

# Becoming International

*Elementary schools seek to develop students of the world through the International Baccalaureate Organization's Primary Years Programme.*

Niki Singh

**W**hat makes a school "international"? Is it an international body of students? The teaching of one or more "foreign" languages? A foreign exchange program? A curriculum that includes the study of different cultures? The display of flags of different countries? A cafeteria that serves foods of different cultures? In fact, these are *not* the defining characteristics of an international school.

A few designated international schools might surprise you: A Title I school in South Carolina in which 60 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; an American school in Bombay, India, that enrolls 200 students of 25 different nationalities and has an annual tuition about 35 times the average national income; and a neighborhood school in Colorado. What do these schools have in common? All three offer the Primary Years Programme, a curriculum framework for 3- to 12-year-olds developed by teachers and administrators at international schools. Since 1997, the Primary Years Programme has been administered and further developed by the International Baccalaureate Organization, best known for its rigorous college preparatory program.

Undergirding these schools is the Programme's student profile, which reflects what the Programme has

defined as the 10 most important attributes of an international person and provides the response to the crucial question, What do we want students to learn? In essence, we want them to learn how to be inquirers, thinkers, communicators, risk takers, knowledgeable, principled, caring, open-minded, well-balanced, and reflective (see sidebar, p. 59). Every aspect of the curriculum, then, focuses on moving students toward becoming people who reflect these characteristics.

Although the Primary Years Programme was originally developed by and for schools that taught students of many nationalities, the student profile clearly describes the kind of person that every school should seek to develop. Indeed, the Primary Years Programme, once described as a curriculum for international schools, is now more accurately described as an international curriculum for schools (Bartlett, 1996). Schools that wish to adopt the Programme undergo a rigorous authorization process that includes extensive teacher training at regional and on-site workshops, putting the Programme in place at the school, and hosting an authorization visit. Once authorized, schools conduct self-evaluation studies and receive periodic evaluation visits. Of the more than 1,000 International Baccalaureate schools in 112 countries, about 80 are authorized to offer the relatively new Primary Years Programme,



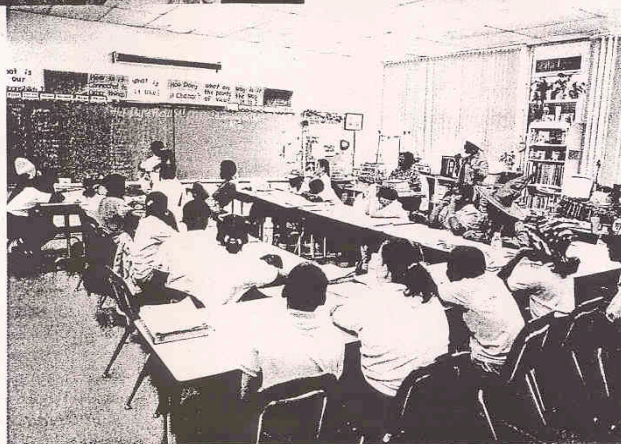
and another 150 are in the process of implementation.

## Teaching What Matters

The Primary Years Programme defines six themes that transcend the traditional disciplines and represent broad ideas that are relevant to, and meaningful for, all human beings: who we are, where we are in place and time, how we express ourselves, how the world works, how we organize ourselves, and sharing the planet. Each year of elementary school, about half of class time is spent exploring these six themes, with 4-6 weeks spent on each unit. Much of the content that teachers have always taught—that they are in many cases required to teach—works naturally into the units, although the instructional approach changes quite dramatically. After all, students around the world learn about igloos, tepees, mud huts, and homes on stilts for a reason. The Primary Years Programme simply encourages teachers to emphasize, for example, the core concept that human beings need shelter. Examining different kinds of homes then becomes a means to an end rather than the end of the lesson itself.



At far left, students in the Primary Years Programme pose for the camera. Near left, a student experiments with an African drum during the class's exploration of global traditions.



Acting as the hero he has studied, a Westward Elementary School student responds to his classmates' questions as part of a performance-based assessment.

### From Personal to Universal

Teachers at one Colorado school struggled to find a balance between developing a Programme of Inquiry consistent with the Primary Years Programme's six transdisciplinary themes and addressing the state requirement to

teach a unit on significant events, groups, and people in Colorado history (Colorado Department of Education, 1995). They believed that they could address state history within the framework of the theme on where we are in place and time, which the Primary

Years Programme describes as

an exploration of our orientation in place and time; of our personal histories; of history and geography from local and global perspectives; of our homes and journeys; of the discoveries, explorations, and migrations of humankind; of the contributions of individuals and civilizations. (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2000)

The Programme requires teachers to write a single, concise sentence expressing a globally significant central idea that is truly universal and worth knowing—and therefore worth study by any school anywhere in the world. The central idea should extend students' prior knowledge and be complex enough to provoke genuine student inquiry (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2000). The Colorado teachers' early drafts of such a sentence were simply rewordings of their state's requirement; they could see that their central idea would not satisfy the Primary Years Programme criteria.

The teachers knew that the unit must allow students to explore Colorado history and the significant events that had shaped it, as the unit had always done. But this time, the unit would have to do more—students must see Colorado history in the wider context of human migration and begin to understand that their state's history followed



a pattern repeated many times over in many parts of the world. Teachers developed two central ideas:

- Migration is a constant process that changes people and places.

- Throughout history and the world, groups of people have settled in new locations.

When the teachers introduced the new unit, students quickly became interested in the migratory histories of their own families. Soon students involved their parents and grandparents in the unit. Even among a student population that did not necessarily appear diverse or multinational, students' family histories provided a variety of reasons that individuals and groups of people migrate. The students were so engaged in the unit that the teachers decided to incorporate students' personal histories as an opening activity when they taught the unit the following year.

### Concepts Over Content

The Primary Years Programme outlines eight key concepts for teachers to consider as they plan—thereby helping them focus on what really matters—and allows schools to fill in the content. All primary-level curriculums address the defining characteristics of certain things (*form*), how things work (*function*), and why things are a certain way (*causation*). In addition, the major disciplines regularly address the concepts of *connection* and *change*. The Primary Years Programme goes a step further and asks teachers and students to consider alternative points of view (*perspective*), opening the curriculum to the world beyond the cumulative experiences represented in any one classroom. *Responsibility* leads students to personalize the curriculum because it provokes them to consider their own role in the content. *Reflection* encourages a deeper level of questioning in the classroom because students consider that there are different ways of knowing as they examine their evidence and conclu-



Photo courtesy of Westward Elementary School

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sions. The result is a curriculum that addresses the kinds of thoughtful questions that all students—indeed, all humans—ask:

- Why do people who live in poor countries stay there?
- Why do some places not have four seasons?
- What does it mean to be a good person? Am I good?
- Does every language have cursive and upper case?
- Does every part of our body grow?

### Rethinking Celebrations

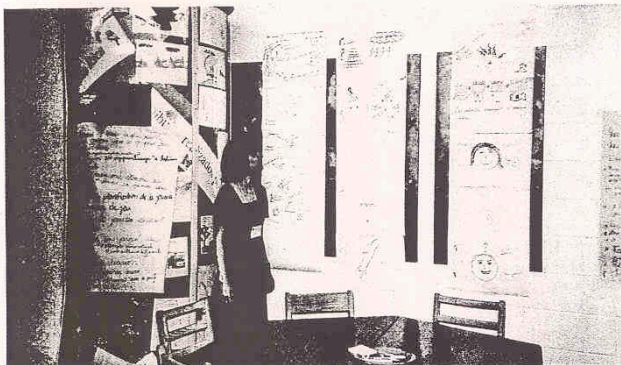
The head of one Primary Years Programme school uncovered what she considered to be evidence, albeit of an unexpected nature, that the

Programme's ideas had taken hold in the culture of the school. In the staff room, teachers were engaged in thoughtful discussions about Black History Month. They had been discussing such issues as civil rights, human rights, discrimination, and racism throughout the year in class and did not want to indulge in what they believed was tokenism. They had taught a unit that had explored the idea that certain groups of people have marginalized other groups of people throughout history, and they had used African Americans in the United States as an example. Another unit in a different grade level had focused on human rights, and a subgroup of that class had studied slavery. Although the teachers did take their students to some of the Black History Month exhibitions and events planned in town, they decided not to highlight one particular group for an entire month, noting that they were not singling out other minority groups that had suffered as a result of race-based laws.

Visit a Primary Years Programme school on Valentine's Day, and you probably won't find students making cards or solving contrived, holiday-related math problems. The idea that all cultures have rituals to mark historical and cultural events is, however, a significant idea worth knowing and exploring, and a school might choose to develop a unit on such a topic under the theme of "how we express ourselves." The unit's summative assessment might involve a multicultural celebration honoring the festivals of several cultures represented—and some cultures *not* represented—among the students and staff of the school. By studying several examples of festivals, students might marvel at the differences but also discover some commonalities among rituals.

### A Focus on Language

All Primary Years Programme schools must teach an additional language. Some schools use an immersion



An International Baccalaureate Organization staff member models Primary Years Programme practice at a teacher training workshop.

Photo courtesy of the International Baccalaureate Organization

approach in which students spend part of the school day learning in a language other than the main language of the school. In the United States, students more commonly learn an additional language as a traditional subject two or three times a week. Simply teaching two languages in the school is a big step for many elementary schools and often requires new districtwide policies.

Just as important as teaching at least two languages in school is encouraging mother-tongue development for students whose mother tongue is not one of the languages taught at school. Whereas transient families who plan to return to their home countries in the foreseeable future are aware of the importance of mother-tongue development, immigrant parents who want their children to assimilate as quickly as possible may not immediately see the importance of such development.

The Primary Years Programme expects schools to support mother-tongue development. Such support might take the form of providing parents with evidence from research indicating that proficiency in a student's mother tongue will aid his or her academic, emotional, and social development (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2002).

#### Emphasizing Language

One Primary Years Programme school in the United States aims to stock in its library at least one book in every

mother tongue of every student (or student's home) in the school. The school asks parents to donate a book in the language spoken at home. Another school started its library language collection by purchasing familiar stories in different languages.

In another Programme school, fortunate enough to have a television studio on campus, a student's parent or grandparent facilitates a monthly culture show focusing on the artifacts, clothing, and language characteristic of his or her culture. In yet another school, the after-school program shares space with some language schools that meet in the school building rent-free, courtesy of the local board of education. Parents—and, in some cases, grants from foreign ministries of education—pay for materials and instructors' salaries.

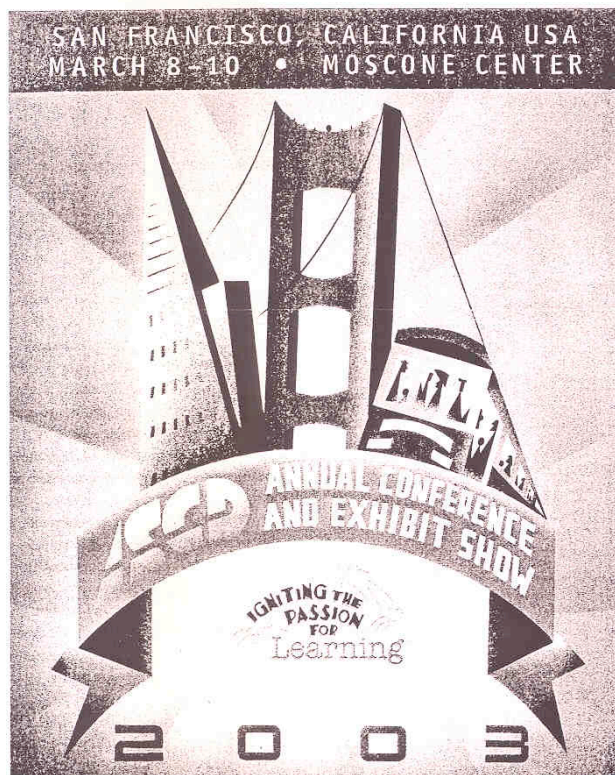
Some schools have taken advantage of having a dedicated language teacher to provide opportunities for other

### What Is an International Person?

The Primary Years Programme defines the characteristics of students who are aware of and sensitive to the experiences of others. The profile helps teachers and students establish goals, plan units of inquiry, and assess performance.

- **Inquirers**—They have natural curiosity. They have acquired the skills necessary to conduct purposeful, constructive research. They actively enjoy learning.
- **Thinkers**—They exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to solve complex problems.
- **Communicators**—They receive and express ideas and information confidently in more than one language, including the language of mathematical symbols.
- **Risk Takers**—They approach unfamiliar situations without anxiety and have confidence and independence of spirit.
- **Knowledgeable**—They have explored globally relevant and important themes.
- **Principled**—They have a sound grasp of the principles of moral reasoning. They have integrity, honesty, and a sense of fairness and justice.
- **Caring**—They show sensitivity toward the needs and feelings of others. They have a sense of personal commitment to action and service.
- **Open-Minded**—They respect the views, values, and traditions of others.
- **Well-Balanced**—They understand the importance of physical and mental balance and personal well-being.
- **Reflective**—They give thoughtful consideration to their own learning and analyze their personal strengths and weaknesses in a constructive manner.





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teachers in the school to learn the language (usually after the regular school day). Aside from the obvious benefits to the teachers of learning to speak another language, such an arrangement provides yet another opportunity for these adult learners to discuss the learning process.

### Students of the World

The International Baccalaureate Organization asks teachers, parents, and students in Programme schools to regularly use the vocabulary of the Primary Years Programme. Consequently, one often finds the characteristics of an international person (the Programme's student profile) written into school mission statements and posted on classroom walls. But is the international school just a collection of words? One finds evidence to the contrary, including this reflection written in mid-September 2001 by a 5th grader in a Primary Years Programme school:

Last Monday, it was easy to be open-minded. All we had to do was listen to other people's ideas at recess. But this Monday, we all wonder, can we be open-minded? Can we comprehend, listen to, and reflect on all sides of the story? And more than that, can we understand the conflict and what got us to where we are now? ■

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