



PUZZLE PIECES THAT FIT: Eagle Hill’s IB Program Empowers Diverse Learners

Why Learning Differences don’t define academic potential in the IB Diploma Programme at Eagle Hill School.

—Jane Alwis, history teacher, academic advisor, and IB faculty

In social settings, when I am asked what I do and where I work, I smile at the predictability of the questions and comments that will follow. “I teach high school history, including history for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, at Eagle Hill School.” Yes, my school is for diverse learners, which some may label a school for students with learning disabilities. And yes, the IB Diploma Programme is challenging for any student. But the question I would like to ask those who look puzzled about EHS’s combination of IB and learning diversity is: should we automatically place limits on our students because of societal perceptions of learning differences?

Generally speaking, the IB Diploma Programme is designed to be a demanding, well-rounded, and rigorous course of study. The heavy workload required by IB classes can be difficult to manage, as can the focus on collaborative learning and group projects, which require students to advocate amongst themselves and develop strong communication and negotiation skills. It can also present a challenge for students who resist a traditional curriculum. Since they follow standardized course syllabi and use prescribed evaluation schemes, it may appear that IB schools leave less room for the flexibility students sometimes crave. Diploma students are required to take a more holistic program of courses (one each from math, science, foreign language, the arts, and humanities), which provides fewer opportunities for specialist courses to explore individual interests.

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One of the unique elements of IB at Eagle Hill, however, is that students can select IB courses a la carte, allowing them to stretch academically in the classes where there is strength while continuing to access the comprehensive support they may need. Long-time EHS faculty member Dr. Jane Cronin (now retired) once wrote, “Our teachers seek to understand each student’s learning needs and approaches and then strive to give them the tools they need so that each student can take on his or her own quest for discovery about themselves and the world.”¹

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¹ Cronin, J. 2010

Previous literature suggests that the IB program is so rigorous it has been called the ‘Cadillac of College Prep.’² In some countries, including the United States, graduates may be offered college credit based on their grades. The rigorous standards of the IB Diploma curricula require students to delve more deeply than rote memorization and exam preparation. IB graduates are well-equipped to crush the academic challenges of college as the program encourages students to master critical thinking skills that lead to the analysis of complex information, the formation of their own opinions, and the engagement in meaningful discussions. The focus on research, inquiry-based learning, and independent projects equips students with essential skills for navigating an ever-changing world and college courses in the interim. The IB Diploma Programme has made a name for itself by providing a challenging yet holistic approach to education that goes beyond just academic success. Some learners love this kind of collaborative, open-ended approach to learning. It is not unusual for students who complete the program to develop a lifelong love for learning and a strong commitment to personal growth. As one recent Eagle Hill alum stated, “Practically, the IB programme prepared me very, very well (for college), but it also gave me the confidence to push myself more academically and personally”.³

So, what I say to those who ask me why IB and diverse learners is that this comprehensive approach to education fits perfectly at EHS, where instilling confidence and curiosity in students is what we do best. Jason Przypek, IB Coordinator at Eagle Hill School, states that “[t]he IB Diploma Programme immerses students in a comprehensive two-year personal growth journey and lays the foundation for a robust and enduring intellectual life.”⁴ Although the IB Diploma Programme is widely considered an appropriate secondary program of study for high-achieving students, its potential to enhance self-regulated learning suggests that it may also be a suitable option for college-bound students labeled with so-called learning differences. The term “learning differences” typically refers to diagnoses such as dyspraxia, dyslexia, and dyscalculia that are purported to stem from “neurological differences in brain structure and function [that] . . . affect a person’s ability to receive, store, process, retrieve or communicate information . . . [and] are both real and permanent”.⁵ Whatever your thinking about learning might be, however, these labels do not indicate a person’s intellectual capacity, curiosity, or motivation to learn.

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At Eagle Hill, we do not want students to avoid academic rigor. Head of School Erin Wynne argues that “[t]oday, the genius of the Eagle Hill philosophy remains its simplicity, grounded in the beliefs that our students are endowed with diverse and remarkable capacities for learning and that it is our responsibility as educators to identify, nurture, and celebrate those capacities as our students pursue their dreams.”⁶ In fact, the IBO states that, “the [IB] programme is intended to be inclusive, not exclusive, and IB schools are required to give students with wide-ranging abilities, including students with learning disabilities, the fullest access to the programme.”⁷

Research suggests that students achieve academic success only if they want to and feel capable of doing so.⁸ At Eagle Hill, we want to foster resilience, grit, and confidence in our students. Individual attention and close bonds with academic advisors result in a thorough understanding of a student’s capabilities before enrolment in a class. This

² Culross and Tarver, 2011. 232

³ Student 1, 2024

⁴ Przypek, 2024

⁵ Cortiella and Horowitz, 2014

⁶ Wynne, 2024

⁷ IBO, 2018

⁸ Stiggins, 1999

relationship helps to build confidence in academic ability. As Carol Dweck writes: “Confidence is not something we’re born with; it’s a skill to be mastered, an art to be perfected over years of learning. However, many still think that it’s a fixed characteristic—that if someone is low on confidence, it’s just not their strength. Yet, we absolutely can, and should, work on our confidence, and the benefits for learners can be invaluable”.⁹

The IB Diploma Programme encourages a growth mindset, emphasizing the importance of effort, perseverance, and continuous learning, skills that Eagle Hill School seeks to instill in all learners. Students are challenged to step outside their comfort zones, to tackle complex tasks, and to learn from their mistakes. Challenge fosters resilience that enables them to overcome complex tasks, to adapt to new situations, and to remain motivated, even when faced with difficulty. This is made possible by individualized attention in small classes, and “[b]y emphasizing individualized attention within the context of a small classroom environment, Eagle Hill provides for the academic, social, and personal growth of each student.”¹⁰

Classroom academic work regularly asks students to “solve complex tasks demonstrating skills that range from simple to ones that have interdependencies of cognitive, emotional, and social abilities.”¹¹ While cognitive skills have long been a primary focus of education, metacognitive skills are increasingly being considered 21st-century competencies that are crucial for success. Metacognitive awareness is “knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena.”¹² It is what we think about thinking. In the Diploma Programme, metacognition, or learning how to learn, is not taught as a separate course; “it [is] infused naturally into the curriculum as part of the teaching and learning process.”¹³ IB’s “Approaches To Learning” skills (Thinking, Research, Communication, Self-management, and Social skills) are part of the core curriculum and are highlighted in each course syllabus.

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Diploma Programme pedagogy is meant to be student-centered, differentiated, varied, and reflective. This emphasis on metacognition suggests that the IB Diploma Programme may be uniquely supportive for students with learning differences, and from the IB’s perspective, metacognition is “teachable.” As Jason Przypek says, “The IB Programme is not a collection of courses designed around passing standardized multiple-choice tests. It emphasizes the depth of knowledge and understanding, mastery of the material, and the careful cultivation of the skills required for complex communication and not rote memorization of a vast array of encyclopedic knowledge.”¹⁴

Many students with learning differences struggle to take ownership of their learning. Without sophisticated metacognitive awareness, students use ineffective strategies such as repeatedly rereading their textbook or class notes and cramming without critically thinking about their reading. “These ineffective strategies lead to memorization, rather than learning, while tricking students into believing that meaningful learning has taken place.”¹⁵ In contrast, there are pedagogical practices in which IB subject teachers are encouraged to engage, which can facilitate the development of metacognitive awareness. Modeling, scaffolding, formative assessment, collaborative learning, discussion, and other activities that illuminate, draw upon, and value multiple perspectives all serve to challenge students’ thinking and, in doing so, encourage a more effective approach to learning.¹⁶ Muis and Singh argue that this sort of teaching develops metacognitive awareness.¹⁷ For this reason, we should encourage all students who desire to do so to participate in IB courses.

⁹ Dweck, 2008

¹⁰ Wynne, 2024

¹¹ McGraw Hill, 2018

¹² Flavell, 1979

¹³ IBO, 2009

¹⁴ Przypek, 2021

¹⁶ IB, 2024

¹⁷ Muis and Singh, 2018

One important aim of the Diploma Programme is to prepare students to overcome life’s challenges by developing into effective lifelong learners. ¹⁸ School-based stakeholders may assume that the Diploma Program is only suitable for high-achieving students, but this investigation suggests otherwise. “Across the world, inclusive education has grown from a movement that was about the inclusion of students with disabilities to a holistic approach that is about all learners and values the diversity of the student population.” ¹⁹ IB texts communicate their philosophy and translate this for schools into pedagogical guidance and professional development to ensure IB students can take ownership of their learning. Notably, the pedagogy encouraged by the IB appears to have enhanced the effectiveness of diverse learners as reflected by the number, type, and quality of strategies they implemented during independent learning and continue to use as college students. ²⁰

Because strategy use is an integral element of self-regulated learning and vital to academic success in secondary school and beyond, these findings suggest that the Diploma Programme is indeed an appropriate college preparatory program for students with learning disabilities and not just for those students with a history of high achievement. And, as they say, the proof is in the pudding. Here at Eagle Hill, we see firsthand the success of our students as they engage in IB courses. We see them develop into life-long learners who know that they are capable and unafraid of high-level academic work.

ABOUT JANE ALWIS

Jane grew up in a small town in regional Victoria in Australia. She completed an arts degree, with majors in history and philosophy and a minor in literature, and then obtained a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Teaching at a regional campus of what is now LaTrobe University. After relocating to the United States, she completed a Master of Education in Learning, Teaching, and Education Transformation at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Her teaching experience includes seventeen years in Australian public schools teaching history and English and one very interesting year at a small Catholic school teaching everything, including cake decorating. After relocating to the United States in 2005, she spent five years working in Massachusetts public schools—teaching, amongst other things, history, social studies, and special education. She joined the Eagle Hill teaching faculty in 2011 and now teaches classes in world history, IB history, social justice, and writing. In 2024, Jane was named a faculty fellow at Eagle Hill in recognition to her outstanding to the school.

Jane lives in Clinton with her husband. She has three adult children. She likes to read, cook, and work in her garden, and she is an enthusiastic tea importer and drinker.



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¹⁸ IB, 200-9

¹⁹ IBO, 2023

²⁰ Student Survey, 2024

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