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Student conceptualizations of international education programs and professional functioning in the free market: A data-driven inquiry

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of the research project *Comparative Study on Functions of International Programmes in Poland* (NCN, Sonata Bis, 2020/38/E/HS6/00048) was to explain the functions of international education programs in Poland. However, during the data analysis, a topic not previously anticipated emerged: students' interpretations of these programs in the context of their future professional careers in a free-market economy.

Research methods: Using a qualitative approach and a phenomenographic research strategy, we sought to deepen our understanding of students' conceptualizations of international education programs. This led us to an additional research question: What meanings do students attribute to international education programs in relation to their future professional functioning in a free-market economy?

Process of argumentation: We identified three key conceptualizations: (a) *Pole position* – an international program as a guaranteed advantage in the race for admission to the world's top universities.

(b) *Freedom laboratory* – international schools as spaces where students can safely explore the freedom of learning, which later translates into the ability to capitalize on economic freedom.

(c) *Diamond mine* – a setting where students, independently or with minimal teacher support, consciously mine vast and unlimited reserves of academic knowledge in order to acquire unique information and skills (often unavailable in national programs) that support success in the competitive free-market environment.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Contrary to numerous previous academic claims, the neoliberal order does not necessarily have a negative impact on education. Students in international education programs do not view the free-market economy as a threat, but rather as an opportunity for global competition – which ultimately leads to financial success and the ability to fulfill personal aspirations.

Conclusions and/or recommendations : Given the continuing globalization of education, it can be assumed that the number of students participating in international education programs will grow. This trend suggests a long-term research trajectory in pedagogy, with the potential to shed new light on the complex nature of educational processes.

Introduction

The free market and education are two systems built on mutually exclusive assumptions and concepts. The free market assumes that a person is mature from childhood, endowed with complete freedom, and inherently knows what is best for themselves (e.g., which school to choose). Others are seen as competitors to be outperformed. From a neoliberal perspective, each individual is entirely responsible for their actions and life, and must bear the consequences alone. If someone fails to cope, the blame lies solely with them, and they should not expect assistance from others.

In contrast, educational theory assumes that a person is inherently immature, develops throughout life, and strives for self-improvement – aware that this ideal may never be fully reached. In the educational process, the individual is never alone as they can always count on support from other people or institutions – specifically established for this purpose. The foundation of education lies in cooperation, authenticity, responsibility, trust, and empathy.

This axiological incompatibility between the free market and education generates numerous problems and challenges (e.g., Rojek, 2019;

Michałowska, 2013; Szwabowski, 2013; Potulicka, 2011; Meczowska-Christiansen, 2010; Kargulowa, Kwiatkowski, Szkudlarek [Eds.], 2005; Rutkowiak, 2007, 2005a, 2005b; Futyma, 2002). However, it also creates a space of tension that can generate new value and educational practices – such as instruction based on international programs.

International education programs

International education programs can be seen as an educational response to neoliberal culture and the free market. They promote proactive attitudes, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, multilingualism, thinking beyond conventional patterns, creativity, curiosity about the world, originality, and efficiency – as well as sensitivity, reflection, and high ethical standards. These programs represent free-market educational offerings that mirror the neoliberal values and preferences of middle-class communities in large cities and metropolitan areas across Europe, including Poland. A distribution map¹ of schools offering the International Baccalaureate program clearly shows that they are located only in major urban centers with free-market economies.

International Baccalaureate programs are implemented and developed independently of governments and national systems. Instead, they are based on practices arising from collaboration among teachers at school, national, and international levels. Due to globalization, increased international worker mobility, the growing internationalization of the labor market, and parents' and students' search for alternatives to national education systems, these programs are receiving growing public attention. In Poland, however, the topic is relatively under-researched. Most academic knowledge about these programs is available in international publications (cf. Suits, 2023; Haywood, 2021; Jaafar, Bodolica & Spraggon, 2021; Maire, 2021; Bunnell, 2019; Wright & Lee, 2020; Gardner McTaggart, 2018;

¹ A map of schools offering International Baccalaureate is available at <https://www.ibo.org/>.

Outhwaite & Ferri, 2017; Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016; Resnik, 2014; Theokas, 2013; Doherty & Shield, 2012; Edwards & Underwood, 2012; Tarc, 2009; Cambridge & Thompson, 2004; Gellar, 2003). International education programs share certain commonly assumed features, though their practical implementation varies based on the legal, social, and cultural context of each country.

The three most popular international programs in Poland are the International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). International Baccalaureate (IB) offers four international education programs: the Primary Years Program, the Middle Years Program, the Diploma Program, and the Career-Related Program. Schools gain IB status through an accreditation process that typically takes two to three years. The IB program focuses on meeting the individual needs of each student and emphasizes the development of critical thinking and a sense of responsibility. According to the International Baccalaureate Organization, there are currently about 5,000 IB schools worldwide, and the program is implemented in more than 140 countries. Graduates of the Diploma Programme (DP) can continue their studies at universities around the world.²

Another international program gaining popularity in Poland is Advanced Placement (AP), developed by the College Board, an American organization of schools in the United States. Since 1955, the College Board has overseen the program, established course guidelines and supported the teachers involved in its delivery. The AP program is designed for high school students and allows them to gain specialized knowledge in various subjects. Currently, students can choose from 38 subjects. Unlike the IB, which emphasizes skills-based learning, the AP program focuses on mastering the content of a core academic curriculum. Instruction is centered around specific academic disciplines and concludes with a final exam.³

² More information about the *International Baccalaureate* is available at <https://www.ibo.org/>.

³ More information about the *Advanced Placement* program is available at <https://ap.collegeboard.org/>

The International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) is the third most popular international education program in Poland. Developed over 30 years ago by the University of Cambridge International Examinations, it is an internationally recognized program for students aged 14 to 16. The IGCSE offers more than 70 subjects, from which students typically choose 5 or 6. Each subject is certified separately, though the program is delivered holistically. Schools can combine IGCSE with elements of their national education curricula. While the IGCSE focuses on content knowledge, it also promotes the development of critical thinking, independent inquiry, problem-solving, and collaboration. Subjects are assessed through examinations organized by Cambridge International Examinations. With its holistic approach, the IGCSE program prepares students well for the demands of higher education. Cambridge Assessment International Education provides teachers with extensive teaching resources, methodological support, and opportunities for professional development.

In the 2021/2022 school year, all three of these programs were offered across various educational stages in Poland.⁴ As of 2024, the IB program was implemented in 68 schools, IGCSE in 10 schools, and AP in 6 schools. Due to the lack of official statistics, it is estimated that approximately 1,500 teachers are involved in delivering international education programs in Poland. This figure includes both teachers working full-time within these programs and those who teach a few lessons per week, with most of their hours still dedicated to the Polish national curriculum.

Methodological assumptions of the study

The research project Comparative study on functions of international programs in Poland (NCN, Sonata Bis, 2020/38/E/HS6/00048) has been underway since September 1, 2021, and is scheduled for completion

⁴ For more details about the International General Certificate of Secondary Education, visit <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-upper-secondary/cambridge-igcse/>.

by the end of 2024. The study began with a quantitative phase using a diagnostic survey method involving 519 students and 190 teachers from Polish international schools. This was followed by qualitative focus group interviews with 112 teachers and 124 students at 22 schools.⁵ The main objective of both research phases was to identify and characterize the assumed and actual functions of the three most popular international education programs in Poland: the International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education.⁶ During the qualitative analysis, a research topic emerged that had not been anticipated at the planning stage – namely, students' conceptualizations of the relevance of international education programs to their future professional functioning in a free market and neoliberal culture.

It became clear that when given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in the survey and to speak freely during qualitative interviews, students frequently raised the topic of how free-market labor conditions influence their decision to pursue international education programs. Using a qualitative approach – which implies a circular research model (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2016, p. 80) – and phenomenography as the chosen research method, which supports the emergence of an understanding of the research subject (Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2013, pp. 66–70), we aimed to uncover and explain how students conceptualize the importance of international education programs for their future functioning in free market conditions.

⁵ The project employed both research approaches sequentially rather than concurrently; therefore, it does not qualify as a mixed methods study (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021, pp. 28–31).

⁶ Earlier results from this project have been published in the following works: Leek, 2024; Leek & Śliwerski, 2024; Dobińska & Kosiorek, 2023a; Dobińska & Kosiorek, 2023b; Rojek, Leek, Kosiorek, & Dobińska, 2023; Rojek, Leek, & Szulewicz, 2023; Leek, 2022a; Leek, 2022b; Kosiorek, 2022.

Pole position

International education programs give students a strong starting position in the race for admission to top universities in Poland and around the world, as well as access to the most attractive fields of study. This is largely because the international school diploma is not only accepted by most universities globally, but its scores often convert more favorably than those of national school diplomas. Additionally, instruction is in English, which is typically the language of instruction at the world's most prestigious universities. Programs in the fields students view as highly desirable are conducted in English, and completing them is seen as a reliable pathway to well-paid jobs – primarily in international settings – and to achieving a high economic status:

It is that even though I am studying in Poland, the IB diploma works really well for me. It means I don't have to score super high on final exams. I don't have to get 100% in all six subjects to get into the University of Warsaw, for example. – Weronika

With SGH [Warsaw School of Economics], let's say, if a student with a Polish high school diploma wants to get in, they need pretty high scores. But most of the people there are winners of academic competitions or have an IB diploma. The requirements for us are threes or fours – like, three out of seven – which isn't hard to achieve. – Antek

For the students whom we interviewed, one of the main reasons for choosing an international program was the great advantage it offers during university admissions. They are well aware of the more favorable "conversion rate," so they conceptualize international programs as a "ticket" to their dream studies. When thinking about their future education, they most often consider the most prestigious Polish majors or foreign universities:

I think everyone is hoping to get a scholarship somewhere abroad. –
Natalia

They emphasize that international programs help them better understand the complexity of the modern world and to move confidently through this world in the future. The English language is of great importance in this as it functions as a kind of a “thinking tool” that conceptualizes the world differently than Polish and allows for more nuanced understanding:

I decided to attend a bilingual program simply because I like English, and honestly, English is even easier for me than Polish. Plus, the more languages I know, the more open the world becomes to me, I'd say. – Ania⁷

Another important aspect of international education programs – especially in relation to students' future professional functioning in the global free market – is the opportunity to choose subjects that are directly related to their personal interests as well as with their partially formed career plans:

For me, the first thought that made me decide to join the IB program was the additional subject – psychology. Psychology is my main area of interest. – Gosia

Students enrolled in international education programs approach their academic choices thoughtfully and strategically. They consider both their chances of being accepted into their desired field of study and the possibilities for financing their studies abroad. They are aware of the high costs associated with tuition, housing, living expenses, and transportation. They also demonstrate an excellent understanding of international study opportunities and frequently reference countries where obtaining scholarships or student loans for foreigners has become nearly impossible or significantly more difficult (e.g., the United Kingdom and the

⁷ Participants' data – such as students' names – have been changed for confidentiality.

United States). Even at the high school level, they are already considering not just specific career paths, but also external factors that could either hinder or support their goals. The interviews also revealed a recurring theme of students gearing up for the role of university students.

The goal of the essays and papers they write in the International Baccalaureate program is to resemble undergraduate work, mirroring the expectations of university-level assignments. When describing the international program, students refer to the qualities they believe are important for succeeding in higher education and later functioning in a neoliberal economic environment. Chief among these qualities is critical thinking – one of the key learning outcomes of international programs and the focus of a dedicated subject. Critical thinking is also integrated into other subjects (e.g., *Theory of Knowledge*),⁸ mainly through the analysis and discussion of academic sources:

I think critical thinking – although sometimes forced – is still really valuable. When we're learning, doing assignments or working with theories, there is actually an emphasis on recognizing that even professionals and experts have limitations. You have to be able to see the flaws, not just accept everything. You need to be self-critical. And also, just the ability to write longer papers, do introductions and summaries, and construct solid arguments – that's important. – Wojtek

In summary, students view international education programs as one of the most reliable ways to secure the best starting position in the race for elite universities, prestigious majors, and ultimately, the most attractive (especially in financial terms) jobs. These students are aware of the decline of centrally planned economies and want to take an active part in the free market. Their participation in international education programs is a conscious step toward preparing for that future.

⁸ *Theory of knowledge* is a subject consisting of approximately 100 hours of instruction, focusing on a scientific approach to understanding knowledge.

Freedom Lab

Schools offering international education programs are structurally distinct entities, with dedicated staff, facilities, and resources that create an environment where students can practice learning autonomy in a safe and supportive setting. This experience of taking initiative in their learning is seen as preparing them to more effectively exercise economic freedom and pursue financial goals in neoliberal conditions.

Freedom is embedded in the very nature of international education programs. Not only are these programs exempt from government control, but teachers are also free to select both the content they use to achieve learning outcomes and the teaching methods that they deem most effective. Students, in turn, enjoy considerable freedom in how, where, and when they complete educational projects and pursue learning – whether at school, in a library, or at home; independently, collaboratively, or through peer-to-peer collaboration.

The students interviewed clearly recognize this difference between international programs and the Polish core curriculum, along with the educational practices typically associated with it – and they place a high value on that distinction:

Especially in biology and chemistry, it is common to go to the lab. But under the Polish curriculum, students are just thrown into the lab without really knowing what to do. In our case, by the time we got to the lab, each of us – I’m talking specifically about chemistry here – had to come up with a research question, determine quantities, come prepared with our own methodology, and write a research paper based on it. And I know – for example, I’ve heard, although I haven’t studied abroad myself – that the support at the beginning of university studies in Poland is quite limited. There’s not much guidance on what needs to be done, how, or why. Whereas abroad there’s usually some sort of introduction. So for a student from Poland, who has had a ton of theoretical chemistry – everything just on paper – it’s suddenly very different to have to do something practical. That’s the difference: even

though the program might not be perfect, there's definitely more hands-on experience, I would say. – Gosia

Shifting away from simply going through textbook pages and chapters toward independently selecting, preparing, and conducting experiments allows students to develop a better and deeper understanding of the world around them. This hands-on approach helps them make informed decisions – first in their studies and later in their professional lives. Additionally, learning in a foreign language and interacting with teachers from various countries and cultural backgrounds promotes the development of multilingualism and enhances students' ability to adapt to diverse cultural codes. Students also view the way lesson groups are organized as a professional advantage. These groups are made up of peers who have chosen the subject based on genuine interest:

There are about five or six of us in a class, and I think that makes a difference. Everyone chose this subject for themselves; they're genuinely interested and want to learn more about it. That changes the dynamic – it's a smaller group of people who are really engaged. – Wojtek

This structure offers students the opportunity to practice teamwork and task-based collaboration in a relatively safe and supportive setting. The knowledge, skills, and competencies developed in this way are intended to be applied in adulthood, for example, in executing business projects. The size of these learning groups also resembles the size of employee teams in corporations – a feature students see as an advantage, especially considering the roughly 50-year careers that they expect to have. Students are allowed to change groups during project work, which helps them develop flexibility, learn how to collaborate in unstable or unpredictable environments, and establish their presence in changing teams.

For these students, change feels natural; they are not afraid of it and are eager to embrace it:

Something you don't really notice here – unlike in a regular Polish classroom – is how the groups don't stand out as much. That's because we have each lesson with a different group. So in each one, we have some close friends. Since we're constantly being shuffled, the group divisions don't feel as rigid. – Kasia

The opportunity to engage in discussion, ask questions, think critically, and draw conclusions in a group of like-minded peers is particularly important to students. They also emphasize the significance of the teacher's role, especially their professionalism and personal qualities. Teachers are seen not just as instructors, but as team leaders and educational guides who provide meaningful support:

We're in a private school, so the teacher's approach is more personal. If we want the teacher to stay after class or give us extra help, they will – but of course, we have to ask for it. And that can be a barrier sometimes. – Ania

These are professors who really know their stuff – they know what good work looks like. They're familiar with every literary device out there... well, maybe not every single one. – Zosia

Students assign a particularly important role to the coordinators⁹ of international programs, who are viewed as similar to supervisors in a corporate environment:

There's no equivalent to the coordinator in the Polish system. This is the person who guides us – explaining how to attach our papers, how

⁹ The role of coordinator in international programs does not have a direct equivalent in the Polish system. The coordinator is responsible for ensuring high-quality education, supporting teachers in program implementation and professional development, overseeing both educational and administrative staff, and managing school safety. Additional duties include promoting the school's mission and values through public events, stakeholder engagement, social media, newsletters, and collaboration with local, national, and international partners and institutions.

to submit university applications, or keep track of deadlines. You can even start applying to universities with their help. They're the person who's there to hold your hand, so to speak. – Kasia

From the students' point of view, the coordinator is not just someone who manages the logistics of the international program at school. Instead, they're seen as a vital source of support – someone whose role simply does not exist in the Polish school system. The presence of such a figure is viewed as yet another advantage of international programs over national ones.

Diamond mine

Students independently – or with minimal teacher support – tap into the vast and virtually limitless resources of scientific knowledge in order to uncover unique insights and develop competencies that are difficult or even impossible to acquire through national education curricula. These competencies increase their chances of succeeding in the competitive free-market environment. Students play an active role in deciding what qualifies as a “diamond” – that is, what content is interesting and valuable for their future professional lives – and what they see as “just a rock” with little relevance:

That may be the difference – that the teacher still has some choice, a limited one, but they can choose what topics they want to cover in history. We still have those options. In math, we didn't – because of COVID – but starting next year, there will be even more choice. Teachers will be able to choose pretty much everything, I think. – Ania

Teachers are not required to accompany students through every level of the “diamond mine,” but they are expected to guide them toward areas with the highest likelihood of discovering these precious gems – places where students themselves want to explore and where intellectual

challenges, or “cognitive risks,” are greatest. Their task is to curate engaging content that students can critically analyze¹⁰ and use as a basis for inquiry. In this way, the search for knowledge becomes a shared journey between teacher and student:

But I know that once, for example, our teacher asked us whether we preferred one topic or another. So there is that element of choice, and it's already motivating, I'd say. And we all have to agree on it – it's not like you have to master everything on your own. – Wiktoria

Students complete assignments, read books, and explore resources – mainly digital libraries and online materials. With guidance from teachers, they build skills for verifying and evaluating information, or – metaphorically speaking, they learn to tell diamonds from ordinary stones:

We learn how to think, and how to think practically, so we're not caught off guard by things we had to memorize by heart. I think that's one of the problems with the Polish program – you're constantly working like an ant, and then suddenly, when it comes time to think for yourself, you can't. You've always been given everything – like even the structure of how to write a paper. – Kamil

In the diamond mine, it is important to follow your own interests, be consciously engaged, think strategically, show innovation, possess a desire to achieve, act spontaneously, be imaginative, and have courage:

I mean, there are textbooks, but in some subjects we just don't use them. Especially if the teacher is experienced and has been working

¹⁰ *Teaching through concepts* is a strategy unique to international education programs and does not exist in the Polish curriculum. Concepts – often interdisciplinary and timeless – form the foundation for multiple lessons across different subjects, helping students understand connections between areas of knowledge. Examples include creativity, feminism, change, development, knowledge, and tolerance.

in the IB program for a while – they often have a whole collection of their own materials. – Gosia

Students spend most of the school year working in this “diamond mine.” Their free time is typically divided between preparing for projects and exams and participating in extracurricular activities – many of which are also educational or focused on personal growth:

And I think it’s also largely up to the students because they’re the ones who have to find the motivation within themselves and develop an awareness of their goals. – Maja

It’s also worth noting that all in all, the IB is a very demanding program, through which we really learn a strong work ethic. I think it prepares us very well for academic work because we write research papers. So I feel like we’re able to enter student life with a slightly different mindset – or even later on, if someone becomes an academic, they’ll approach it a bit differently than students who went through the Polish high school diploma program. – Zuzia

Students conceptualize the international program as one meant for people who genuinely enjoy working hard. They value learning and take pleasure in it. They see the world as an exciting place – not just because it offers the chance to search for “diamonds,” but also because the process is unpredictable. They never know exactly where those discoveries might be found.

Conclusion

The three student conceptualizations of international education programs identified and described in this study suggest that the free market and neoliberalism are not inherently negative forces in education, as many previous scholarly works have argued. In fact, it appears that without neoliberal culture and the free market as a socio-cultural order,

international education programs may not have achieved their current popularity – or perhaps even had the opportunity to develop and flourish globally, including in Poland. As a result, students would not have had access to an alternative educational experience outside of national programs.

Students in international education programs do not view the free market order as a threat, but as an opportunity to compete fairly in a globalized economy – an opportunity that may lead to a high standard of living, personal satisfaction, and the ability to fulfill their dreams. Given the ongoing processes of globalization, increasing international mobility, and the growing internationalization of economic relations, it is likely that the number of students enrolled in international education programs will continue to rise. This creates a new, compelling, and promising horizon for pedagogical research, one that may shed new light on the complex nature and evolving conditions of educational processes.

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