the number of schools offering IB qualifications to 200 within five years. MEXT responded to this initiative by launching a new project called "Improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education for the Development of Global Human Resources." MEXT also carried out a study on curriculum focused on the objectives of the IB, examining teaching methods and assessment approaches in selected schools that offer IB programs (Yano, 2012).

The 'Japan Revitalization Strategy - JAPAN is BACK', approved by the Cabinet in 2013, set a new goal to raise the number of IB-accredited schools to 200 by 2018 and expedite the adoption of IB education in Japan (MEXT, 2019b). In 2013, MEXT and IBO collaborated to create a Japanese DP that allows students to enrol in courses taught in both English and Japanese. Consequently, while certain subjects have limitations, it is possible for students to study up to four out of the six subjects in Japanese. The Japanese DP Liaison Council, established at Tokyo Gakugei University in 2013, aimed to facilitate the exchange of information regarding the implementation of the IB program (Yamamoto et al., 2016).

MEXT is also currently focused on promoting the recognition of IB qualifications by domestic universities in Japan. In September 2015, the National University Association proposed an "Action Plan for the Future Vision of National Universities" recommending that capacity for recommended entrance examinations, AO Enrolment, and IB entrance examinations be increased to 30%. (MEXT, 2019c). At present, top universities, such as the University of Tokyo and Kyoto

University, are gradually preparing university entrance examinations for IB students (MEXT, 2019c).

Moreover, the need to maintain a balance between the IB curriculum and national curriculum guidelines has been a concern for Article 1 schools in Japan. This led to revisions in the School Education Law Enforcement Regulations in August 2015, resulting in approval of the IB curriculum at DP accredited schools. Consequently, special provisions have been established to allow students to pursue both courses concurrently. The special provisions enable an increase in the maximum number of credits counted towards graduation requirements in DP courses, from 20 to 36. Compulsory subjects like English, Mathematics, and Science can be substituted by taking DP courses, and all subjects except Japanese can be instructed in English. (MEXT, 2015). Furthermore, MEXT created a manual for IB accreditation, and gathered the essential resources to facilitate the implementation of IB in Japanese. (MEXT, 2019c).

The evidence presented regarding the expansion of the IB program in Japan suggests that MEXT's initial timeline was overly optimistic. As a result, they have revised their goal to increase the number of IB World Schools to 200 by shifting the deadline from 2018 to 2020. (MEXT, 2019b).

### 2.2.2 IB in China

Although China has the world's oldest education system, the modernization of Chinese education is often seen as a process of westernization (Zhang, 2018). After adopting the 'open door' policy and establishing strong ties with the United States after the Cultural Revolution ended, the number of people speaking English has increased dramatically (Wei and Su, 2012).

In recent decades, there has been significant expansion in international education within China. The 2018 Global Report on the International Schools Market from ISC Research indicates a worldwide total of 9,605 English-medium international schools. These institutions are predominantly English-speaking, with some offering bilingual programs where English is a key language of instruction. (ISC Research, 2019).

As a result of this rapid growth, ISC predicts that in ten years, there will be at least 15,000 English-medium international schools with over eight million students enrolled.

According to ISC Research (2015), China has the highest number of English-medium international schools at 526 and has experienced the largest increase in institutions, adding 218 over four years from September 2011. Richard Gaskell, director for international schools at ISC Research, noted that there is a strong demand among Chinese nationals for English-medium education within China. He also emphasized that the expansion of international schools in China is primarily driven by local demand rather than expatriates. Moreover, he highlighted that Chinese-owned international schools are on the rise in response to this growing domestic interest despite current policies prohibiting domestic students from attending expatriate-run international schools.

The International School of Beijing was the first school in China in which IB was authorized in 1991 (Salt, 2013). The school was formed by the mergers of US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the British Embassies' schools in 1980 (ISB, 2016). The school was officially registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China in 1988, and was approved to receive children from foreign nationals in Beijing (Salt, 2013).

With increasing globalization as background, public schools like Beijing No.55 high school and Shanghai High School also started to establish international divisions, which offered international curriculums like A Levels and the IB (Ko, 2013). Ko (2013) suggests this development was a step

forward in the process of introducing the IB into Chinese public schools and allowing more students to experience the benefits of the IB. However, it is important to note that these two schools do not accept Chinese students without foreign permanent residence. The expansion of the IB into public schools only benefits the foreign students and Chinese students who were able to obtain a foreign passport or permanent residence in another country (MOFA, 2018; SHSID, 2019). This implies that the state did not make the necessary steps that would allow the more of students in China to gain access to IB education.

The number of IB world schools China has witnessed a rapid development in the number of schools adopting IB programs. There were 10 IB world schools in China in the year 2000, and by the end of year 2018, there were 287 of IB world schools in China (IBO, 2024b).

Salt classified educational institutions providing IB programs in China into four groups: government-funded programs within Chinese schools, well-established international schools operated by boards, private international schools formed through joint ventures (with authorization to admit Chinese students), and independent international schools or affiliates of corporate entities (Salt, 2013: 31). Salt (2013)'s categorization gives a general view of the main social actors involved in the IB in China: the state, the Embassy, the private education business, and other business groups.

Chinese IB students' access to the IB schools is severely limited. Among the four categories mentioned above, only the joint-venture private international schools have the right to accept local Chinese students without foreign passport or residence. It has become the main destination of Chinese students.

## **2.3 Students' perspective on IB in Japan and China**

### **2.3.1 Japanese Students' perspective on IB**

During the literature review, the author found limited published materials addressing students' experiences with IB. One notable resource is a study on Japanese IB students by Mahmood Sabina et al. (2020), which emphasized significant contrasts between International Baccalaureate education and Japanese high school education. The study highlighted how these differences could offer valuable insights for improving student performance and university experience in general. However, this also suggests that Japanese DP students transitioning from the Japanese local high school system to the IB program may encounter challenges.

Japanese universities are making increased efforts to be more inclusive of IB students, as noted by Sanders, J., & Ishikura, Y (2018), the recognition of the IB Diploma Programme in Japan is steadily improving, especially among private universities implementing admissions reforms.

When discussing the selection of studying abroad, research suggests that Japanese university students exhibit mixed feelings about studying English abroad, as their interest can be swayed by both anxiety and confidence (Burden, P. ,2020), although the study pertains to university-level research, it may present the perspectives of Japanese students on studying abroad. There are also studies indicating that in Japan, there has been a sustained decrease in the number of students going overseas since the mid-2000s. The waning interest of Japanese students in studying abroad is affected by various factors including media coverage, media prejudice, and individual considerations (Lassegard, J., 2013). Studying abroad may not be the top choice for Japanese IB students, or their favoured alternative.

Based on the available literature, it is suggested that Japanese students transitioning from traditional Japanese schooling to the IB program may find increased support and recognition for

the IB Diploma Programme beneficial. The varying perspectives on international studies emphasize the importance of considering individual student attitudes and motivations when evaluating the experiences of Japanese IB students.

### **2.3.2 Chinese Students' perspective on IB**

Chinese research on the holistic experiences of Chinese students pursuing their IB Diplomas is also scarce.

Yang et al. (2022) conducted research on examining the perspectives of Chinese IB students. Their findings indicate that although the students generally expressed satisfaction with the program, key elements for successfully completing the curriculum included integrity and ensuring access to high-calibre educators.

Chinese students and their families consider private tutoring crucial for English learning (K. Yung et al., 2015). E. Wright et al. (2018) suggests that private supplementary tutoring for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in China is associated with lower final scores, particularly among underperforming students seeking remedial assistance. Private education in China has diverse impacts on academic achievement in subjects such as Chinese, mathematics, and English, due to the additional time spent outside of standard school hours. It can benefit urban students with lower achievement levels and schools with higher educational resources (Zhang et al., 2017). However, this may not be the situation in the International Baccalaureate program.

Based on the current academic literature, Chinese students' contentment with the IB program relies on both ethical standards and the calibre of education provided. The prevalent reliance on private tutoring in China has a twofold impact, but its effectiveness among IB students may differ.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, relying on semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and perceptions of International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) students in Japan and China. The qualitative approach was selected due to the exploratory nature of the research, aiming to understand personal experiences and social phenomena related to education and mobility.

### **3.2 Participants**

The study sample consists of 25 Chinese students and 21 Japanese students, all of whom completed the IBDP and were enrolled in university at the time of the interviews. Participants were from various regions, including Shanghai and Beijing in China, and Tokyo and Osaka in Japan. Recruitment was initially based on personal networks and expanded through snowball sampling, ensuring a diverse group of students.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January and October 2019. Interviews were held both in person and online, using platforms like Skype. Participants had the option to choose their preferred language (English, Japanese, or Chinese), and interviews were transcribed and translated into English as necessary. Each interview lasted between 22 and 45 minutes, with discussions focused on motivations for choosing the IB, challenges faced, and the perceived impact of the program on their academic and professional futures.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Graduate School of Human Sciences Ethics Committee at Osaka University (Registration Number: OUKS1821). All participants provided informed consent before participating, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and their identities were protected throughout the research process.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the interview data. This involved reading through the interview transcripts, coding responses, and organizing the data into overarching themes. The analysis focused on identifying key differences and similarities between the experiences of Chinese and Japanese students, particularly in relation to their motivations, challenges, and post-IB educational pathways.

### 3.6 Limitations

The study is limited by the scope of the sample, which focuses exclusively on students from English-language IB programs in Japan and China. Additionally, the snowball sampling method may have introduced bias, as participants were largely drawn from personal networks, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. Furthermore, no participants from Japan's Dual Language Diploma Programme (DLDP) were included, which could offer additional insights into the IB experience.

## 4. RESULTS

A detailed analysis of interviews with IB students from Japan (n=21) and China (n=25) is presented. The average interview duration was approximately 30 minutes, ranging from 22 to 45 minutes. The participants' profiles are provided in the first section, followed by an organized analysis of results based on the research questions in subsequent sections. To maintain anonymity, participants are identified by numbers corresponding to their interview order.

### 4.1 Demographic Profile

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The following tables detail the regions of origin for both Chinese and Japanese participants.

**Table 4-1-1-1: Place of Birth - Chinese Group (n=25)**

Region	Percentage
Shanghai	44%
Beijing	28%
Guangdong	12%
Jiangsu	8%
Zhejiang	8%



**Table 4-1-1-2: Place of Birth - Japanese Group (n=21)**

Region	Percentage
Tokyo	33.3%
Osaka	28.6%
Thailand	14.3%
Hyogo	9.5%
Malaysia	4.8%
Germany	4.8%
Kanagawa	4.8%

Chinese participants all received their education in the city where they were born, while Japanese participants had a more varied educational background, with some being educated in multiple cities. This diversity ranged from individuals born and educated in Japan to those who were born overseas and later returned or moved abroad and then came back after a few years. Despite all Japanese participants attending DP in Japan, their diverse backgrounds likely influenced their experiences and contributed to differences within the group. The inclusion of students' birthplaces serves to demonstrate the regional distribution of participants within each country.

Participant No. 2 mentioned that studying overseas has been a fresh and pleasurable experience for them, especially considering their upbringing in Shanghai. Participant No. 4 noted that only a small number of Chinese group members have permanent residence or passports in other countries, and none had studied long-term abroad before college. They disclosed that they obtained their foreign passport to attend a prestigious high school offering the IB curriculum in Shanghai through an immigrant investor program, but did not live there for an extended period.

Participant No.39 observed that the situation is more complex within the Japanese group compared to the Chinese group. Japanese students who were born abroad either finished their entire IB program in Japan or commenced the DP while in Japan. Participant 39 was raised in Thailand until high school before beginning the IB program in Japan.

Participant No.45 reported that numerous Japanese students, who were born in Japan, spent a significant amount of time living abroad after their birth. Some also resided outside of Japan before starting college. For example, this participant's family moved overseas when they were one year old and came back when they turned 17. Afterwards, they joined an international school in Japan and commenced their DP studies there.

We can see that the majority of Japanese students in the IB program in this study come from families that move frequently, and many have previously studied outside Japan before entering college. In contrast, a large number of Chinese students are less mobile, as most did not take part in long-term overseas programs before enrolling at university. The small number of students holding foreign passports probably acquired them through immigrant investor programs, which do not require residency beyond meeting a specific investment threshold. It seems that Chinese participants' families are less inclined to relocate compared to their Japanese peers.

#### 4.1.2 First Venture into IB

76% of Chinese respondents and 66.7% of Japanese students initiated the IB program, with none of the Chinese participants commencing from PYP (Primary Years Programme for children aged 3-12), in contrast to 4.8% of Japanese participants. The research indicates that Chinese

participants embarked on the IB at a later stage compared to their Japanese counterparts.

**4.1.3 University Choices**

Tables 4-1-3-1 through 4-1-3-4 present the universities attended by participants from both groups, along with an analysis of the geographical distribution.

**Table 4-1-3-1: Distribution of Chinese Students' University Choices**

University Name	Number
New York University	5
University College London	3
Nanyang Technological University	2
McGill University	2
University of Western Ontario	2
Queen’s University	2
University of California Berkeley	1
Hong Kong University	1
University of Toronto	1
York University	1
The University of Kent	1
Boston University	1
Durham University	1
Imperial College London	1
University of Bath	1

**Table 4-1-3-2: Global Distribution by Areas - Chinese Participants**

Region	Percentage
North America	64%
Western Europe	24%
Asian countries other than China	12%

**Table 4-1-3-3: Distribution of Japanese Students' University Choices**

University Name	Number
University College London	3
Kwensei Gakuin University	3
Osaka University	2
University of Toronto	2
Sophia University	2
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg	1
Keio University	1
International Christian University	1
Aoyama Gakuin University	1
University of British Columbia	1
University of Sydney (Australia)	1

University Name	Number
Monash University (Australia)	1
Florida Institute of Technology (US)	1
Hitotsubashi University (Japan)	1

**Table 4-1-3-4: Global Distribution by Areas - Japanese Participants**

Region	Percentage
Japan	52.4%
Western Europe	19%
North America	19%
Australia	9.5%

The majority of participants have gained admission to prestigious universities worldwide, possibly influenced by the snowball recruitment method employed in this study. Notably, Chinese students predominantly opted for universities in North America (64%), with Western Europe (24%) as the second choice. Conversely, Japan emerged as the top choice for Japanese participants (52.4%), followed by Western Europe (19%) and North America (19%).

The data from these two tables indicates that a significant number of students successfully gained admission to leading global universities. This could be partly attributed to the snowball sampling method utilized in this research, which initially involved Chinese students from esteemed institutions like University College London and University of Toronto. It is possible that their peers also had increased opportunities for acceptance into prestigious universities, thus influencing the sample for this study.

A majority (64%) of Chinese students opted for North American universities, while 24% chose those in Western Europe. In contrast, Japanese participants showed a preference for Japan (52.4%) as their primary choice, followed by Western Europe (19%) and North America (19%).

Within the Chinese group (n=25), 68% of participants were male and 32% were female. In the Japanese group (n=21), 61.9% were male and 38.1% were female. These findings suggest that there may be cultural and societal factors influencing the choices of undergraduate degree majors among Chinese and Japanese students. It is evident from the data presented that there are no notable differences between Chinese and Japanese students in terms of their gender into the IB program.

#### 4.1.4 Major in the College

**Table 4-1-4-1: Major in the College - Chinese Participants (n=25)**

Major	Percentage (Male Students)	Percentage (Female Students)
STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and maths)	52.9%	25%
Business	29.4%	62.5%
Social Science	11.7%	0
Law	5.9%	12.5%

**Table 4-1-4-2: Major in the College - Japanese Participants (n=21)**

Major	Percentage (Male Students)	Percentage (Female Students)
Social Science	30.8%	25%
STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and maths)	30.8%	0
Law	30.8%	12.5%
Business	7.7%	37.5%
Art	0	12.5%
Literature	0	12.5%

The tables indicate that STEM fields were the most favored majors among male students in China (52.9%), followed by business (29.4%). Similarly, business was the top choice for female Chinese students, with 62.5% selecting this major and 25% opting for STEM subjects as their second preference. In contrast, social sciences, STEM subjects, and law were equally popular choices among male Japanese students, each at 30.8%. However, business emerged as the preferred major for young women at 37.5%, followed by social sciences at 25%.

The data reflects a similar trend of popularity for STEM and business majors across both groups of Chinese and Japanese students but also reveals variations in gender preferences: Japanese girls exhibit less interest in STEM fields compared to their Chinese counterparts while showing a greater inclination towards social sciences than Chinese girls do.

#### 4.1.5 Reason for IB

Students opt for the IB program due to various factors, which will be elucidated in this section. Table 4-1-5-1 displays reasons cited multiple times by interviewees, sorted based on frequency. Subsequently, a comprehensive overview of the five key motivations identified in the data will be presented.

**Table 4-1-5-1 Reasons for Participants to Choose the IB Program**

Reasons	Japanese Participants	Chinese Participants
Parental Pressure	80.9%	84%
Desire for Mobility	42.3%	76%
Admiration for English Proficiency and Aspirations for Skill Enhancement	52.4%	68%
School Encouragement	9.5%	20%
Not Only Opting for the IB (Did Not Choose It)	0%	24%

The external pressure from parents appears to be the most common reason for students choosing the IB program. This is evident in responses from 80.9% of Japanese participants and 84% of Chinese participants, reflecting the influence of parental preferences due to the high cost of International Baccalaureate education in both countries. Students often attributed their decision to their parents' wishes rather than their own independent choice, highlighting a lack of personal agency in selecting such a costly educational path.

9.5% of students from Japan and 20% from China indicated that their decision to enrol in international schools was influenced by their school environment. They stated that while they were not pressured, their teachers highly recommended it to them and their families, emphasizing its benefits for gaining admission to prestigious universities outside of their home countries, as many top universities give preference to students with an International Baccalaureate background.

Participants highlighted that the second most significant reason for enrolling in the IB program is their admiration for English proficiency and other skills. This motivation was cited by 30 participants, with variations observed between Japanese and Chinese students. Specifically, 52.4% of Japanese participants mentioned this compared to a much higher rate of 76% among Chinese participants. Many students who expressed this point also indicated that their decision to pursue the IB was influenced by their parents' wishes. It's possible that while this motivation originates from the students themselves, it could partly reflect their parents' perspectives which they have embraced as well.

Some excerpts from survey participants are as follows:

*"I have always aimed to cultivate skills like creativity, which I believed were unattainable within the traditional education system."* (No.24)

*"Even if I am unable to secure admission into a prestigious university, it gives me solace to know that my proficiency in English communication has markedly improved."* (No.6)

*"The standard of English education in our country is somewhat deficient; therefore, a program such as this would undeniably enhance my prospects for future employment opportunities."* (No.33)

The third most significant factor driving participants was mobility, mentioned by 26 individuals from both groups. This comprised 42.3% of Japanese participants and 68% of Chinese participants. The literature indicates that the IB program was created to address the educational requirements of mobile families living overseas due to professional obligations.

Nevertheless, interviews uncovered contrasting views on mobility among respondents in both groups. For the Chinese cohort, mobility specifically referred to leaving China; students pursued the IB program to access opportunities for international education.

*"I opted for the IB to study abroad. I don't think local universities can compete with the rigorous gaokao (the National College Entrance Examination in China)."*

*Both of my parents and I wanted me to study and work overseas for a few years as we believed it would be a valuable experience for me."*

In contrast, Japanese students viewed mobility as a two-way process. Some returnee students sought re-entry into the Japanese education system by undertaking the IB, while local Japanese students saw it as an opportunity to access top-tier education in other countries.

One of the Japanese participants stated: "Initially, I thought that pursuing the IB would provide an easy pathway—although it turned out challenging—for admission into a Japanese university. To be honest, I didn't enjoy my early life in Thailand—we moved there when I was 5 due to my father's career. My desire had always been to return and eventually work here in Japan. Despite

initially being unfamiliar with school life here, engaging with the IB curriculum at an international school provided me with several years of adjustment time which I am truly grateful for. I embarked on this journey with the IB because of my aspiration to pursue studies at renowned universities abroad; constantly pondering how they maintained such high rankings compared with those of Japanese universities."

Surprisingly, the interviews revealed that several participants took part in other programs alongside the IB. As mentioned in previous chapters, the IB has its own special curriculum which differs from other existing programmes. Moreover, it is not known for being easy. Taking both the IB and another program simultaneously must be highly demanding for students.

24% of the Chinese participants admitted to this; all of them were from private schools in China. The 'other program' they took was A-Levels, as mentioned in the literature review. Their schools required them to do so because only a small number of students can obtain an IB Diploma every year, and the school needs to ensure that as many of their students as possible can get into college.

*"I took A-Level's math, chemistry, and physics at the same time. My school requested us to take them. "* (No.44)

This issue is only raised among Chinese students; additionally, according to these students' words, the combination seems largely focused on math and science.

#### 4.2 Obstacles

In this section, challenges encountered during the IB study by participants are organized. Table 4-12 summarizes challenges mentioned more than once by all participants. Additionally, less frequently mentioned difficulties are explained.

**Table 4-2-1: Challenges Faced by Students**

<b>Obstacle</b>	<b>Japanese Participants</b>	<b>Chinese Participants</b>
Academic Stress	90%	88%
Domestic Conflicts	61.9%	31%
Language	19%	72%
Acceptance by Local Universities	52.4%	40%
Evaluation of Worldwide Universities	52.4%	40%
IB Pedagogy	0	44%
Concepts of the IB	0	24%
Few Subjects Too Demanding	0	20%
Cost	9.5%	0

##### a) Language

There were 22 participants in total that considered language as a difficulty. For this difficulty, a large gap was seen between Japanese participants of which only 19% mentioned language and 72% of the Chinese participants. All of the participants were from English IB program, so the language mentioned here is English.

Apparently, participants from the Chinese group were having bigger problems in the language

than the ones from the Japanese group. Although English is not the first language for most of the participants in both groups, the Japanese group with more experiences of living abroad clearly have the advantage in language than the Chinese group.

## b) Pedagogy

Dissatisfaction with the teaching methods employed by the IB appears to be prevalent, particularly among Chinese participants, with 44% expressing negative views. Additionally, a majority of students who raised this issue opted for STEM subjects in their university studies. Their discontent stemmed from the belief that the IB approach to science disciplines such as mathematics and physics emphasized rote memorization rather than equipping students with effective tools and methodologies for arriving at solutions independently.

*"Mathematics can be taught in a much better way. IB mathematics is not as rigorous as university mathematics, not even close. We are essentially given an equation or two and told to use them without even thinking about proofs. I am constantly told 'That's the method. Just use it.' or 'It's not part of the IB syllabus so don't bother with it.' These remarks do not follow the mission statement of the IB--to become an inquiring student. "* (No.13)

The core principles of mathematics may not have been fully explored in the IB Mathematics program. Furthermore, students expressed that other science subjects predominantly emphasized problems specific to the IB curriculum, overlooking significant topics beyond it. These concerns were raised after transitioning to university education. It is suggested that the IB curriculum, which centers around selecting from six groups of subjects, imposes more constraints compared to programs like A-Levels. Consequently, STEM students pursuing A-Levels may demonstrate a higher level of proficiency in science upon entering universities than their peers studying within the IB framework.

## c) Demanding Subjects

Some disciplines that do not have equivalents in the local education system are perceived as overly challenging by the respondents. For example, Economics is a subject that is absent from the Chinese secondary education curriculum and appears to be unpopular among IB students. Among Chinese participants, 20% expressed difficulty with economics, all of whom had studied this subject within their group.

Economics is not the sole discipline without counterparts in local education; however, these concerns were raised exclusively by 20% of Chinese students who had studied it. This may suggest a growing number of students opting for this course. As previously noted, business is a popular major among these participants and economics presents itself as an attractive option for those pursuing a business major. It's possible that this increased interest could explain why so many students have reservations about economics.

## d) Domestic issues

Two-thirds of the participants from both groups mentioned facing difficulties with their parents in relation to their IB studies. Specifically, 61.9% of Japanese participants and 72% of Chinese participants experienced this issue.

There are words like:

*"My mother easily gets upset when she feels I am spending too much time on my computer. She*

*believes that studying doesn't require so much use of computers, and I wish I had more time for leisure activities."*

It appears that parents were interested in encouraging their children to pursue further studies, but they have limited knowledge about the International Baccalaureate program.

*"My mother constantly reminds me about the amount of energy and money she has invested in me, making it seem like even a small mistake is unacceptable. It was really challenging."*

*"I am passionate about anime and wanted to attend university in Japan, but my parents didn't believe that Japanese universities offer quality education compatible with the IB program. Despite my arguments, I wasn't successful; however, now I still aspire to pursue graduate school in Japan."*

While parental involvement in a child's education is crucial, it's essential to find a balance that meets both the students' aspirations and the parents' expectations. Finding common ground may help alleviate some of the tension and stress that the students are experiencing. Open communication and understanding between the students and their parents could potentially help bridge the gap and create a more supportive and harmonious environment for the students' educational journey.

#### e) University Admission and the Perceptions of IB Programs

Many students believe that universities underestimate the value of the International Baccalaureate program. Despite being recognized by many top universities, students still feel that they have to work harder than those in regular programs, which should be taken into consideration.

#### f) Issues with IB Concepts

The interview found that 24% of Chinese group students do not particularly like certain aspects of the IB concepts. Some express concerns about international-mindedness being perceived as a form of western cultural capital and find it narrow and inadequate. Others point out a mismatch between ideals and reality, highlighting how rigid structures and various factors can hinder the development of inquiring and altruistic individuals. While some acknowledge its benefits in terms of college admissions opportunities, they also see significant room for improvement.

### 4.3 Overall perceptions of the International Baccalaureate

In this section, students' viewpoints not directly related to motivation and challenges will be expounded upon.

#### a) Adequate preparation for higher education

Many participants concurred that the IB program adequately prepared them for university. Here are some excerpts from their comments:

*"The IB places significant emphasis on reading and writing skills, along with a well-rounded curriculum involving papers and presentations. I felt completely prepared for university-level studies before beginning them. This is the most significant benefit of the IB."*

#### b) Criticism

Some individuals have expressed criticism of the IB program. One student remarked that while they learned valuable time management skills from the IB, they wish they had pursued A-levels



instead. Similarly, another student mentioned that while the IB helped them adapt to undergraduate workload, they did not find the core components useful. Another student shared their belief that top universities do not necessarily favour IB students and criticized how much time is dedicated to IB cores with little perceived value.

#### C) Admission Process in Higher Education

Facing the decision of selecting a university was crucial. Here are accounts from students: “I got into the university by passing an entrance exam for returning nationals. The academic atmosphere at Japanese universities lacked interaction, with limited opportunities for collaboration and discussions, and provided few chances to engage with peers. Moreover, my school mostly had Japanese students who had no previous exposure to studying abroad, leading to occasional challenges due to differing perspectives. This made me question whether attending a Japanese university was right for me.”

#### 4.4 Conclusion

In this section, we examined interviews conducted with International Baccalaureate students hailing from Japan and China. The focus was on understanding their encounters, driving forces, hindrances, and outlooks in relation to the IB program. Our investigations unveiled a range of backgrounds among the participants; predominantly Chinese students were from China while Japanese students had diverse educational histories including stints overseas. Varied motivations for enrolling in the IB program stemmed from parental influence as well as aspirations for mobility and English proficiency.

The feedback gathered highlighted participant contentment with how the IB prepared them for higher education; however, it also underscored challenges such as academic pressure, domestic conflicts, language barriers and apprehensions about university admissions procedures. Distinctions between Chinese and Japanese participants' experiences were noted.

Insights into key selections served to provide perspective on educational paths; STEM disciplines attracted considerable interest among male students whereas business and social sciences held appeal for female students.

Despite facing obstacles along their journey, participants acknowledged the benefits derived from the IB program which equipped them with crucial skills for university studies. Concerns regarding teaching methods and recognition by universities also emerged indicating areas requiring improvement.

This study underscores the significance of considering distinct viewpoints of IB students representing diverse cultural landscapes so that policymakers can bolster inclusivity thereby ensuring an enriching global educational experience.

### 5. DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Explanation based on results

##### 5.1.1 Exploring Results: The Impact of the International Baccalaureate

Steve Jobs once articulated the profound synergy between technology and the liberal arts, underscoring that true innovation arises from their fusion (Lehrer, 2011). This sentiment resonates deeply with the ethos of the IB program, which seamlessly integrates diverse subjects and core principles. By immersing students in this rich tapestry of knowledge, the IB not only nurtures future STEM professionals but also cultivates a holistic perspective essential for tackling complex

challenges.

While some students initially perceive the IB as lacking in STEM preparation compared to other programs, the nuanced advantages it offers may not be immediately evident. Over time, the IB instils critical thinking, fosters interdisciplinary connections, and fosters a global outlook—qualities indispensable in any STEM career trajectory.

Contrary to scepticism about the IB's efficacy in STEM preparation, participants were told that universities often regard IB graduates favourably. Their multifaceted education sets them apart, enhancing their prospects of admission to esteemed institutions and highlighting the IB's enduring relevance in higher education.

The decision to choose the IB or an alternative program is complex, influenced by various factors such as parental guidance and individual aspirations. While parents often focus on future university prospects, students have a significant role in shaping their academic paths and choosing their majors.

The popularity of the IB program is evident in participants' choices, with parental input often guiding students toward this academic path and international higher education institutions. This worldwide recognition greatly impacts individuals' educational decisions, shaping their future opportunities and career paths.

Noteworthy disparities between Chinese and Japanese participants shed light on regional nuances. Japanese returnees benefit from tailored selection processes, while Chinese students navigate challenges stemming from local universities' limited recognition of IB qualifications. Economic factors, including disparate tuition fees and income levels, further shape educational trends in these regions.

Ultimately, the choice between the IB and alternative programs hinges on diverse considerations, including personal aspirations, familial influence, and regional contexts. While perceptions of the IB's efficacy in STEM preparation may vary, its broader educational dividends and global resonance continue to attract students seeking a comprehensive and enriching academic journey.

### **5.1.2 Understanding Country-Specific Perspectives: Challenges and Perceptions**

#### **a) Disparate Views on English Proficiency:**

A striking observation emerged regarding English proficiency, with a significantly higher proportion of Chinese participants (72%) expressing difficulty compared to their Japanese counterparts (19%). This contrast may stem from the distinct educational backgrounds of the two groups. Chinese students, lacking prior exposure to long-term overseas programs, grapple with the introduction of English-medium instruction and Western concepts inherent in the IB curriculum. Consequently, they often invest more time and effort in acclimating to these novel challenges compared to the Japanese cohort, many of whom are returnees familiar with Western educational paradigms.

#### **b) Concerns Over Local University Acceptance**

Another notable divergence lies in participants' perceptions of local university acceptance, with a greater proportion of Japanese participants (52.4%) expressing concerns compared to Chinese participants (40%). While the numerical discrepancy may appear modest, contextual nuances reveal deeper insights. Japanese students, buoyed by government-supported integration initiatives, harbour reservations about local university acceptance, albeit limited. For them, education serves

as a pathway to societal reintegration, amplifying their apprehensions. Conversely, Chinese students, cognizant of local universities' reluctance to recognize IB qualifications, pivot towards international avenues, rendering local acceptance less pertinent.

c) Unpacking Perceptions of Institutional Recognition

At first glance, the prevalence of complaints among Japanese participants might suggest a lack of recognition for the IB by Japanese universities. However, this interpretation warrants scrutiny. Japanese students' grievances primarily stem from the existence of a viable path to local universities, albeit constrained, contrasting sharply with China's near-total blockade. Consequently, Japanese participants' concerns reflect their aspirations for local integration, highlighting the nuanced interplay between institutional recognition and societal integration.

d) Conclusion: Navigating Educational Terrain with Cultural Sensitivity

Understanding divergent perspectives among Chinese and Japanese participants illuminates the complex interplay between cultural backgrounds, educational systems, and societal expectations. As the IB continues to transcend geographical boundaries, it is imperative to contextualize its impact within the unique socio-cultural landscapes of different countries. By fostering a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, educators and policymakers can better tailor educational initiatives to meet the diverse needs of students worldwide, ensuring equitable access to transformative learning experiences.

The increasing reliance of Chinese students on the International Baccalaureate program as a strategic tool to secure admission to prestigious universities demonstrates its role in fostering academic excellence and gaining a competitive edge within the Chinese educational framework. This inclination also resonates with wider societal principles that prioritize prestige, accomplishment, global awareness, and international perspectives.

Conversely, the preference of Japanese families for the International Baccalaureate program to facilitate international mobility suggests its role in fostering global interconnectedness and cultural exchange.

In China, where prestigious educational outcomes are highly valued as a pathway to social mobility, the IB program aligns with societal ideals of prestige and accomplishment. These practices reflect a broader trend of leveraging international education to meet the demands of a globalized society, highlighting the importance of adaptable socio-educational strategies.

## 5.2 Explanation Based on Research Questions

a) Contextualizing the Driving Research Question:

The central inquiry guiding this study— “What does it mean for students to do the IB?”—unveils multifaceted dimensions that extend beyond academic pursuits. As we examine the findings, it becomes evident that the IB journey extends beyond mere academic achievements, deeply influencing students' trajectories and socio-cultural landscapes.

b) Navigating Social Mobility:

At its core, undertaking the IB equates to enhanced prospects for preserving social status, underscored by two pivotal facets. Firstly, the IB serves as a gateway to elite universities, affording students unparalleled access to esteemed institutions worldwide. While the study's sample composition initially raised concerns of bias due to the snowball recruitment strategy, wherein

connections with individuals attending top-tier universities predominated, the empirical reality remains indisputable—both Japanese and Chinese participants have ascended to the echelons of global academia.

c) Embracing Global Opportunities:

Secondly, the IB empowers students with a transformative choice: to either embrace their native shores or venture abroad in pursuit of higher education. In the Chinese context, where the IB and national education systems diverge, opting for the IB entails foregoing local university admission in favour of a broader, international vista. This strategic decision not only broadens educational horizons but also nurtures essential English proficiency and global competencies, indispensable assets in an increasingly interconnected world.

d) Facilitating Reintegration and Resilience:

Conversely, Japanese students embarking on the IB journey encounter a more nuanced landscape, wherein the IB serves as a dual conduit—providing a pathway to both domestic and international educational avenues. For local students, the IB offers an alternative route to Japanese universities, mitigating challenges associated with reintegration and facilitating a smoother transition into the national education system. Additionally, for returnee students grappling with the complexities of readjustment, the IB serves as a lifeline, fostering resilience and providing a supportive framework for navigating cultural reintegration.

e) Conclusion: Redefining Educational Trajectories

As we reflect on the multifaceted implications of the IB experience, it becomes evident that its significance transcends academic rigor, permeating the realms of social mobility, global citizenship, and cultural reintegration. By illuminating the diverse pathways and opportunities afforded by the IB, this study underscores its pivotal role in reshaping educational landscapes and empowering students to chart their own trajectories, irrespective of geographical or cultural constraints. As we continue to unravel the complexities of educational systems, the IB stands as a beacon of inclusivity, innovation, and transformative potential, redefining the contours of contemporary learning paradigms.

## 6. CONCLUSION

### Section 6.1 Synthesizing Key Insights

This study explores the nuanced experiences of IB students in Japan and China, against the backdrop of increasing internationalization in education. With the IB curriculum diverging significantly from local educational frameworks, this research endeavours to unravel the motivations, challenges, and implications of choosing the IB pathway.

Employing semi-structured qualitative interviews, 25 Chinese participants and 21 Japanese participants were engaged in illuminating discussions, offering rich insights into their IB journeys. Insights on motivations and perceptions were gained from the results for questions 1 and 2. In Research Question 1, students' motivations for choosing the IB program unveiled a predominant influence of parental wishes, often complemented by school directives. Apart from familial expectations, many students were also enticed by the prospect of improved English proficiency due to the allure of enhanced language skills.

In relation to Research Question 2, a wide range of challenges faced by IB students was

uncovered, with academic stress emerging as a significant obstacle. Furthermore, domestic conflicts, language proficiency barriers, university acceptance concerns at local institutions, and dissatisfaction with IB pedagogy emphasized the multifaceted nature of student struggles.

The answer to Question 3 explores the significance of IB experience. According to the study, engaging in the IB program extends beyond academic accomplishments; it also represents a route to upholding social status and securing entry into esteemed universities, reflecting family economic standing and future prospects.

By providing a comprehensive explanation of the various aspects of the IB experience, this study creates opportunities for further investigation into the evolving landscape of international education. Exploring the motivations behind participation in the IB program, as well as its accompanying challenges and socio-cultural impacts, not only shapes educational policies and practices but also illuminates broader societal factors that shape students' educational paths. As we navigate through the intricacies of globalized education, it is imperative to continue exploring how programs like the IB can contribute to positive transformations and foster diverse and enriching learning environments for students worldwide.

## 6.2 Significance of the study

The empirical part of this study involved interviews with 46 IB students from Japan and China. This allowed for a detailed investigation into their background, current situation, expectations, motivations, and the obstacles they face in relation to the IB program. It may be beneficial for readers to gain an overview of IB schools, students, and the overall situation within both countries. As indicated by the focus of the literature review, this research emphasized not only the students themselves but also examined the level of education provided by each country's educational system and state policies related to international education as well as specifically focusing on IB programs. The findings focused mainly on individual student experiences and provide insights into understanding Japanese and Chinese IB students' experiences.

Comparing the perspectives of parents regarding IB education in Japan and China is important because of the distinct educational settings and cultural backgrounds in these influential Asian nations. Despite their geographical proximity, Japan and China have different historical, cultural, and social contexts that shape their educational principles and methods. By analysing the similarities and differences in parental motivations and expectations within these countries, IB administrators can acquire valuable insights into how cultural values shape educational decisions. This comparison allows for the recognition of best practices as well as challenges specific to each setting, facilitating the development of more efficient IB programs that are culturally sensitive. Moreover, comprehending these viewpoints can guide global IB strategies by ensuring adaptability and relevance to diverse educational environments while advancing the mission of creating globally aware students with a comprehensive education.

Furthermore, this research is important as it provides an empirical study investigating the learning experiences of students who have completed the IB program. While reviewing existing literature, I found limited studies on the experience of Chinese IB students. Only a few studies explore both Chinese and Japanese students' experiences in IB programs and their motivations for enrolling in them. This study appears to have a distinctive focus.

## 6.3 Limitation of the study

This study has several constraints, including the exclusive participation of students from

English IB programs. Additionally, none of the participants were from Dual Language Diploma Programme (DLDP, Japanese DP). However, Chinese students attending public schools offering the IB were included in the study, providing distinct perspectives to consider. It is reasonable to speculate that students enrolled in Japan's Dual Language Diploma Programme would have had unique experiences not captured in this research.

Another constraint of the research pertains to the returning students. Although a number of Japanese participants were returnees, no Chinese returnee students were included in the interviews. It would be beneficial to explore the experiences of students returning to China and enrolling in the IB program as this could offer valuable insights for comparison with Japan.

#### 6.4 For Further Research

Future research should broaden the sample to encompass the perspectives of participants who could provide deeper insights into the IB. One potential avenue is to examine students enrolled in a dual language program in Japan, where they have the option to study 4 out of 6 subjects in their native language rather than English. As these students are likely to have attended Article 1 Schools, expanding the sample in this manner would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how the IB is implemented in Japan.

Another area for further exploration could focus on the influence of parents of IB students. This study has indicated that parents play a pivotal role in their children's enrolment in IB programs. Thus, exploring parental viewpoints regarding their children's education may enrich our understanding of their motivations and specifically illuminate how the IB program impacts their endeavours to secure their children's future success - which also perpetuates their social status.

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