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# The Elite's Counterstrategy to the Massification of Education: IB

教育の大衆化に対するエリートに対抗戦略: 国際バカロレア (IB)

Submitted by:

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

This study examines the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as a mechanism for elite reproduction within the global education landscape. Grounded in Bourdieu's theory of capital, the research investigates how economic, cultural, and social capital influence parental decision-making and the marketing strategies of IB schools in Japan and China. By employing a mixed-methods approach—combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews of parents and IB school directors—the study reveals that while the IB promotes global citizenship and academic excellence, its benefits are largely accessible to affluent families. The findings underscore the dual role of the IB in enhancing international educational mobility while simultaneously reinforcing entrenched social inequalities.

**Keywords:** International Baccalaureate, Elite Reproduction, Global Education, Social Stratification, Cultural Capital, Economic Capital, Social Capital, Parental Motivations, Educational Mobility, Mixed-Methods Research

## 要旨

本研究は、国際バカロレア (IB) プログラムがグローバル教育におけるエリート再生産のメカニズムとして果たす役割を検証するものである。ブルデューの資本理論に基づき、経済的、文化的、社会的資本が日本および中国における親の意思決定やIB校のマーケティング戦略にどのような影響を及ぼすかを探求した。定量調査と質的インタビューを組み合わせた混合研究法を用いることで、IBプログラムはグローバル市民性と学問的卓越性を促進する一方、その恩恵が主に裕福な家庭に限定されていることが明らかになった。これらの結果は、IBが国際教育において、教育移動性の向上と既存の社会的不平等の持続・拡大という相反する二面性を有していることを浮き彫りにしている。

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and Context**

The global education landscape has undergone profound transformations since the mid-20th century, a period marked by massification—the rapid expansion of access to education across all societal strata (Altbach, 2017; Tight, 2019). While celebrated as a democratizing force, this expansion has also brought new challenges. As education became a universal aspiration, the traditional markers of elite status, once rooted in exclusivity, began to erode. This phenomenon has created a paradox: massification has both broadened access to education and intensified competition, particularly for socio-economic elites seeking to maintain their social and economic advantages.

In response, elite families have increasingly sought alternative educational pathways to secure their children's future positions within the social hierarchy. Among these, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program stands out as a global educational model that offers perceived superiority in academic rigor, international orientation, and prestige. Established in 1968, the IB was initially designed for globally mobile families but has since evolved into a strategic credential for elite reproduction worldwide (Resnik, 2012). Its inquiry-based curriculum, emphasis on multilingualism, and international university recognition make it a preferred choice for families seeking to differentiate their children in a highly competitive global education market. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of capital conversion, IB education serves as an institutionalized form of cultural capital, offering elite students a competitive advantage in university admissions and professional trajectories.

Japan and China provide compelling contexts for exploring these dynamics. Both nations are characterized by deeply rooted educational traditions, yet their responses to globalization

reflect distinct cultural and institutional differences. Japan's education system has long been associated with an exam-centric culture that prioritizes rote learning and conformity (Tsuneyoshi, 2004; Takayama, 2008). While this system has historically produced consistent academic outcomes, it has been criticized for stifling creativity and failing to equip students with the skills needed in a globalized economy (Moriguchi, 2018). However, reform efforts have been slow, and international programs like the IB remain a niche option, primarily confined to international schools and select private institutions (Ishikura, 2018). A small but growing segment of elite families, particularly those with overseas exposure or aspirations, view the IB as a means to access global higher education and develop internationally relevant skills (Coulson et al., 2019). Beyond the IB, Japanese elite families have historically relied on other mechanisms such as shadow education, bilingual programs, and private schooling to secure their children's advantages within an increasingly competitive educational landscape (Yamamoto, Y., 2019; Tsuneyoshi, 2013). These strategies, like the IB, serve to reinforce class-based distinctions and contribute to intergenerational social reproduction (Ishida, 2022). In 2011, the Japanese government launched the "IB 200 Schools Project", aiming to expand IB implementation in public schools to develop "global jinzai"—a new generation of globally competent human resources (Yamamoto, B. et al., 2016). To support this initiative, a Dual Language IB DP (English and Japanese) was introduced, allowing students to take up to four subjects in Japanese. However, despite these efforts, the initiative encountered several significant barriers to implementation.

One of the primary challenges was the limited availability of IB instructional materials in Japanese, which made it difficult for local schools to adopt the program effectively. Many subjects were only available in English, creating accessibility issues for students and teachers accustomed to monolingual Japanese instruction (Yamamoto, B. et al., 2016). Additionally, a

lack of IB-trained teachers posed further difficulties, as many Japanese educators were unfamiliar with the IB's inquiry-based pedagogy. Schools required extensive professional development programs to transition to IB-style instruction, yet such training opportunities were limited, delaying effective program implementation (Yamamoto, B. et al., 2016). Beyond logistical and training challenges, curriculum alignment with Japan's existing education system proved problematic. The IB DP's emphasis on holistic learning and research-driven coursework contrasted sharply with Japan's rigid university entrance exam framework. Japanese students who completed the IB still had to sit for additional entrance exams to gain admission to domestic universities, which discouraged broader IB adoption (Yamamoto, B. et al., 2016). Given these structural incompatibilities, the IB DP has remained a niche program in Japan, largely confined to international and private schools rather than becoming a widely accessible pathway. While the program aligns with Japan's stated goal of fostering global competencies, its structural incompatibility with Japan's exam-oriented higher education system has hindered its widespread adoption (Sabina, 2023).

By contrast, China's education system, shaped by rapid economic modernization and internationalization, reflects a dual aspiration among elites: preparing students for global opportunities (often through international qualifications like the IB) while maintaining ties to cultural heritage (Liu, 2020). Unlike Japan's exam-centric model, which resists reform, Chinese elites increasingly view the IB as a parallel pathway to international universities, even as domestic institutions remain anchored in the gaokao system (Young, 2018; Zhang, 2024b). International schools and the IB program serve as a refuge from the intense pressures of the Chinese education system, offering alternative routes to academic success and social mobility (Wright et al., 2014). However, despite its progressive ideals, the IB remains predominantly accessible to affluent families, reinforcing rather than mitigating

educational inequalities (Xue, 2023). This pattern reflects broader inequalities in China's education system, where rural and low-income students face significant barriers to elite university admission (Li et al., 2015). The IB pathway allows affluent families to circumvent the gaokao system, which disproportionately disadvantages students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Jia et al., 2017). Similar patterns can be observed in other international education pathways, where family income plays a decisive role in students' access to elite opportunities (Yang and Wu., 2021). Furthermore, IB adoption in China has presented unique challenges. Unlike Japan, where IB remains a niche program, China has seen rapid expansion in IB schools, driven by increasing demand from elite families seeking direct access to Western universities. In this context, social capital plays a particularly crucial role—Chinese IB families frequently leverage alumni networks and informal connections (*guanxi*) to maximize their children's educational mobility (Zhang, 2024a). Chinese students often experience difficulties due to language barriers and must rely heavily on private tutoring to meet the IB's academic demands, which further reinforces class-based disparities (Zhang, 2024a). In China, some IB schools have modified their curriculum through project-based teaching methods to align with local educational expectations (Hou, 2024; Poole, 2021; Resnik, 2016). These adaptations reflect the ongoing tension between the IB's global framework and its practical implementation within China's domestic education landscape.

This study examines how the IB functions as both a mechanism of elite reproduction and an adaptive strategy within a globalized education system. By contrasting the IB's limited presence in Japan with its growing significance in China, this research advances debates on the evolving role of elite education in an era of credential inflation and educational massification (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). While IB is often framed as a tool for global

educational equity, its implementation in Japan and China reveals how elite families strategically utilize international credentials to maintain exclusivity in a shifting landscape of competition.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

Mass education is often celebrated for its democratizing potential, yet it has also intensified competitive pressures among socio-economic elites. The devaluation of traditional credentials—as more individuals attain higher education—and the globalization of labor markets have heightened anxieties about social mobility and economic security. In response, elite families have increasingly sought alternative educational pathways, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), to preserve their advantages. The growing presence of IB schools globally, particularly in Japan and China, reflects this trend (IBO, 2024a).

### **Growth of the IB and Its Implications for Access and Equity**

The rise of the IB as a global educational program raises critical questions about access and equity. While the IB promotes inclusivity and international-mindedness, in practice, it remains predominantly accessible to affluent families due to its high costs and selective nature (Tarc, 2021). The expansion of IB programs in both Japan and China exemplifies these dynamics.

Globally, the IB program has experienced substantial growth. As of October 2024, IB programs serve over 1.95 million students across more than 5,900 schools in 160+ countries (IBO, 2024a). Japan and China have also seen significant IB expansion, albeit in different ways.

In Japan, the government has actively promoted the IB as part of its educational internationalization strategy. The number of IB schools increased from 39 to 200 by 2018,

reflecting a deliberate effort to integrate international education frameworks into the national system (British Council, 2018). However, despite these efforts, IB adoption remains niche, largely concentrated in private and international schools that cater to elite families (Moriguchi, 2018; Ishikura, 2018).

In China, IB adoption has expanded rapidly. As of 2024, China hosts over 1,100 international schools, many of which offer IB programs (ICEF Monitor, 2024). This growth is driven by increasing demand among affluent Chinese families seeking access to prestigious universities abroad (Liu, 2020). Unlike Japan, where IB remains a niche option, China has embraced IB as an alternative to its national curriculum (Zhang, 2024a).

**Table1-2-1: IB Program Adoption Overview**

<b>Region/Country</b>	<b>Number of IB Programs</b>	<b>Number of IB Schools</b>	<b>Notable Trends</b>
<b>Global</b>	Over 8,000	Over 5,900	Rapid growth in IB adoption worldwide (IBO, 2024a).
<b>Japan</b>	122 total IB schools	PYP: 65 MYP: 40 DP: 71	IB is expanding, but remains niche, primarily in private and international schools (IBO, 2024b).
<b>China</b>	443 total IB schools	PYP: 189 MYP: 84	IB serves as a pathway for affluent families seeking



DP: 165 overseas education (IBO,  
CP: 5 2024c).

### **1.3 Research Aims and Objectives**

This research seeks to address the following objectives:

1. To analyze the motivations of Japanese and Chinese parents in selecting the IB for their children.
2. To explore the role of economic, cultural, and social capital in shaping these decisions.
3. To examine how the IB functions as a mechanism for social reproduction and status maintenance.
4. To assess the broader implications of these dynamics for global educational inequality and access.

By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to theoretical debates on globalization, education, and social stratification, while offering practical insights into the dynamics of elite education.

### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital to examine how elite families navigate global education markets to sustain intergenerational privilege. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized capital as a multi-dimensional resource that extends beyond economic wealth to include cultural and social capital, both of which play crucial roles in educational

reproduction. His framework provides a critical lens for analyzing how families strategically mobilize resources to secure elite educational opportunities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Within the field of international education, the International Baccalaureate (IB) serves as a key site where economic, cultural, and social capital interact. While the IB presents itself as a meritocratic and globally inclusive curriculum, research suggests that its implementation aligns with elite educational strategies, favoring students from high-cultural-capital backgrounds (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Resnik, 2016; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). This study explores how IB participation functions as a mechanism of elite reproduction, reinforcing class-based distinctions and access to transnational mobility.

Bourdieu's three forms of capital—economic, cultural, and social—are central to this analysis. Economic capital enables access to high-cost international schooling, private tutoring, and enrichment activities (Weenink, 2008). Cultural capital manifests through linguistic proficiency, academic preparedness, and familiarity with elite educational norms, all of which shape student success within the IB (Reay, 2004; Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Social capital plays a critical role in network formation, access to university admissions strategies, and long-term career mobility (Ball, 2003; Yamamoto, Y., 2019; Zhang, 2024a). By examining how these forms of capital interact, this study evaluates whether IB education serves primarily as a tool of elite distinction or as an adaptive strategy in an increasingly competitive global education landscape.

This research applies Bourdieu's theoretical lens to analyze survey and interview data collected from IB families in Japan and China. It investigates how parents conceptualize the IB as a means of accumulating institutionalized cultural capital (i.e., globally recognized credentials) and how social networks influence IB decision-making (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Additionally, by exploring how IB school directors frame the program's elite accessibility

and marketing strategies, this study situates IB participation within the broader discourse of global educational stratification (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015; Resnik, 2016).

Ultimately, this framework allows for a critical interrogation of the IB's role in contemporary elite education. While the IB promotes ideals of global citizenship and educational mobility, its structural barriers—particularly its financial exclusivity and alignment with elite capital—suggest that its benefits are disproportionately concentrated among affluent families (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). By applying Bourdieu's insights, this study assesses how IB participation is shaped by, and contributes to, broader patterns of class reproduction in transnational education markets (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

## **1.5 Methodology Overview**

A mixed-methods approach underpins this research, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide both breadth and depth of understanding. Surveys capture general trends in parental motivations, while interviews delve into the nuanced cultural, economic, and social factors influencing these decisions. By focusing on both Japanese and Chinese families, the study adopts a comparative lens, highlighting the similarities and differences in how elites engage with the IB in distinct national contexts.

This methodological approach also aligns with the study's theoretical framework, allowing for the triangulation of data across different sources. By integrating quantitative and qualitative insights, the research seeks to illuminate not only the "what" but also the "why" behind elite strategies in education.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This research addresses a critical gap in the literature on globalization and education by examining the socio-economic implications of the International Baccalaureate (IB), a topic that has received limited scholarly attention. While prior studies have extensively analyzed the IB's curriculum and pedagogical philosophy, this study shifts the focus to how the IB functions as a tool for elites to counteract the massification of education and maintain social stratification. By situating the study in Japan and China, the research explores the intersection of global educational systems with localized cultural and economic dynamics, offering a comparative perspective that is often missing from existing literature.

The study makes a significant contribution to broader debates on equity and access in education. By illustrating how the IB program reinforces social inequalities through its exclusivity and high cost, the findings challenge policymakers and educators to critically evaluate its claims of promoting inclusivity and global competence. This critique is particularly urgent in light of the IB's growing prominence in education systems worldwide. Moreover, the research has practical implications for rethinking international curricula. It provides insights into how the IB might be reformed to address its role in perpetuating inequality, offering pathways for aligning its practices more closely with its stated ideals of inclusivity and accessibility.

## **1.7 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is structured into six chapters, each building on the preceding one to construct a cohesive analysis of the IB's role in elite education strategies:

- Chapter 2 (Literature Review): This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of theoretical and empirical work on globalization, social reproduction, and elite education strategies. It situates the rise of the IB within broader trends in education, highlighting its role in global and local contexts. Key debates on equity, access, and cultural capital are discussed to establish the foundation for the study.
- Chapter 3 (Methodology): The research design and methodological approach are outlined in this chapter. It explains the mixed-methods framework, detailing how surveys and interviews were employed to capture the motivations of parents and the perspectives of school directors. This chapter also addresses ethical considerations, sampling strategies, and the alignment of methods with the theoretical framework based on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts.
- Chapter 4 (Findings): This chapter presents the study's empirical findings, organized around key themes. It examines parental motivations for choosing the IB, the economic and cultural capital required to access it, and the strategic use of the program for status maintenance. Insights from interviews with directors reveal nuanced perspectives on the socio-economic profile of IB families and the challenges of balancing exclusivity with the program's global aspirations.
- Chapter 5 (Discussion): The discussion chapter situates the findings within broader theoretical and geopolitical frameworks. It engages critically with the literature on globalization and education, analyzing how the IB both reflects and contributes to global inequalities. The chapter also explores the implications of the findings for understanding social reproduction and the strategic role of education in elite family strategies.

- Chapter 6 (Conclusion): The thesis concludes by summarizing its key contributions to the field. It reflects on the theoretical and practical implications of the study, highlighting areas where the IB could be reformed to promote greater inclusivity. The chapter also acknowledges the study's limitations and offers recommendations for future research, particularly in the context of expanding access to global education systems.

This structured approach ensures that the study's arguments are developed coherently, providing a comprehensive analysis of the IB as an elite strategy within the global education landscape.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The latter half of the twentieth century heralded a transformative period in global education, marked by the massification of schooling systems (Altbach, 2017; Tight, 2019). This expansion, driven by rapid economic growth, shifting demographic patterns, and the democratization of education, reconfigured schooling from an exclusive privilege into a ubiquitous social institution. However, while mass education has undeniably fostered upward mobility and bolstered national development, it has concurrently intensified competition among socio-economic groups, prompting elites to devise alternative strategies to preserve and enhance their privileged status (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

One prominent manifestation of this elite response is the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, established in 1968. Originally designed to cater to the educational needs of globally mobile families engaged in diplomatic and international enterprises, the IB has evolved into a globally prestigious credential celebrated for its academic rigor, international orientation, and university preparatory nature (Resnik, 2012). Nevertheless, the program's considerable costs and selective accessibility ensure that it predominantly benefits affluent families, thereby reinforcing existing patterns of educational stratification (Resnik, 2016; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015).

This literature review examines not only the overarching trends in mass education and credential inflation but also how these processes are distinctly manifested in national contexts. The educational landscapes of Japan and China serve as compelling case studies. In Japan, a legacy of exam-centricity—characterized by an enduring reliance on standardized

testing and rote memorization—continues to prevail despite contemporary efforts to introduce more progressive, student-centered approaches (Tsuneyoshi, 2004; Takayama, 2008). In contrast, China’s education system, heavily influenced by the high-stakes Gaokao, has witnessed a rapid proliferation of IB schools; however, these institutions remain largely confined to international and private sectors, thereby catering predominantly to the upper echelons of society (LaFraniere, 2009; Tan, 2023; ICEF Monitor, 2024).

By juxtaposing these two national contexts, this review elucidates the multifaceted ways in which the massification of education has simultaneously expanded access and perpetuated inequality. It further establishes the foundation for a nuanced analysis of elite strategies—such as the adoption of international educational programs—as mechanisms for both reinforcing and, potentially, challenging entrenched educational hierarchies in a rapidly globalizing world.

## **2.2 The Rise of Mass Education**

The concept of mass education, or massification, refers to the dramatic surge in educational participation across all levels, particularly higher education, since the mid-20th century. This expansion has transformed the landscape of global education, reshaping educational access, attainment, and societal structures. Massification is not simply an increase in enrollment numbers but signals a profound shift in the relationship between education and society, raising critical questions about equity, value, and the nature of social mobility.

This trend, while promoting broader participation, also brings challenges. As Marginson (2016) points out, although educational systems have expanded globally, the system remains



deeply stratified, with inequalities continuing to persist despite increased enrollment. The expansion has led to heightened concerns about credential devaluation and greater competition within educational systems, particularly in elite sectors.

### **2.2.1 The Shifting Tides of Education: From Mass Enrollment to Elite Anxieties**

The expansion of education is not merely a quantitative increase in enrollment but a structural transformation with profound social implications (Teichler, 1996). As participation in higher education has grown, it has played a critical role in shaping social mobility, national identity, and economic opportunities. However, research suggests that the widening of access has also heightened anxieties among traditional elites, particularly concerning the perceived devaluation of academic credentials and the challenge to their historical dominance of prestigious institutions (Brown, 2013; Collins, 1979).

While mass education is often framed as promoting equal opportunity, scholars have shown that its expansion frequently reinforces existing social hierarchies. Teichler (1996) highlights how the massification of higher education contributes to vertical differentiation, where the value of credentials is stratified based on institutional prestige rather than solely on individual achievement. This process is consistent with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) broader argument that education systems serve as mechanisms for social reproduction, legitimizing elite advantage by embedding cultural capital within educational credentials.

Brown (2013) examines how credential expansion has intensified competition for elite pathways rather than reducing educational inequalities, as access to top-ranked institutions remains disproportionately concentrated among privileged groups. Similarly, Marginson (2016) describes the rise of high-participation higher education, emphasizing that while more

individuals attain degrees, the advantages conferred by elite institutions persist, reinforcing stratification rather than eroding it.

Collins (1979) argues that the proliferation of credentials leads to credential inflation, wherein degrees lose their distinctiveness in the labor market, prompting elites to seek alternative mechanisms—such as selective educational tracks—to preserve their social and economic advantages. In this context, Zhang (2024b) explores how programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and liberal arts education function as elite pathways that differentiate students within the increasingly saturated field of higher education. Despite the broad expansion of education, structural barriers continue to limit the ability of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access the most prestigious institutions.

## **2.2.2 Historical Context**

### **2.2.2.1 Early Developments**

The journey toward mass education began well before the post-World War II era, rooted in the unique socio-economic and political shifts of the 19th century. As Westberg (2015) and Meyer et al. (1992) show, the rise of industrialization and urbanization in Europe during the 1800s created a demand for a literate and skilled workforce, leading to the birth of mass schooling systems. However, these systems were not uniformly developed across regions, and the expansion of primary education between 1870 and 1940 was shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors (Benavot et al., 1988).

Prussia's establishment of compulsory education in 1763 is a notable early example of state-led education reforms (Zinkina, Korotayev & Andreev, 2016). These efforts were driven by the need to foster a skilled labor force and a cohesive national identity. As Kamens (1988)

observes, education became a critical tool for nation-building, reinforcing both civic engagement and the political control of newly industrialized societies.

This early period of educational expansion, while transformative, was not uniformly experienced across the globe. The 1918 Smith-Hughes Act in the United States, which supported vocational training, and the 1944 Butler Act in the United Kingdom, which expanded secondary education, reflect how Western nations approached education as a tool for national development (Glodin, 2001; Earl, 1984; Akenson, 1971). Yet, as Benavot et al. (1988) argue, this uneven development highlights the complexities of implementing universal education, a challenge that would persist into the 20th century.

#### **2.2.2.2 Post-World War II Expansion**

While the groundwork for mass education was laid in the 19th century, the post-World War II era saw an unprecedented global expansion of educational systems. Countries around the world began to view education as central to national development, economic growth, and individual opportunity. The period from 1945 to the 1970s saw major developments in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, with global enrollment rates soaring (Schofer & Meyer, 2005).

The U.S. experienced a significant expansion in higher education, spurred by the GI Bill of 1948, which broadened access for veterans. This coincided with the post-war baby boom, leading to dramatic increases in college enrollment (Thomas, Alexander, & Eckland, 1979). The launch of Sputnik in 1957 by the Soviet Union further prompted the U.S. to increase investments in education, particularly in STEM fields, leading to curriculum reforms and the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958. These developments underscored the

growing belief that education was essential for technological advancement and national security (Springer, Goujon, & Jurasszovich, 2019).

However, while mass education expanded access, the benefits were not evenly distributed. Benavot et al. (1988) emphasize that this period, though marked by significant growth, continued to reflect the global inequalities present in the earlier phases of educational development. Despite major advances, many regions struggled to implement universal education.

Decolonization movements in Africa and Asia during the mid-20th century further emphasized the role of education in state-building and development. For example, in Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah prioritized education as a tool to dismantle colonial structures and promote national empowerment (Boakye & Kwarteng, 2018). However, even with the global emphasis on education, significant disparities remained between developed and developing nations.

### **2.2.2.3 Global Spread**

The second half of the 20th century saw the rise of education as a global priority. International organizations like UNESCO and the World Bank played key roles in promoting education as a means of economic development, particularly in the Global South. UNESCO's "Education for All" initiative and the World Bank's investments in building educational infrastructure reinforced the idea that education was central to modernity and progress (Heyneman, 2003). Countries such as Nigeria, following independence, heavily invested in education as part of their development strategies, often with the support of international organizations.

At the same time, the expansion of education in developing nations brought to the forefront the issue of credential inflation. As more individuals attained higher education qualifications, the value of those credentials began to decline. Furlong (2013) argues that the massification of education, while increasing opportunities, led to the devaluation of degrees, particularly in developed nations, as credentials became more common. This created a new challenge: while more people had access to education, the competitive advantage it once conferred became diluted.

### **2.2.3 The Uneven Impact of Mass Education**

While mass education expanded access to millions globally, it also exposed deep inequalities between and within nations. The legacy of colonialism and unequal economic development meant that while Western nations rapidly advanced their educational systems, many developing countries struggled to catch up. Additionally, the rise of lifelong learning in Scandinavian countries and other developed regions during the 1970s further widened the gap between nations that could afford to invest in continuous education and those that could not.

In the U.S., reports like *A Nation at Risk* (1983) warned of declining educational standards, leading to reforms focused on accountability, curriculum, and teacher training. These reforms, however, were primarily directed at improving the quality of education in an already highly developed system, whereas many developing countries were still grappling with the basic challenge of providing universal primary education.

Unlike some Western countries that successfully integrated holistic education into national curricula, Japan's system remained dominated by high-stakes testing. Although initiatives

such as the Yutori Education reforms attempted to promote student-centered learning, societal resistance and concerns over academic decline led to policy reversals, reinforcing the primacy of entrance exams as the primary determinant of educational and professional success (OECD, 2019; Kariya & Rapple, 2020).

#### **2.2.4 Japan's New Education Movement and the Development of Exam-Based Schooling**

The development of modern education in Japan was shaped by significant reforms during the New Education Movement in the early 20th century. Influenced by Western progressive educational theories, particularly those of John Dewey, this movement sought to replace rigid rote-learning methods with student-centered, experiential, and holistic learning approaches (Fujita, 1989; Duke, 2009). Reformers emphasized critical thinking, creativity, and well-rounded development over the traditional memorization-heavy and teacher-centered model (Takayama, 2018).

However, despite these reformist efforts, Japan's highly competitive school system continued to prioritize standardized testing and entrance examinations as key determinants of student success (Tsuneyoshi, 2004). By the postwar era, exam-centric schooling had become deeply entrenched, driven by economic growth, social mobility concerns, and national workforce demands (Kariya & Rapple, 2020). This contradicted the holistic ideals envisioned by early education reformers, leading to an ongoing tension between progressive educational rhetoric and high-stakes testing realities. Debates over Japan's test-driven system intensified with international assessments like PISA, raising concerns about how standardized performance metrics shaped national education policies (Takayama, 2008, 2018).

Later reforms, such as the Yutori Education policies of the 1990s–2000s, attempted to rebalance Japan's education system by reducing curriculum content and promoting student autonomy (OECD, 2019). However, these efforts were met with significant backlash, as concerns over declining academic performance and global competitiveness led to policy reversals in the 2010s. Consequently, Japan's education system remains one of the most exam-oriented in the world, with high school and university entrance exams serving as primary gatekeeping mechanisms. While some educational reforms have attempted to introduce holistic learning, such initiatives often remain marginal due to deeply entrenched societal expectations of academic success through standardized testing (Cave, 2016; Kariya & Rappleye, 2020).

### **2.2.5 China's Mass Education and Credentialism**

China's education system has been profoundly influenced by its historical imperial examination system (keju), which emphasized merit-based selection for government positions (Elman, 2013). While the keju system was abolished in 1905, its legacy continued to shape China's approach to education, reinforcing a strong emphasis on standardized testing and academic achievement (Pepper, 1996). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government prioritized mass education as a tool for national development, leading to significant expansion in primary and secondary schooling (Tsang, 2000). However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), academic meritocracy was de-emphasized, and university admissions were based on political ideology and labor background rather than academic performance (Deng & Treiman, 1997).

The reintroduction of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) in 1977 marked a return to academic meritocracy and has since become the central pillar of China's education

system (Zhou & Cheung, 2017). Gaokao scores are the primary determinant of university admission, reinforcing a highly exam-oriented culture. Due to the extreme competition surrounding Gaokao, students and families invest heavily in private tutoring and shadow education to secure placement in elite universities (Feng, 2021). This has fueled a credentialist system, where access to top-tier institutions serves as a key gateway to social mobility but remains highly stratified.

Despite mass educational expansion, inequality persists, particularly due to the hukou (household registration) system, which limits rural students' access to quality education in urban areas (Zhou & Cheung, 2017). This system has exacerbated disparities between urban and rural education, ensuring that elite educational opportunities remain disproportionately available to students from wealthier, urban backgrounds (Tang, 2023). While affirmative action programs and rural-focused scholarships have been introduced to address these gaps, structural barriers continue to disadvantage students from less privileged regions (Tang, 2023).

In recent years, China has explored alternative education models, including the expansion of International Baccalaureate (IB) programs and international schools (Resnik, 2016).

However, tensions persist between test-based meritocracy and holistic learning approaches, as policymakers struggle to balance global education trends with the deeply ingrained exam-centric culture (Pepper, 1996). While educational reforms have sought to reduce reliance on standardized testing, Gaokao remains the dominant metric of academic success, shaping students' career trajectories and reinforcing China's rigid credential hierarchy (Feng, 2021).



### **2.2.6 Conclusion: Mass Education and the Ongoing Challenge of Equity**

The rise of mass education has undeniably transformed societies, creating pathways for upward mobility and national development. Yet, as this chapter has demonstrated, the global expansion of schooling—from its early roots in Europe to the postwar push for universal education—has often reinforced deep social and economic disparities. Early mass education efforts, as illustrated by Westberg (2015), Meyer et al. (1992), and Zinkina, Korotayev, & Andreev (2016), were intimately tied to state-building and economic growth in Western nations. However, as Benavot et al. (1988) and Heyneman (2003) argue, the uneven global expansion of education reflects enduring historical, economic, and political differences between nations.

The case studies of Japan and China further underscore these challenges. In Japan, the legacy of the New Education Movement and subsequent reversion to an exam-centric system (as discussed in Section 2.2.4) highlights how even progressive educational reforms can be overwhelmed by entrenched national practices. In contrast, China's rigid credentialist model—anchored by the Gaokao and reinforced by the hukou system (see Section 2.2.5)—illustrates how mass education can coexist with, and even exacerbate, socioeconomic inequalities. Moreover, both national examples reveal how the massification of education has introduced new challenges, such as credential inflation, where the value of academic qualifications diminishes as more individuals attain them (Furlong, 2013).

Moving forward, the challenge lies not only in expanding access to education but also in ensuring that these systems promote genuine equity and opportunity. Addressing disparities in educational quality and outcomes will require concerted efforts from governments, international organizations, and educators alike. Without such initiatives, the promise of mass

education as a tool for social mobility will remain incomplete, and the dual legacies of Western state-building alongside the contrasting experiences of Japan and China will continue to shape educational inequality worldwide.

## **2.3 The Credential Dilemma: Access vs. Value**

The expansion of educational access has long been viewed as a societal good, providing pathways to individual opportunity and collective progress. However, this seemingly straightforward goal gives rise to a complex dilemma: how to balance the undeniable benefits of expanded access with the devaluation of credentials as they become more widespread. This chapter delves into the tension created by credential inflation, where increased access to education undermines the value of degrees and certificates, and explores how elite families use their resources to maintain an advantage in this shifting landscape. From the pressures of credential inflation to strategies employed by privileged groups to stay ahead, we will examine the multifaceted nature of this dilemma and consider potential paths toward a more equitable and effective education system.

### **2.3.1 The Paradox of Progress: Access Leading to Devaluation**

The widespread expansion of access to education, particularly at higher levels, has long been celebrated as a driver of societal progress. A more educated population is expected to lead to greater economic opportunity, civic engagement, and social mobility (Marginson, 2016). However, this seemingly straightforward equation encounters a significant complication: the potential for credential inflation—a phenomenon in which the increasing number of degree

holders reduces the relative value of academic credentials in the job market (Collins, 1979). As educational attainment becomes more widespread, the signaling power of any given credential—a high school diploma, a college degree, or even a master's degree—may erode. What was once a marker of distinction can become a baseline expectation, creating a paradox where progress itself contributes to a shifting landscape of opportunity and competition (Brown, 2013).

This phenomenon is not new. A historical example is the declining labor market value of the US high school diploma since the early 20th century. At that time, fewer than 10% of the population possessed a high school diploma, and it signified middle-class status, often facilitating access to managerial positions (Collins, 2002). Today, however, a high school diploma alone rarely leads to upward mobility, often serving as a minimum qualification for low-wage service jobs. Similarly, as more people obtain bachelor's degrees, employers raise the bar, requiring higher qualifications for positions that previously demanded less education. This creates a cycle of escalating educational requirements, compelling individuals to pursue further credentials not necessarily to advance, but simply to maintain their employability (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

While credential inflation affects individuals across all socioeconomic backgrounds, it does not impact all groups equally. Elite families, equipped with cultural, social, and economic capital, are particularly well-positioned to navigate this changing terrain (Furlong, 2013). Through strategic educational investments, such as elite private schooling, international curricula, and enrichment programs like the IB Diploma, these families ensure their children remain ahead in the increasingly competitive race for academic and professional success. The IB Diploma, with its rigorous curriculum and international recognition, functions as a symbol

of distinction, helping its graduates stand out from those with more conventional academic qualifications (Zhang, 2024b).

In contrast, students from less privileged backgrounds face significant barriers in responding to credential inflation. Without access to elite educational programs or financial resources to pursue advanced degrees, these students are at a disadvantage in an escalating credentials race. As a result, rather than serving as an equalizing force, education can exacerbate social stratification, reinforcing the advantages of those with existing cultural and economic capital (Brown, 2013; Collins, 1979).

The credential dilemma thus reflects a deeper paradox: expanded access to education does not necessarily translate into greater social mobility. Instead, the inflationary effects of mass education often entrench existing inequalities, as those with the means to differentiate themselves through elite credentials maintain their dominant positions in the social and economic hierarchy (Zhang, 2024b).

### **2.3.2 The Uneven Playing Field: Exacerbating Existing Inequalities**

The pressure to accumulate credentials affects all students, but the consequences of credential devaluation disproportionately impact those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As demand for higher qualifications increases—particularly with the rise of mass education—students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds encounter systemic barriers that limit their access to high-quality education. This devaluation of credentials is intensified as educational systems prioritize advanced qualifications, such as those required for entry into elite universities and high-status careers. For many, these barriers create an uneven playing field, where success is

increasingly determined by financial resources rather than merit (Brown, 2013; Collins, 1979).

While programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB) are designed to promote inquiry-based learning and global citizenship, research shows that IB participation is unequally distributed, with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to enroll and benefit from the program (Doherty, 2009; Resnik, 2016). IB schools, particularly in Asia, North America, and Europe, are often concentrated in elite private institutions or high-fee-paying international schools, making access limited for lower-income students (Bunnell, 2011).

Though the IB curriculum itself does not emphasize rote memorization or test-prep strategies, many IB students in China engage in private tutoring, particularly for English language learning (Zhang, 2024a). Private tutoring is a widely documented trend in China's high-stakes education system (Bray, 2017b), and while it is commonly associated with exam-driven curricula, IB students also use tutoring to supplement their studies. However, research suggests that private tutoring's effectiveness in IB is unclear. Zhang (2024a) notes that while tutoring is prevalent, its overall impact remains uncertain, particularly when considering IB's emphasis on inquiry-based learning rather than test-driven outcomes.

Moreover, some studies suggest that tutoring may negatively affect IB performance. Wright et al. (2018) found that private supplementary tutoring for IB students in China was linked to lower final scores, particularly among underperforming students who sought remedial tutoring rather than enrichment. This suggests that while tutoring may be a common strategy, it does not always translate into higher IB achievement and may even disadvantage students who rely on it as a compensatory measure.

This pattern aligns with the broader phenomenon of educational "opportunity hoarding", where privileged families leverage exclusive resources to maintain their children's competitive edge, further perpetuating social stratification (Lucas, 2001). Elite families not only enroll their children in prestigious IB programs, but also secure additional academic support, reinforcing their advantage in university admissions.

At the same time, this dynamic extends beyond secondary education into tertiary education, where the barriers created by credential devaluation are even more pronounced. As universities expand and become more accessible, elite institutions remain out of reach for many (Marginson, 2016). Admission to prestigious universities is no longer solely dependent on academic achievement but is increasingly influenced by social networks, extracurricular involvement, and financial resources. Families with substantial economic capital can afford to send their children to elite private schools that specifically prepare them for admission to top-tier institutions, creating an intergenerational cycle of advantage (Khan, 2011).

The role of supplementary education further underscores the growing divide in educational opportunity. In major cities such as Beijing and Seoul, private tutoring, test preparation, and enrichment programs have become an integral part of the education system, providing students with additional academic advantages (Wang & Li, 2018; Bray, 2017b). Research on shadow education highlights how private tutoring is disproportionately accessed by affluent families, reinforcing educational inequalities on a global scale (Bray, 2017a). As students worldwide compete for a finite number of places in prestigious universities, those with access to financial resources enjoy a decisive advantage, reinforcing existing patterns of social stratification.

In a similar vein, elite private schooling offers additional advantages that further perpetuate social inequality. These institutions, characterized by small class sizes, intensive curricula, and influential alumni networks, provide students with a clearer pathway to elite universities and high-status careers (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016). Research shows that such institutions not only solidify the privilege of their students but also play a key role in reinforcing social stratification, particularly in countries with limited social mobility (Marginson, 2016).

For disadvantaged students, this uneven playing field presents formidable challenges.

Lacking access to established networks, cultural capital, or supplementary education, these students struggle to compete with their elite peers, who benefit from far greater opportunities. As a result, the strategies employed by privileged families—through both supplementary education and elite schooling—serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies, making upward mobility increasingly difficult (Brown, 2013). Far from being an equalizer, the education system often exacerbates inequality, reinforcing elite privileges while creating significant obstacles for students from lower-income backgrounds (Collins, 1979; Marginson, 2016).

### **2.3.3 Elite Concerns and Strategies: Preserving Advantage in a Changing Landscape**

International schools and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program have emerged as refuges from the intense pressures of traditional education systems. In contexts such as China, where the gaokao and associated educational practices impose rigorous demands, these alternative pathways offer routes to academic success and social mobility (Poole, 2021; Fei, 2023). However, despite their progressive rhetoric, the IB and similar international programs remain largely accessible to affluent families. This selective accessibility reinforces

educational inequalities, as only those with sufficient resources can fully leverage these programs to bypass entrenched disadvantages in national systems (Resnik, 2016; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015; Li et al., 2015). Affluent families, for instance, utilize the IB pathway to circumvent the gaokao system—a system that disproportionately disadvantages rural and low-income students (Jia et al., 2017; Li, Loyalka, & Rozelle, 2015).

As traditional credentials lose their relative value due to the massification of education, elite families have grown increasingly anxious about maintaining their competitive edge. This anxiety is rooted in a “zero-sum” view of educational attainment, where success is seen as a contest for limited elite opportunities. Historically, mechanisms like legacy admissions have safeguarded this advantage: for example, legacy preferences in U.S. college admissions have been shown to triple the odds of acceptance for children of alumni (Hurwitz, 2011). Such practices reinforce social hierarchies, as they privilege upper-class students and further limit opportunities for those from less privileged backgrounds (Columbia Law Review, n.d.).

This phenomenon is not confined to the United States. Research on elite institutions in the United Kingdom reveals that students from prestigious family backgrounds remain overrepresented in top-tier universities (Reeves A., et al., 2017; Marginson, 2016). In response to the increasing scrutiny and eventual decline of traditional pathways like legacy admissions, elite families have sought alternative mechanisms—most notably, the IB program—to secure their children’s access to prestigious universities. Unlike national secondary school qualifications, the IB is internationally standardized and widely recognized by elite universities around the globe (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2024d; Perna et al., 2015).



For affluent families, participation in the IB is not merely an alternative educational track; it is a strategic asset. Many IB students augment their studies with private tutoring, specialized test preparation, and personalized college admissions counseling—practices that further entrench existing inequalities (NCES, 2016). Even when public schools offer IB programs, these opportunities remain highly selective, with only the top 10% of students typically completing the full IB Diploma Programme (NCES, 2016). Consequently, while the IB promotes ideals of global citizenship and academic excellence, it primarily benefits those who are already well-positioned socio-economically.

Unlike classical elite pathways rooted in national traditions—such as Eton or Oxford in the U.K.—the IB offers a more globally oriented route to elite education. Its emphasis on international-mindedness, multilingualism, and interdisciplinary learning resonates with the cosmopolitan values of transnational elites (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). This shift reflects how elite families are adapting to the globalization and massification of education. While the massification of education has been extensively studied, the emergence of new elite educational pathways like the IB and their interplay with traditional elite mechanisms remain underexplored.

In conclusion, the IB program functions as a modern instrument for preserving elite advantage. By providing an internationally recognized credential and pathways to prestigious universities, the IB not only facilitates academic excellence but also ensures that elite families can maintain their status in an era of global competition. Rather than serving as an equalizer, the IB ultimately reinforces educational hierarchies, securing a competitive edge for those who already possess substantial financial and social capital.

### **Classical Elite Paths: Eton and Harrow**

Institutions like Eton and Harrow, long associated with the British aristocracy and elite families, represent the classical educational pathways for the global elite. These schools emphasize a curriculum designed to maintain the cultural traditions and values of the elite, fostering leadership, public service, and a connection to national heritage. Students at these institutions often follow a clear trajectory towards prestigious universities like Oxford or Cambridge, with a strong emphasis on social networks, historical legacy, and an exclusive, in-person learning environment (Reeves R.V., et al., 2017). Eton and Harrow are not just educational institutions; they are gatekeepers of social class, deeply integrated into the historical and cultural fabric of the British aristocracy (Brown & Tannock, 2009).

These schools have a long-standing tradition of serving as "feeder schools" for top universities, predominantly within the UK. The focus here is often on fostering national elites, preparing students for leadership roles within the country's political, economic, and social spheres. The alumni networks of these institutions also play a significant role in shaping future opportunities, making their graduates well-positioned within elite social circles (Marginson, 2016).

### **The IB: A New Path for Global Elite Families**

In contrast, the International Baccalaureate (IB) offers a more globalized, academically rigorous alternative to traditional elite educational pathways. While the IB does share certain elements of exclusivity, such as its costs and access being dependent on financial capital, it is distinguished by its international scope and emphasis on global citizenship. Unlike Eton or Harrow, which remain firmly anchored in British national traditions, the IB is a transnational education system that prepares students for the global stage (Furlong, 2013). The

curriculum's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, critical thinking, and multilingualism aligns with the demands of an increasingly interconnected world (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). For elite families, the IB is an attractive option because it facilitates entry to top-tier universities worldwide, not just in the UK, but also in the US, Europe, and beyond. As the IB's global recognition grows, it provides a more flexible pathway that caters to the increasingly cosmopolitan aspirations of today's elite families. The IB also has a holistic approach to education, incorporating community service, inquiry-based learning, and leadership development, which contrasts with the more traditional, exam-centric pathways of UK private schools like Eton or Harrow (Study International, 2023).

Compared to traditional elite institutions like Eton and Harrow, where tuition can exceed £46,000 per year, IB programs—especially those offered in public schools—can present a relatively more affordable alternative (TDSB, 2025). However, despite being less expensive than elite private schools, the IB remains financially demanding. Even in public institutions that offer IB programs, students often incur additional costs for tutoring, international trips, and exam fees, making it far more accessible to upper-middle-class families than to truly low-income students. For instance, Toronto District School Board (TDSB, 2025) reports that public IB programs charge up to CAD 3,300 per year, excluding costs for exams, private tutoring, and enrichment programs. Thus, while IB schools are more affordable than traditional elite institutions, they still cater primarily to families with significant economic resources.

### **For whom is the IB for?**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program is primarily designed for academically motivated students seeking an internationally recognized qualification. While the program is

technically open to all students, it is particularly popular among affluent families who can afford the financial and logistical burdens associated with it. The IB is increasingly seen as a pathway for elite families to secure a competitive edge, offering a form of cultural capital that aligns with the globalized demands of today's educational and professional markets (Resnik, 2019).

Research indicates that the IB disproportionately attracts families who value a cosmopolitan, interdisciplinary approach to education. Studies on international schooling suggest that IB students often come from families with significant cultural capital and a strong global orientation (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). The IB curriculum aligns well with elite educational aspirations, as it emphasizes multilingualism, global citizenship, and interdisciplinary learning, making it particularly appealing to families seeking transnational educational mobility (Sriprakash, Singh, & Jing, 2014).

At the same time, the financial costs associated with IB programs limit participation, reinforcing educational exclusivity. Bray (2017b) highlights that private supplementary education, including tutoring and exam preparation, is often essential for success in rigorous international curricula like the IB, making it more accessible to families with financial resources. These additional educational investments help bridge the gap between IB's academic demands and the existing cultural capital of students, which tends to be more readily available to affluent families.

Unlike traditional elite pathways such as Eton or Oxford, which are historically rooted in national traditions and aristocratic networks, the IB provides a more globally recognized route to elite education. This flexibility appeals to high-income families seeking to position

their children for success in international academic and professional markets (Beek, 2014; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016).

### **IB Accessibility in Public Schools: A Limited Reach**

While the IB is often associated with elite private schools, it is also offered in public institutions in various countries, particularly in the United States. According to the International Baccalaureate Organization (2024d), "89% of IB World Schools in the U.S. are public institutions." Despite this availability, participation in the IB Diploma Programme (DP) remains highly selective.

A study by the International Baccalaureate Organization (2015) found that '60% of public schools offering IB programs were designated as Title I schools, indicating a significant presence in low-income communities.' However, even in these schools, only the top-performing students enroll in the program (Gordon, 2017). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) shows that 'only the top 10% of students in public schools typically participate in IB coursework, with the majority of students taking only a few courses rather than completing the full diploma.' This suggests that, while IB is formally available in many public schools, it remains an academically selective track that primarily benefits high-achieving students.

Moreover, racial and socioeconomic disparities persist in IB enrollment. A report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) indicates that "Asian students are the most likely to earn AP/IB credits (72%), followed by White students (40%) and Black students (23%)." This suggests that, even within public schools, IB programs tend to benefit students

from more advantaged backgrounds, reinforcing existing educational inequalities (Perna et al., 2015).

Even within Title I public schools, IB students tend to come from higher-income families compared to their non-IB peers. According to the International Baccalaureate Organization (2023), "participation in IB remains disproportionately high among students from upper-income families, even in schools where the program is formally available." This suggests that financial and cultural capital remain critical determinants of success within IB programs, much like traditional elite schools.

### **Conclusion: The IB as an Extension of Elite Educational Pathways**

While the IB program presents itself as an alternative to nationally bound pathways like Eton, Harrow, and Oxford, its increasing popularity among elite families mirrors the historical function of traditional elite institutions—perpetuating social advantage across generations rather than dismantling educational hierarchies (Marginson, 2016).

The IB's flexibility, emphasis on fostering global citizenship, and preparation for top universities worldwide make it an increasingly viable option for elites who seek to position their children in prestigious educational systems, irrespective of national borders. However, like traditional elite institutions, the IB remains a system where access is largely determined by financial and cultural capital (Resnik, 2019).

Although the IB promotes global education and inclusivity, its high costs ensure that it remains primarily a pathway for privileged families, reinforcing existing social hierarchies rather than democratizing access to elite education.

As educational landscapes evolve, it remains crucial to examine whether emerging pathways like the IB genuinely disrupt traditional patterns of elite reproduction or simply serve as a transnational extension of existing privilege. While the IB promotes global education, it often functions as another mechanism of elite distinction, enabling affluent families to maintain their advantage in an era of increasing educational competition.

### **2.3.4 The Globalization of Elite Education: IB, Private Schools, and Alternative Pathways**

As education systems have become increasingly globalized, elite families are diversifying their strategies to secure advantage in transnational academic markets. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program has emerged as a prominent pathway, offering an internationally recognized curriculum that meets the cosmopolitan aspirations of these families (Resnik, 2016; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016). Unlike traditional national credentials, the IB's global framework enables students to access top universities across borders, thus facilitating greater academic mobility.

In parallel with the IB, private international schools and alternative qualifications—such as A-Levels and Advanced Placement (AP) courses—have risen in prominence as pathways to elite education. These alternatives are often perceived as more rigorous or internationally oriented compared to conventional national examinations, thereby enhancing a student's competitive profile in the global arena (Furlong, 2013). To further bolster their children's credentials, elite families frequently invest in private tutoring and specialized college

admissions counseling, ensuring that students are well-prepared for transnational admissions processes.

Moreover, the globalization of elite education is reflected in the adoption of transnational college admissions strategies, whereby students strategically apply to a broad array of universities in different countries. This approach not only expands their academic opportunities but also exemplifies the shifting landscape of credential competition in a global economy (Marginson, 2016; Reeves A et al., 2017). By integrating the IB with other elite alternatives, families are able to leverage both cultural and academic capital to maintain their competitive edge, even as traditional credentials face devaluation amid mass educational expansion.

Ultimately, this comparative approach underscores how the globalization of education has created multiple, interlocking pathways for elite reproduction. Each pathway—whether through the IB, private international schools, or alternative qualifications—reinforces existing social hierarchies while simultaneously providing distinct advantages in an increasingly competitive global educational market.

### **2.3.5 Conclusion: Addressing Inequality in the Credential Landscape**

The rise of educational massification and credential inflation has reshaped the landscape of opportunity, with profound implications for students from all social classes. While mass education offers the promise of upward mobility, the reality is that the advantages of elite



families—who leverage their cultural and financial capital to navigate this changing environment—continue to widen the gap between themselves and less privileged students.

The strategies employed by elites, from private schooling and supplementary education to enrollment in programs like the IB, reinforce social hierarchies. These mechanisms ensure that elite families can continue to secure a competitive edge, even as traditional degrees lose their distinctiveness in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

To address these inequities, educational institutions must move beyond a focus solely on credentialing. They must explore alternative ways to assess and reward a broader range of skills and competencies, and critically reflect on how access to prestigious programs can be made more equitable. Only by confronting these embedded inequalities can education fulfill its role as a true pathway to upward mobility for all students.

## **2.4. Elite Reproduction and the IB Diploma**

This section examines how the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program, despite its international focus, contributes to the reproduction of social elites. While designed to offer a globally recognized, rigorous curriculum, concerns about equitable access and the program's structure and implementation remain central.

### **2.4.1 History, Philosophy, and Global Spread of the IB**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (IBDP) was established in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland, to provide an internationally recognized high school qualification for students from globally mobile families, particularly the children of diplomats and expatriates.

Initially conceived in Europe, the program aimed to offer a pre-university curriculum that would transcend national education systems, ensuring academic continuity for students relocating across borders (IBO, n.d.-c). Poelzer and Feldhusen (1997) highlight that the IB had a dual mission: to provide rigorous academic training and to cultivate global citizenship through cross-cultural awareness and multilingualism. The program expanded into North America in the 1970s, marking the beginning of its international reach.

A central tenet of the IB philosophy is the development of the “whole person,” emphasizing not only academic achievement but also personal growth and intercultural understanding. As outlined by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO, n.d.-d), the IB’s mission is to nurture active, compassionate, and lifelong learners who are committed to creating a more peaceful world through education. This is reinforced by an inquiry-based approach that encourages students to critically engage with global issues.

However, while the IB promotes global citizenship, its structure inherently favors students with substantial cultural and financial capital. The curriculum assumes prior exposure to international perspectives, and students from privileged backgrounds—often with access to global networks and elite educational resources—are more likely to thrive in the program (Dickson, Perry, & Ledger, 2017). Since the IB was initially designed to serve the globally mobile elite, its continued association with privilege is not surprising.

Over the last five decades, the IB has grown significantly, with over 7,500 programs across nearly 160 countries (IBO, n.d.-e). This expansion has reinforced the IB’s reputation as a prestigious qualification associated with elite education. Although its flexibility allows it to be implemented as a standalone curriculum or integrated within national education systems,

access to its benefits remains largely restricted to students with significant financial and cultural resources, maintaining its role as a pathway for educational and social advantage.

#### **2.4.2 IB Curriculum and Pedagogy: Analyzing Potential for Elite Reinforcement**

While the IB is celebrated for promoting academic rigor and global-mindedness, aspects of its curriculum and pedagogy may contribute to social stratification, inadvertently benefiting students from privileged backgrounds. The structure of the IB program—its content selection, teaching methods, teacher demographics, and student interactions—can reinforce existing inequalities.

##### **Content Selection and Hidden Curriculum**

The IB curriculum may contain implicit biases that reflect Western or elite perspectives, prioritizing subjects such as global economics and international relations that are more familiar to students from privileged backgrounds. Igarashi and Saito (2014) highlight how international curricula like the IB institutionalize cosmopolitanism as cultural capital, where students from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to benefit from a curriculum that assumes familiarity with global issues.

Consequently, while the IB aims to promote global-mindedness, the hidden curriculum may favor students with prior exposure to international environments and global networks. This further widens the achievement gap and perpetuates social stratification by privileging students from elite backgrounds.

##### **Teaching Methods**

The IB's emphasis on inquiry-based learning fosters critical thinking and independent research. While students from wealthier backgrounds may have access to private tutoring or additional academic support, IB pedagogy ultimately prioritizes student autonomy over external assistance. Chichekian & Shore (2014) note that the success of students in such environments depends largely on their ability to self-direct their learning and actively engage with coursework, rather than relying solely on supplementary tutoring.

However, students from lower-income backgrounds may face challenges in adapting to this self-directed approach, particularly if they lack prior exposure to independent learning strategies. As a result, disparities in academic preparedness may emerge, reinforcing unequal educational outcomes.

### **Teacher Demographics**

The demographic composition of IB teachers, historically drawn from Western or elite institutions, has the potential to reinforce social inequalities in IB classrooms. Gardner-McTaggart (2016) highlights that a lack of diverse role models within the IB teaching workforce can contribute to a sense of alienation among students from marginalized groups, affecting their academic engagement and confidence.

However, as IB expands into public education systems worldwide, efforts have been made to increase diversity within IB teaching staff (IBO, 2024d). Nonetheless, concerns remain about whether these shifts have sufficiently addressed representation disparities across IB schools.

### **Structured Interactions and Socialization**

While the IB encourages collaboration through group projects and discussions, these structured interactions may at times favor students from privileged backgrounds, who may

have greater confidence in internationalized academic settings. Research on group dynamics suggests that without careful facilitation, group work can reinforce existing social hierarchies, as students with higher social or cultural capital are more likely to take leadership roles in discussions.

Theobald et al. (2017) found that student perception of comfort and fairness in group interactions significantly affects individual academic performance. In settings where some students dominate discussions while others feel marginalized, learning outcomes can become uneven. While this research was conducted in university-level STEM classrooms, it provides insights into how similar dynamics may emerge in IB classrooms, particularly in diverse, internationally focused environments.

### **2.4.3 International Mobility: Benefits and Limitations**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma is widely recognized for its emphasis on international-mindedness, often positioning graduates as strong candidates for elite university admissions and global career opportunities. Its reputation as a highly regarded qualification provides students with increased access to prestigious institutions, reinforcing the IB's role in shaping transnational educational mobility.

However, the advantages associated with the IB program are unequally distributed, primarily benefiting students from financially privileged backgrounds who can afford the costs of tuition, examination fees, and international study opportunities. Maire & Windle (2021) note that the IB Diploma is frequently leveraged by socially dominant families to maintain educational advantages, thereby reinforcing domestic and global inequalities.

Beyond financial constraints, geographic and economic segregation further limits access to IB programs. Many IB schools are concentrated in affluent urban centers or private institutions, making participation difficult for students from lower-income or rural backgrounds (Perna et al., 2015). As a result, these students are less likely to benefit from the IB's global network, international learning experiences, and associated social capital, further exacerbating disparities in higher education access.

Moreover, while the IB promotes global citizenship, its implementation within elite education structures means that the program's benefits primarily reinforce the mobility of privileged students. Gardner-McTaggart (2016) argues that IB graduates from affluent families are better positioned to take advantage of exclusive international internships, summer programs, and study-abroad opportunities, which in turn strengthen their university applications and professional prospects. This dynamic ensures that those with financial and social capital continue to dominate transnational educational pathways, effectively limiting the IB's potential as a tool for equitable global mobility.

The disparities in IB accessibility and global opportunities illustrate the urgent need for systemic policy changes. Addressing financial barriers through scholarships, expanding IB programs in public schools, and increasing institutional support for marginalized students could help ensure that the IB's global mobility benefits are accessible to a broader demographic, rather than remaining an elite privilege.

#### **2.4.4 Conclusion**

This section has examined the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which, despite its commitment to promoting global citizenship and developing internationally minded individuals, often reinforces the social and economic advantages of elite students. While the IB seeks to cultivate well-rounded individuals who are prepared to engage with global challenges, its curriculum, pedagogical methods, and global reach disproportionately favor students who come from affluent backgrounds with the cultural and financial capital necessary to excel. The program's emphasis on inquiry-based learning and global economic topics aligns well with students who are already immersed in elite educational environments, making it more accessible to those who can afford additional resources such as private tutoring and extracurricular programs.

The high costs associated with the IB, including tuition, international study trips, and supplementary support, further limit its accessibility, ensuring that it remains largely available to those with significant financial resources. Despite its expansion into more countries and a wider range of schools, participation in the IB still primarily benefits affluent students who have the resources needed to navigate its rigorous academic demands. This limitation challenges the program's potential as a tool for upward mobility, as it continues to be more easily accessible to those already positioned within privileged socio-economic groups.

So, who is the IB for? While the program is open to all students, it is increasingly associated with elite families who seek an international education for their children. Furlong (2013) and Gardner-McTaggart (2016) highlight that the IB appeals most to families with the resources to fully engage with its demands, whether through supplementary education or the ability to afford its costs. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, lacking the financial support or

the cultural capital necessary to thrive in this environment, are often excluded from the IB's full benefits, reinforcing its role in perpetuating educational inequalities.

For the IB to truly fulfill its mission of fostering global-minded citizens, it must critically address the barriers that limit its accessibility, particularly for lower-income students. If the program is to become a genuine pathway for social mobility, it must adapt its structure to ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic status, can access the opportunities it offers. In doing so, the IB could better align with its ideal of promoting equality, ensuring that global citizenship and academic success are not restricted to those with significant financial and cultural capital.

## **2.5 Cultural Capital and Educational Choice**

Education has long been recognized as a primary mechanism for both reproducing and legitimizing social class distinctions. Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding how elite families strategically mobilize education to sustain their privileged status. In this framework, cultural capital encompasses non-economic resources—such as knowledge, skills, tastes, and dispositions—that confer social advantages within institutional settings. The intergenerational transmission of cultural capital ensures that children from privileged backgrounds acquire competencies and dispositions that align with elite academic expectations, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2011).

In the context of global education, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program exemplifies how educational credentials can function as institutionalized forms of cultural capital. The IB



is widely recognized for its rigorous, internationally oriented curriculum, which provides students with credentials that serve as markers of academic distinction (IBO, n.d.-g). However, while the IBO emphasizes the global recognition of its programs, academic research suggests that such credentials also operate as mechanisms of elite reproduction. The pedagogical design, assessment methods, and linguistic requirements inherent in the IB program tend to favor students already steeped in high levels of cultural capital, thereby reinforcing educational stratification rather than mitigating it (Doherty, 2009; Resnik, 2012).

This section thus examines how cultural capital is mobilized within elite educational choices—particularly within the IB—and how these mechanisms contribute to the consolidation of social stratification.

### **2.5.1 Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) delineates cultural capital into three primary forms, each of which plays a critical role in structuring educational opportunities:

- Embodied Cultural Capital refers to deeply ingrained dispositions, cognitive styles, and linguistic competencies that individuals acquire through socialization. This form of capital is developed over time through familial transmission, shaping students' intellectual engagement, aesthetic preferences, and ability to navigate academic institutions. Children from affluent families, for instance, are more likely to be raised in environments that emphasize reading, analytical reasoning, and exposure to multiple languages, all of which align with the IB's inquiry-based pedagogy (Lareau, 2011). As a result, such students are better equipped to engage with IB coursework,

whereas those from lower-cultural-capital backgrounds often experience a misalignment between their prior educational experiences and the IB's expectations.

- Objectified Cultural Capital encompasses material goods and cultural artifacts, such as books, technological resources, and access to exclusive educational institutions. The IB, as an elite transnational curriculum, is itself a form of objectified cultural capital, symbolizing cosmopolitanism and academic excellence (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Furthermore, students from privileged backgrounds often have access to private tutors, international study opportunities, and extracurricular activities that enhance their academic portfolios, reinforcing their competitive advantage in elite education markets.
- Institutionalized Cultural Capital refers to the formal recognition of academic credentials, such as diplomas and degrees, which serve as legitimate indicators of social status. The IB Diploma exemplifies this form of cultural capital, as it provides a globally recognized certification that facilitates access to elite universities worldwide. Given that institutionalized cultural capital is often required for entry into exclusive professional and academic circles, IB participation becomes a strategic investment for families seeking to consolidate their children's long-term social mobility (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015).

Bourdieu (1986) argues that the transmission of cultural capital is central to the reproduction of social inequalities. Elite families engage in strategic capital conversion, whereby economic resources are transformed into educational advantages that yield both cultural and social capital. This process ensures that the elite's privileged position is sustained across

generations, as access to high-status educational institutions becomes both a symbol of distinction and a prerequisite for elite social membership.

The IB, in this context, operates as a site of elite reproduction, where families with substantial cultural capital leverage the program to differentiate their children from those educated in mainstream national systems. However, as the following section explores, this advantage is neither neutral nor universal, as students from lower-cultural-capital backgrounds often face systemic barriers in adapting to the expectations embedded within IB education.

### **2.5.2 Cultural Capital and Educational Advantage**

Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital highlights how elite education systems privilege students who enter with pre-existing social and intellectual competencies, reinforcing a cycle of advantage. The IB's curriculum structure—emphasizing independent research, interdisciplinary inquiry, and critical thinking—presupposes cultural dispositions that are unequally distributed across socio-economic groups (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016).

#### **Family Background and the Unequal Distribution of Cultural Capital**

The transmission of cultural capital begins in the home, where families with high cultural capital instill academic habits, linguistic proficiency, and intellectual confidence in their children (Lareau, 2003). Research on elite schooling suggests that families who actively cultivate a “scholarly habitus”—one that includes early exposure to academic discussions, participation in cultural institutions, and engagement in structured extracurricular activities—provide their children with a decisive advantage in navigating competitive educational systems (Reay, 2004).

In IB programs, this advantage becomes particularly evident in:

- **Pedagogical Fit:** The IB curriculum rewards self-directed learning, abstract reasoning, and debate-oriented pedagogy, which align closely with the intellectual upbringing of students from elite backgrounds. By contrast, students from lower-income or working-class backgrounds, who may have been socialized into more passive educational structures, often find the IB's inquiry-driven approach unfamiliar and challenging (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).
- **Linguistic Capital:** Since many IB schools operate primarily in English or other dominant global languages, linguistic proficiency acts as a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges native speakers and students from bilingual households. Linguistic competence, an extension of embodied cultural capital, enables elite students to engage confidently with IB assessments, while others may struggle with academic discourse, further exacerbating educational disparities (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016).
- **Extracurricular and International Opportunities:** Families with significant cultural capital recognize that IB success is not confined to classroom performance but extends to co-curricular engagements, including international exchanges, Model United Nations, and global service-learning projects. These experiences not only enhance university applications but also cultivate a cosmopolitan disposition, reinforcing symbolic distinctions between IB graduates and those from non-elite education tracks (Igarashi & Saito, 2014).

### **Cultural Capital as a Mechanism of Social Stratification**

Despite the IB's rhetoric of inclusivity and global access, its implementation often serves to entrench socio-economic hierarchies rather than disrupt them. As Bourdieu & Passeron

(1990) argue, educational institutions implicitly reward students who embody the dominant cultural codes, legitimizing existing class structures under the guise of meritocracy.

The IB's focus on global citizenship and cross-cultural awareness may appear progressive, yet it operates within an elite framework that prioritizes Western epistemologies and institutional recognition (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). In this sense, the IB functions less as a democratizing force in education and more as a credentialing mechanism through which elite families ensure their children's continued access to high-status opportunities.

Thus, the IB exemplifies how cultural capital operates within transnational education markets, shaping the ways in which elite families navigate and exploit global schooling systems. While the IB may provide pathways for some upwardly mobile students, it remains primarily structured around the needs, expectations, and values of those already in possession of substantial cultural capital.

### **2.5.3 The IB as a Form of Cultural Capital**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program, renowned for its academic rigor and emphasis on international-mindedness, serves as a form of institutionalized cultural capital. Igarashi & Saito (2014) argue that participation in international curricula like the IB signals both academic competence and cosmopolitanism, attributes increasingly valued in elite social circles. The IB's alignment with elite educational values reinforces its role in social reproduction, allowing students from privileged backgrounds to leverage their IB experiences for academic and professional advancement (Maire & Windle, 2021).

Studies show that access to high-status educational programs like the IB is unevenly distributed, often favoring students with pre-existing social and financial advantages (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). These structural advantages position the IB as both a credentialing mechanism and a marker of distinction, reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

### **The IB and Social Stratification**

Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction explains how elite education systems, such as the IB, reinforce existing class structures by granting symbolic capital to students from affluent families (Bourdieu, 1986). The IB's emphasis on multilingualism and global perspectives aligns closely with the cultural capital of elite families, who often have prior exposure to international education, second-language acquisition, and inquiry-based learning. Resnik (2016) highlights that the expansion of IB programs has largely catered to elite schools, where students already possess the necessary academic preparation to thrive. In contrast, students from less privileged backgrounds often struggle to meet the linguistic and academic demands of the IB curriculum (Gardner-McTaggart, 2016).

Furthermore, Maxwell & Aggleton (2015) argue that elite education systems create affective belonging and exclusion, where students who lack pre-existing cultural capital may feel alienated in IB classrooms. This process contributes to the IB's role as a mechanism for elite distinction, where students from socially dominant groups can more easily translate their IB credentials into university placements, career opportunities, and transnational mobility.

As a result, the IB continues to serve as a marker of exclusivity, rather than a genuine pathway to broader social mobility. Addressing this issue would require structural reforms,

such as expanding IB programs in public schools, increasing scholarships, and providing academic support for students from underprivileged backgrounds.

#### **2.5.4 Conclusion: Cultural Capital and Educational Choice**

This chapter has examined how the International Baccalaureate functions as a competitive field within the broader educational landscape, operating as both a mechanism for social reproduction and a marker of elite distinction. Through its alignment with the dispositions and values of affluent families, the IB perpetuates educational inequalities, ensuring that access to its benefits remains largely restricted to those who already possess substantial economic and cultural capital.

Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, this analysis highlights the IB's dual role as a site of competition and a tool for the accumulation of institutionalized cultural capital. By privileging students whose cultural practices align with its expectations, the IB reinforces the social hierarchies it ostensibly seeks to transcend. Furthermore, its global recognition and association with elite networks amplify its symbolic value, consolidating its position as a gatekeeper of privilege within the educational field.

To address these embedded inequalities, the IB must critically evaluate its role within the global education landscape. Potential reforms include:

1. **Reducing Financial Barriers:** Implementing targeted scholarship programs or income-based tuition models could broaden access to the program without diluting its academic rigor.

2. **Culturally Inclusive Curricula:** Developing content that reflects diverse cultural perspectives would make the IB more accessible to students from varied backgrounds, reducing the implicit biases embedded in its framework.
3. **Localized Adaptations:** Collaborating with public education systems to integrate IB-inspired elements could extend its benefits to a wider population while preserving its emphasis on critical thinking and global competence.

Without such reforms, the IB risks perpetuating the very inequalities it claims to challenge. As global education systems continue to evolve, the IB's future relevance will depend on its ability to balance excellence with equity, ensuring that its ideals of inclusivity and opportunity are not overshadowed by its role as a mechanism for elite reproduction.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This study has critically examined the International Baccalaureate (IB) program within the contexts of mass education, cultural capital, and social stratification. Through a detailed analysis of the IB's curriculum, pedagogy, and global spread, it is evident that while the program is celebrated for its academic rigor and emphasis on global citizenship, it also plays a significant role in reinforcing existing social inequalities. The massification of education, characterized by the widespread expansion of educational opportunities, has democratized access to learning globally. However, this process has also led to the rise of new forms of social stratification, as traditional markers of elite status—such as exclusive educational credentials—have become more accessible. In response, elite groups have sought alternative



educational pathways to maintain their advantages, with the IB program serving as a prime example.

This analysis shows that the IB curriculum's structure and outcomes cater primarily to elite families seeking to offset the effects of massification. The program's emphasis on inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, and independent research—while progressive—often favors students who already possess the cultural and financial capital necessary to thrive in such an environment. The pedagogical methods employed by the IB may inadvertently privilege students from affluent backgrounds who have access to supplementary educational resources such as private tutoring and enrichment programs. This dynamic reinforces social inequalities, as wealthier students are better positioned to excel in the IB program and gain admission to prestigious universities.

Moreover, the often homogenous demographic composition of the IB teaching workforce perpetuates cultural biases and limits the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the classroom. This lack of representation may hinder the educational experiences of students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, further contributing to the reproduction of social hierarchies. Additionally, the structured interactions within the IB program, such as group projects and extracurricular activities, may reproduce social stratification. Students from elite backgrounds, who are often more confident and better resourced, may dominate these interactions, forming exclusive social networks that reflect and reinforce broader societal inequalities.

The global recognition of the IB Diploma further amplifies these issues, as it provides a distinct advantage in university admissions and professional opportunities, particularly within elite institutions. This advantage is disproportionately accessible to students from privileged

backgrounds, who can afford the high costs associated with IB enrollment and the additional resources required to succeed in the program.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology employed to examine how elite families engage with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program amid the massification of education. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of parental motivations for selecting the IB, as well as the strategic marketing efforts of IB schools aimed at attracting elite families. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) provide the theoretical foundation for this analysis, framing the IB's positioning within elite educational pathways.

The research is particularly concerned with the perception of the IB as a vehicle for maintaining educational and social advantages among elite families. Rather than assuming a direct causal relationship, the study critically examines the marketing strategies of IB institutions alongside parental decision-making processes. This dual focus allows for an exploration of how these factors align with broader societal trends, such as the increasing globalization of education and the heightened demand for credentials associated with elite distinction.

### **3.2 Research Design and Rationale**

This study employs a mixed-methods design, chosen for its capacity to leverage the complementary strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Such a design facilitates a nuanced exploration of the research questions by generating generalizable data

while also providing in-depth insights into the complex dynamics underlying parental motivations and institutional strategies related to IB education.

Given the multifaceted nature of the research questions—which address both broad societal trends and individual decision-making processes—a mixed-methods approach is essential. Quantitative data offers an overarching view of patterns in parental behavior and school marketing strategies, whereas qualitative data elucidates the underlying factors and motivations that quantitative measures alone might overlook. This integration not only enhances the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) but also delivers a more holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

### **3.2.1 Rationale for Mixed-Methods Approach**

Mixed-methods research has become a highly valued strategy within the social sciences, particularly when examining complex, multifaceted phenomena. This approach draws on the complementary strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of research problems. Quantitative methods excel at identifying broad trends and establishing generalizable patterns, whereas qualitative methods offer deeper insight into motivations, perceptions, and the subtleties of human experience that may be overlooked by statistical analyses alone.

Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasises that mixed-methods research fosters methodological triangulation, a process that enhances the validity and reliability of findings by cross-verifying data from multiple sources and perspectives. This study benefits from such triangulation by combining quantitative survey data, which track patterns in parental

decisions, with qualitative interview data, which provide context and depth to these patterns by exploring the underlying social and cultural dynamics. Moreover, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) argue that mixed methods are particularly suited for research that seeks to address both “what” and “why” questions simultaneously. This is particularly relevant to the current study, which aims to explore not only what motivates parents to choose the IB for their children but also why they perceive it as beneficial in the context of the broader socio-economic and educational landscape.

The contrasting educational traditions and social values of Japan and China make this triangulated approach indispensable. Japan’s education system, steeped in collectivist values, emphasizes discipline, group harmony, and conformity to societal norms (Cave, 2007). These cultural ideals are embedded in the structure of its rigorous schooling, including practices such as entrance exams and the extensive use of cram schools (*juku*) to prepare students for academic success (Rohlen, 1983). Within this context, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program represents a departure from the conventional focus on rote learning and standardized testing. Japanese parents often view the IB’s emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, and global-mindedness as a means to supplement traditional education, preparing their children to compete in both local and global arenas.

In contrast, China’s socio-economic landscape has been shaped by its rapid modernization and the pressures of globalization. The one-child policy (1979–2015) created a generation of only children often referred to as “little emperors,” whose parents invested heavily in their education as a pathway to upward mobility (Fong, 2004). This cultural backdrop, coupled with fierce competition for elite opportunities, has led Chinese families to prioritize educational programs like the IB for their global credentials and perceived alignment with

international standards (Kipnis, 2011). For many Chinese parents, the IB is not only an academic qualification but also a strategic tool for securing access to transnational social networks and elite universities, reflecting their aspirations for global mobility and success.

These distinct traditions reveal how cultural and societal factors influence parental motivations for choosing the IB program. In Japan, the decision often involves balancing local expectations with aspirations for global competence, reflecting the duality of tradition and modernity in Japanese education. By contrast, in China, the focus is primarily on leveraging the IB as a gateway to elite global opportunities, reflecting a more singular emphasis on international mobility. These differences underscore the importance of combining quantitative surveys, which provide cross-country comparisons, with qualitative interviews that capture the nuanced, culturally specific factors driving these motivations.

### **3.3 Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of economic, cultural, and social capital to examine the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the elite's strategy to counter the massification of education. Bourdieu's theories are instrumental in understanding how elites deploy various forms of capital to secure and perpetuate their privileged status. In particular, Bourdieu's seminal work *The Forms of Capital* (1986) provides a robust framework for analyzing how educational institutions contribute to social reproduction and enable elites to maintain intergenerational advantage. By leveraging distinct forms of capital, elite families strategically position their children within competitive transnational education

markets, ensuring their continued access to exclusive opportunities (Bourdieu, 1984; Weenink, 2008).

### **Defining Elite in this Study**

This study defines elite families as those who possess and strategically mobilize economic, cultural, and social capital to secure and sustain exclusive educational opportunities (Bourdieu, 1984). Elite status is not merely a function of income but is actively maintained through calculated educational choices that reinforce intergenerational privilege. Unlike middle-class families, whose educational aspirations often center on social mobility, elite families prioritize differentiation—ensuring their children not only retain but further consolidate their advantaged positions in a competitive global landscape (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015).

The IB program serves as a key site of capital conversion, wherein economic resources are strategically transformed into cultural and social capital. Economic capital provides access to high-cost private and international IB programs, supplementary tutoring, and overseas education opportunities. Beyond financial means, cultural capital plays a central role in distinguishing elite families, reflected in multilingual proficiency, cosmopolitan worldviews, and familiarity with global educational norms—attributes that align closely with the IB's emphasis on international-mindedness. This transmission of cultural capital begins in early childhood through family socialization, elite schooling, and extracurricular activities that cultivate internationally valued competencies.

However, the role of social capital varies across national contexts. In China, elite families leverage *guanxi* networks—exclusive social connections that facilitate access to prestigious

universities, professional circles, and privileged opportunities (Zhang, 2024a). In contrast, Japanese elites rely more heavily on institutionalized cultural capital, wherein elite status is reinforced through formal credentials from prestigious domestic universities and selective private schools rather than informal social networks (Tsuneyoshi, 2013; Yamamoto, Y., 2019). This contrast highlights the ways in which IB education functions differently as a status strategy in Japan and China.

By situating IB participation within these capital conversion strategies, this study assesses whether IB functions primarily as a tool for elite reproduction—reinforcing class hierarchies through exclusive access to transnational credentials—or whether it serves as an adaptive strategy that allows elites to maintain distinction amid the massification of higher education and global credential competition.

### **The Role of Capital in Elite Educational Strategies**

Bourdieu (1986) posits that economic, cultural, and social capital function as interdependent resources, shaping individuals' access to elite opportunities. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant in elite educational systems, where economic capital provides access to prestigious schools, cultural capital shapes student success, and social capital reinforces networks of privilege.

Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that economic capital serves as the foundation for all other forms of capital, stating:

*"Economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital, but it is through the conversion of economic capital into cultural and social capital that families secure their social position" (p. 252).*



In elite educational systems, the interplay between economic, cultural, and social capital is particularly significant. Economic capital enables elite families to invest in prestigious schools, private tutoring, and international education. This financial investment is then converted into cultural capital, as elite students develop linguistic fluency, critical thinking skills, and other intellectual assets that are rewarded in elite academic settings (Weenink, 2008). Similarly, economic capital facilitates access to exclusive institutions that serve as hubs for social capital accumulation, connecting families to influential networks and perpetuating intergenerational privilege.

These capital dynamics help to explain how elite families strategically use the IB program to maintain and reproduce their social advantage in a globalized context. The next sections examine each form of capital in greater detail.

### **3.3.1 Cultural Capital and Educational Reproduction**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides a foundational lens for understanding how elite families utilize education to maintain and reproduce social privilege. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes cultural capital as existing in three interrelated forms:

*"Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational*

*qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee" (p. 243).*

These forms collectively shape how individuals navigate social systems, ensuring that social hierarchies are maintained and legitimized.

### **Embodied Cultural Capital**

Embodied cultural capital refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions, habits, and competencies acquired through socialization. Bourdieu (1986) describes this as the "*form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body*" (p. 243). This includes linguistic fluency, intellectual sophistication, and a familiarity with cultural norms, which are instilled in children from an early age by their families and social environments. Such dispositions are internalized and serve as markers of distinction that align with the values of the dominant class. Importantly, these traits require a significant investment of time and effort, often facilitated by economic resources. Bourdieu emphasizes that:

*"The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state... presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time" (p. 244).*

This aspect of cultural capital highlights the interplay between time, effort, and access, as elite families invest heavily in cultivating these traits in their children to align with societal expectations of refinement and competence.

### **Objectified Cultural Capital**

Objectified cultural capital refers to material symbols of status, such as books, artwork, and instruments. These objects are not only indicators of wealth but also representations of

cultural legitimacy, allowing individuals to demonstrate their sophistication and alignment with dominant cultural values. Bourdieu (1986) notes that such capital has a dual role: it is both "material" and "symbolic," providing utility while also signaling the owner's position within the social hierarchy (p. 244). The ownership of cultural goods signifies a form of mastery and access to resources that are often limited to the privileged classes.

Bourdieu also observes that objectified cultural capital is intrinsically tied to embodied capital, as possessing cultural goods without the competencies to appreciate or use them would strip them of their symbolic power. This dynamic reinforces the interdependence of the forms of cultural capital in perpetuating social privilege.

### **Institutionalized Cultural Capital**

Institutionalized cultural capital takes the form of formal qualifications and certifications, such as academic degrees, which confer legitimacy and authority. Bourdieu (1986) highlights the unique role of institutionalized cultural capital in transforming cultural competencies into socially recognized credentials:

*"The institutional recognition of the cultural capital possessed by any given agent, which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture" (p. 244).*

These qualifications serve as markers of achievement that not only differentiate individuals but also provide access to elite opportunities. Institutionalized cultural capital plays a pivotal role in the education system, which Bourdieu critiques as a mechanism for legitimizing inequality under the guise of meritocracy.

## Cultural Capital and Social Reproduction

Bourdieu's theoretical framework underscores the centrality of cultural capital in reproducing social hierarchies. He argues that the education system perpetuates privilege by rewarding students who possess the cultural competencies aligned with dominant societal values. He states:

*"The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me... as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success... to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions" (p. 243).*

This study applies Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and social reproduction to analyze how elite families engage with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as a means of maintaining intergenerational privilege. The IB curriculum, which emphasizes inquiry-based learning, multilingualism, and global competencies, inherently favors students from elite backgrounds who have already acquired these forms of cultural capital through family upbringing and prior educational exposure.

Moreover, IB participation can be seen as a mechanism of institutionalized cultural capital, where formal certifications (such as the IB Diploma) serve as socially recognized credentials that reinforce educational hierarchies. By gaining access to an internationally valued qualification, elite students enhance their academic distinction, increasing their chances of securing places in prestigious universities and professional networks. In this way, the IB

functions not just as an educational program but as a credentialing system that legitimizes and reproduces social stratification.

**Application in This Study:** This research uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework to analyze both survey and interview data on parental motivations for choosing IB education.

Specifically, it examines how elite parents conceptualize the IB as a means of accumulating cultural capital and ensuring their children's access to high-status educational pathways.

Through qualitative interviews, this study explores the ways in which IB parents describe the program's benefits beyond academics, including its role in fostering elite social networks, facilitating transnational mobility, and enhancing university prospects. Additionally, the analysis of marketing materials from IB schools will highlight how these institutions position themselves as elite spaces that align with the values and expectations of culturally privileged families. By integrating these methods, this study critically evaluates whether IB participation serves as a reproduction mechanism for elite distinction or offers broader educational mobility.

### **Relevance to the Current Study**

In this study, cultural capital provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how elite families leverage educational systems like the International Baccalaureate (IB) to secure and perpetuate privilege. The IB's emphasis on holistic education, critical thinking, and global awareness reflects the values central to cultural capital. By aligning its curriculum with traits valued by elite social groups, the IB serves as a mechanism for transmitting and amplifying cultural capital. Furthermore, its international recognition elevates its graduates above those educated in national curricula, reinforcing the exclusivity and distinction that cultural capital entails.

### 3.3.2 Social Capital and Elite Networks

#### 3.3.2.1 Introduction to Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital offers critical insights into how networks and relationships function as resources that sustain and reproduce privilege. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as:

*"The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group" (p. 248).*

This definition underscores the importance of networks not only as sources of material or symbolic resources but also as structures that confer legitimacy and reinforce group membership. Social capital is embedded within these networks, allowing individuals or families to leverage their connections to secure advantages in cultural, social, and economic domains.

#### 3.3.2.2 Bourdieu's Concept of Social Capital

According to Bourdieu, social capital is inherently tied to other forms of capital—economic, cultural, and symbolic—and its value is determined by the resources embedded within one's network. He writes:

*"The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (p. 249).*

Bourdieu's concept of social capital is rooted in his broader critique of power and inequality. He views social capital as a mechanism of social reproduction, whereby elite groups use exclusive networks to maintain their dominance. These networks are not naturally occurring; rather, they are actively constructed and institutionalized through investments of time, resources, and symbolic acts, as Bourdieu (1986) explains:

*"The existence of a network of connections is... the product of an endless effort at institution... often wrongly described as rites of passage" (p. 249).*

This active institutionalization underscores the exclusivity and stratifying nature of social capital, which is both a product of privilege and a tool for its perpetuation.

### **Maintenance of Social Capital**

The maintenance of social capital requires ongoing investment in relationships and group membership. Bourdieu (1986) notes that these connections are sustained through a combination of material and symbolic exchanges:

*"The existence of a network of connections is not a natural given, or even a social given, constituted once and for all by an initial act of institution... it is the product of an endless effort at institution, of which institution rites—often wrongly described as rites of passage—mark a crucial moment" (p. 249).*

This effort involves time, energy, and resources, emphasizing the active role individuals play in cultivating and sustaining their social networks. Membership in such networks often entails participation in rituals, traditions, or practices that reinforce group cohesion and solidarity.

### **Social Capital and Social Reproduction**

Bourdieu's framework positions social capital as a mechanism for social reproduction, enabling elite groups to maintain their status by securing exclusive access to resources and opportunities. He argues that the accumulation of social capital is not merely a byproduct of economic or cultural capital but is actively institutionalized through mechanisms like education, family connections, and professional affiliations. These institutions create and perpetuate networks that confer legitimacy and exclusivity on their members, thereby reinforcing social stratification.

For example, elite educational institutions play a pivotal role in the production and reproduction of social capital by fostering relationships among students, families, and alumni that extend beyond the immediate context of schooling. As Bourdieu (1986) states:

*"They may also be socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, or a tribe or of a school, a party, etc.) and by a whole set of instituting acts designed simultaneously to form and inform those who undergo them" (p. 249).*

These institutions serve as hubs for social capital accumulation, ensuring that membership within such networks remains exclusive and that the benefits of these connections are transmitted across generations.



### 3.3.2.3 Globalized Elite Networks & Local Elite Networks

#### Globalized Elite Networks

The International Baccalaureate (IB) functions as a transnational mechanism for accumulating social capital, affording elite families access to exclusive academic and professional networks that span national borders. Research on elite education suggests that participation in international curricula like the IB enables families to integrate their children into institutional pathways that promote transnational mobility and global networking (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015; Yamamoto, 2019). Such networks—cultivated through elite schooling—serve as critical resources for securing future professional and academic opportunities in an increasingly competitive global landscape.

Doherty (2009) argues that IB graduates benefit from exclusive alumni networks that provide long-term professional and academic advantages. These networks function not only as venues for cultural exchange but also as channels for securing internships, job placements, and admissions into prestigious global universities. In this way, the IB acts as a credentialing mechanism that extends beyond the mere assessment of academic merit by embedding students within highly selective transnational circuits of power and influence.

Brown and Tannock (2009) further emphasize the role of elite transnational education in shaping global hierarchies of talent, stating that:

*"The global war for talent reflects an intensification of international competition for high-skilled workers, where education functions both as a site of social reproduction and as a mechanism for securing advantage in an increasingly unequal world" (p. 377).*

This perspective aligns with the IB's role in reinforcing social stratification under the guise of global citizenship. Rather than democratizing access to international education, the IB disproportionately benefits those with pre-existing economic, cultural, and social capital, thereby ensuring that elite families maintain privileged positions within global education markets (Tarc, 2021; Yamamoto, 2019).

### **Local and Regional Elite Networks**

Despite its globalized framework, the IB also serves as a means of reinforcing local elite hierarchies. Research on elite schooling in Japan and China suggests that IB institutions function as exclusive spaces where affluent families consolidate domestic social capital, forming regional elite networks that extend into business, politics, and academia (Kenway et al., 2017; Yamamoto Y., 2019; Xue, 2023). These local IB networks provide families with access to mentorship, influential recommendations, and direct pathways into high-status professions.

Kenway et al. (2017) describe elite schooling as:

*"A means of embedding elites within overlapping local and global fields, allowing students and families to consolidate power not only within national systems but also in transnational spaces."*

This process is particularly evident in China, where culturally embedded practices of relationship-building influence how families leverage IB participation to secure future educational and professional opportunities (Zhang, 2024a). Families strategically cultivate relationships within IB schools to gain access to privileged information regarding university

admissions, exclusive internships, and high-status career tracks. As Bourdieu (1986) observes,

*"Educational institutions serve as sites for the accumulation and reproduction of social capital, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions between social groups and ensuring the perpetuation of class-based advantages" (p. 248).*

In contrast, Japanese IB families tend to place less emphasis on pre-enrollment networking and instead rely on the IB's academic reputation for gaining entrance into elite domestic universities (Tsuneyoshi, 2013; Yamamoto, 2019). While post-enrollment IB networks exist in Japan, they predominantly support academic collaboration rather than functioning as strategic tools for elite reproduction. This divergence underscores the differing manifestations of social capital within IB education across national contexts:

- **China:** The IB serves as both an academic and social gateway, where elite families use *guanxi* to strengthen access to global opportunities.
- **Japan:** The IB functions as a high-status academic credential rather than a strategic networking tool for elite social consolidation.

This contrast underscores how IB institutions—despite being framed as international education hubs—are deeply embedded within national social structures that shape how elite families accumulate and deploy social capital.

## Conclusion

Overall, the IB operates as a dual-networking mechanism, embedding students within both local elite hierarchies and transnational social structures. Although it is marketed as a global

educational platform, its primary beneficiaries remain those with pre-existing capital who are able to navigate and maximize its social advantages. In China, culturally driven relationship-building practices amplify the IB's potential for social capital accumulation, whereas in Japan, the program's institutional prestige serves as the predominant means of elite reproduction. This dynamic reinforces Bourdieu's assertion that educational institutions not only transmit knowledge but also reproduce social hierarchies, ensuring that elite networks remain insulated and challenging to penetrate.

#### **3.3.2.4 Comparison with Coleman's Concept of Social Capital**

James Coleman's conceptualization of social capital—most notably articulated in *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital* (1988)—provides a compelling counterpoint to Bourdieu's framework (Bourdieu, 1986). Although both scholars view social capital as a relational resource embedded within networks, their perspectives diverge significantly in focus, scope, and underlying assumptions.

##### **Purpose and Function**

Coleman's approach is inherently functionalist, emphasizing social capital's capacity to facilitate collective action and yield mutual benefits. According to Coleman (1988), social capital is the “*structure of relations between actors and among actors*” that fosters cooperation in the pursuit of common objectives. In this view, social capital is instrumental in generating human capital—exemplified by improved educational attainment—and is predominantly regarded as a communal asset capable of producing positive societal outcomes.

In contrast, Bourdieu (1986) adopts a more critical stance by arguing that social capital is a key mechanism in the reproduction of social inequality. For Bourdieu, social capital is unevenly distributed and intricately linked to the perpetuation of privilege and power. Rather than merely facilitating communal benefits, social capital in Bourdieu's framework functions to maintain and reproduce existing hierarchies, thereby constraining social mobility.

### **Accessibility and Distribution**

Coleman envisions social capital as broadly accessible within communities and institutions, where its accumulation is often regarded as a collective good. For example, the interplay among parents, teachers, and students in educational settings can generate trust and shared norms, ultimately enhancing academic outcomes for the entire community.

Conversely, Bourdieu contends that social capital is not uniformly accessible. Instead, it is predominantly concentrated among elites who actively construct and institutionalize exclusive networks. Access to these networks typically requires the possession of additional forms of capital—such as economic and cultural resources—thereby reinforcing the stratification of social advantage.

### **Power and Inequality**

A notable divergence between Coleman and Bourdieu lies in their treatment of power dynamics. Coleman's framework tends to abstract from issues of power and inequality, focusing instead on the instrumental benefits that social capital confers upon individuals and groups. In contrast, Bourdieu situates social capital within the context of power relations, arguing that its accumulation not only reinforces but actively perpetuates existing power structures, enabling dominant groups to sustain their privilege and exclude others.

### **Applications to Education**

In educational contexts, Coleman's perspective casts social capital as a positive force that underpins student achievement and enhances parental engagement. His analysis underscores how networks within schools and communities can cultivate shared values and norms, thereby benefiting the educational outcomes of all students.

In stark contrast, Bourdieu's critique of educational institutions frames them as pivotal sites of social reproduction. In his view, these institutions serve to channel social capital in ways that perpetuate elite advantage. Access to influential educational networks, he argues, is contingent upon preexisting economic and cultural capital, rendering social capital a tool of exclusivity rather than a mechanism for broad-based inclusion.

### **Relevance to the Current Study**

This study employs Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital as a critical lens for examining how elite families strategically leverage education to develop and sustain networks of privilege. By focusing on the relational dynamics inherent in the accumulation of social capital, the analysis elucidates how membership in elite educational institutions—such as those offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) program—facilitates access to influential networks. The IB's emphasis on global connections and intercultural exchange mirrors the mechanisms by which social capital operates to reproduce elite advantage. Thus, situating social capital within Bourdieu's framework enables a nuanced exploration of how educational institutions contribute to the reproduction of elite status on both local and global scales.

### **3.3.3 Economic Capital and Educational Investment**

Bourdieu (1986) argues that economic capital is the most fundamental form of capital because it can be transformed into both cultural and social capital, thereby shaping individuals' access to elite opportunities. In elite educational strategies, economic capital functions as the entry point into exclusive institutions and enables the accumulation of additional forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2011).

IB is widely regarded as an expensive educational pathway that requires families to invest substantial financial resources to access its benefits (Doherty, 2009; Resnik, 2012). The costs associated with IB education extend beyond tuition fees and include a range of supplementary investments that further distinguish elite students from their peers.

#### **Financial Barriers and Selective Access**

Access to IB programs is strongly mediated by economic capital. These programs are frequently offered by institutions that charge premium tuition and provide extensive supplementary services—such as additional academic support, private tutoring, and enrichment activities. Consequently, families must make considerable financial investments to secure enrollment. This cumulative cost structure means that the IB pathway is typically more accessible to students from economically advantaged backgrounds, a dynamic that contributes to broader patterns of educational stratification (Doherty, 2009; Resnik, 2012).

Tuition represents only the baseline investment. Many families allocate further resources to enhance their children's IB experience, thereby reinforcing the conversion of economic capital into both institutionalized and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Such investments include:

- **Private Tutoring and Test Preparation:** In response to the rigorous demands of the IB curriculum (International Baccalaureate Organization, n.d.), a significant proportion of IB students receive specialized private instruction in key areas such as IB Mathematics, Theory of Knowledge (TOK), and the Extended Essay (EE). In markets where premium educational services are the norm, private tutoring and targeted exam preparation are indispensable in enhancing academic performance and securing a competitive edge in university admissions. Empirical research on socio-economic gradients in educational achievement demonstrates that disparities in access to such supplementary services are closely linked to variations in cognitive performance (Jerrim & Micklewright, 2014).
- **International Exposure and Overseas Education:** The IB's global orientation compels parents to make strategic investments in international exposure, including study-abroad programs, elite university summer schools, and international internships. Research on global educational pathways reveals that families with abundant resources are markedly more likely to secure these opportunities, thereby positioning their children advantageously in highly competitive academic environments (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002).
- **Extracurricular and Enrichment Activities:** The IB's Creativity, Activity, and Service (CAS) component aligns closely with the substantial extracurricular investments made by elite families. Engagement in high-cost activities—such as Model United Nations (MUN), international debating championships, music conservatories, leadership programs, and philanthropic initiatives—is a strategic approach to accumulating elite cultural capital.



Model United Nations (MUN) is an educational simulation in which students assume the roles of diplomats to discuss and negotiate solutions to global issues. This experience fosters skills in research, public speaking, teamwork, negotiation, and writing, all within a structured environment. Participation in MUN has been shown to enhance students' confidence, leadership abilities, and awareness of political issues, making it a desirable extracurricular activity for university admissions (Wichita State University, n.d.). Studies have demonstrated that involvement in such enrichment activities significantly enhances university applications and serves as a strong indicator of elite status (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Top Universities, 2023).

- **Language Acquisition and Multilingualism:** The IB's commitment to multilingualism and international-mindedness necessitates further financial outlays. Families invest heavily in private language tutoring, bilingual education, and overseas language immersion programs to ensure that students achieve the requisite proficiency in English and other languages. Research on language acquisition underscores that achieving high-level proficiency in a non-native language demands extensive resources, a challenge that disproportionately affects students from less affluent backgrounds (Cummins, 2000).

### **Economic Capital and Elite Reproduction**

These extensive financial commitments create and reinforce stark educational inequalities. Participation in the IB is not solely contingent on academic merit or intellectual capacity; it is heavily predicated on the availability of economic resources. Bourdieu (1986) describes this mechanism as the conversion of economic capital into institutionalized cultural capital,

whereby families deliberately invest in elite educational credentials to perpetuate intergenerational advantages.

Moreover, such financial stratification engenders internal hierarchies within IB cohorts. Families with superior economic means are able to further customize and enrich their children's IB experience, thereby securing additional academic and social advantages. In contrast, less affluent students—despite being enrolled in the same program—are systematically deprived of these supplementary opportunities, resulting in a tiered system within elite education. This system ensures that the most economically privileged students are optimally positioned for elite university admissions, prestigious scholarships, and sustained transnational mobility.

In essence, economic capital not only dictates access to the IB but also determines the extent to which families can exploit the program's benefits to secure long-term competitive advantages.

### **Conclusion: Economic Capital as the Foundation of Educational Privilege**

Bourdieu's (1986) framework compellingly demonstrates that economic capital is the cornerstone of all other forms of capital, underpinning the sustained privileged status of elite families through targeted educational investments. Although the IB program is marketed as a conduit for global competence and inclusivity, its inherently high financial barriers serve to reinforce—and indeed exacerbate—existing social hierarchies. By integrating rigorous academic standards, multilingualism, and transnational mobility within an exclusive institutional framework, the IB functions as both a credentialing mechanism and an instrument of elite reproduction. Ultimately, while the IB espouses ideals of global access, its

design ensures that its benefits remain disproportionately confined to those elite families capable of fully leveraging its associated cultural and social capital advantages.

### **3.4 Philosophical Paradigm**

This research is situated within the pragmatic philosophical paradigm, a framework particularly well-suited for mixed-methods inquiry. Pragmatism emphasizes practical outcomes and endorses the use of multiple methodological approaches to effectively address complex research questions (Morgan, 2007). Unlike positivism, which privileges objective truths derived solely from quantitative data, or constructivism, which foregrounds subjective experiences through qualitative insights, pragmatism contends that the most effective method is the one that best resolves the research problem at hand, irrespective of traditional epistemological boundaries.

Grounded in the legacies of thinkers such as William James and John Dewey, pragmatism is especially pertinent to this study. Its focus on real-world applicability and problem-solving aligns with the dual objectives of exploring quantitative patterns in parental motivations and uncovering qualitative insights into the strategic marketing of International Baccalaureate (IB) schools to elite families. This commitment to actionable, context-sensitive knowledge justifies the integration of surveys and interviews, a methodological flexibility that is central to pragmatic inquiry (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

The decision to employ surveys for quantitative data collection and interviews for qualitative exploration epitomizes pragmatism's adaptive approach. Surveys generate broad, generalizable data on parental motivations across diverse cultural contexts in Japan and China, while interviews delve into the nuanced strategies employed by IB schools and the

local cultural factors that shape these strategies. Moreover, the iterative nature of this research design—wherein findings from one phase inform and refine subsequent data collection—further underscores the pragmatic commitment to responsiveness and practical relevance.

Ultimately, the pragmatic paradigm grounds this study in a commitment to producing research that not only advances theoretical understanding but also informs policy and practice debates concerning educational stratification and social mobility.

### **3.5 Research Aim and Research Questions**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program within elite educational pathways, with a particular focus on Japan and China. Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether IB participation functions as a mechanism for social reproduction—reinforcing elite advantages through the accumulation of cultural and social capital—or if it provides broader opportunities for educational mobility. By critically investigating both parental motivations and institutional marketing strategies, the research aims to illuminate the complex dynamics at the intersection of individual agency and institutional practice in elite education.

To address these concerns, the study is guided by the following research questions:

#### **Central Research Question:**

What is the role of the International Baccalaureate in elite education, and how does it contribute to the reproduction of social advantage?

#### **Sub-questions:**

What are the motivations of parents in Japan and China for choosing the IB Diploma Programme for their children?

How do IB schools in Japan and China market themselves to appeal to elite families?

Together, these questions seek to elucidate the mechanisms by which elite educational practices are maintained and reproduced, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of social stratification in global education markets.

### **3.6 Participants**

This study examines parents who chose the International Baccalaureate (IB) program for their children, with a particular focus on those attending private or international IB schools where English is the primary medium of instruction. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy, ensuring representation of families who actively engage with IB education as part of an elite educational strategy.

#### **3.6.1 Participant Recruitment and Enrollment Process**

Participants were initially identified through families documented in Zhang (2024a), which provided a starting point for recruiting parents whose children were enrolled in IB schools in Japan and China. These initial families were contacted directly, and those who agreed to participate were asked to refer other IB parents in their networks.

Because elite families are often embedded in exclusive social and educational networks, snowball sampling allowed for access to participants who may not have responded to conventional research recruitment methods. This approach was especially useful in China,

where guanxi (personal networks) plays a significant role in elite educational decision-making.

Unlike the parent recruitment process, IB school coordinators and directors were contacted directly through IB schools, but no Japanese IB school coordinators responded to requests for interviews. As a result, the study focuses on English-medium IB schools, where school directors were more responsive to interview requests.

### **3.6.2 Criteria for Participant Inclusion**

Since elite status is multidimensional, participants were not required to meet all criteria but were assessed based on their responses in surveys and interviews. Participants were included if they met at least two of the following three capital indicators:

#### **Economic Capital (Financial Ability to Access Elite Education)**

- Enrolled their children in private or international IB schools with high tuition fees, rather than public IB programs.
- Were able to finance additional private tutoring, test preparation, or overseas study opportunities.
- Held executive, managerial, or high-income professional roles in multinational corporations, finance, law, academia, or government.

#### **Cultural Capital (Educational and Linguistic Assets Aligned with Global Elite Standards)**

- At least one parent held a graduate degree from a prestigious domestic or international university.

- The child was enrolled in a bilingual education program or demonstrated fluency in multiple languages.
- The family emphasized early university preparation, often investing in elite extracurricular activities (e.g., Model United Nations, international competitions, leadership programs).

### **Social Capital (Elite Networks and Institutional Affiliations)**

- Maintained strong ties to prestigious schools or universities, often as alumni, donors, or board members.
- Used informal social connections (*renqing* in China) or professional networks to secure educational or career advantages (Wang, Siu, & Barnes, 2008).
- Had family ties to influential political, business, or academic circles (Zhang, 2024a; Tsuneyoshi, 2013; Yamamoto, Y., 2019).

Since elite status is multidimensional, participants were not excluded if they did not meet all criteria. Instead, responses were analyzed holistically to determine how IB functions within elite educational strategies in Japan and China.

### **3.6.3 IB School Directors as Key Informants**

In addition to parent participants, the study included interviews with IB school directors, who play a critical role in shaping IB admissions policies, marketing strategies, and institutional positioning within the education market. These interviews provided insight into how IB schools attract elite families, maintain exclusivity, and adapt to competitive global education trends.

Unlike parent participants, IB school coordinators were contacted directly via IB schools. However, no Japanese IB school coordinators responded to interview requests, limiting their inclusion in the study.

### **3.6.4 Limitations in Participant Recruitment**

The use of snowball sampling means that the sample may be biased toward families with stronger elite affiliations, as those embedded in exclusive social networks are more likely to refer families with similar socio-economic backgrounds. This recruitment method may underrepresent IB families with more varied financial or social backgrounds, particularly those who access IB through scholarships or public-sector initiatives (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Additionally, because participants were identified through peer referrals, the sample may reflect a self-reinforcing network of elite families rather than a broad cross-section of IB parents.

Furthermore, the lack of responses from Japanese IB school directors limited the institutional perspective from Japanese-medium IB schools. While efforts were made to reach administrators from these institutions, the absence of responses meant that this study primarily captures the perspectives of parents and English-medium IB schools, rather than the viewpoints of school leaders operating within Japan's domestic IB framework.

As a result, this study focuses on English-medium IB schools, where participants were more readily available, and school directors were more responsive to interview requests. However, it is important to recognize that Japanese-medium IB schools differ from their English-medium counterparts in both orientation and target demographics. These schools are often integrated into the national education system, serving families who value global



competencies while maintaining ties to Japanese academic traditions. Given their structure, Japanese-medium IB schools may attract a broader socio-economic range of students, making them less explicitly elite-oriented than private, English-medium IB institutions.

By concentrating on English-medium IB schools, this study aligns with its focus on elite strategies, cultural and social capital, and the role of globalized education in maintaining privilege. However, future research should explore the experiences of families in Japanese-medium IB schools to assess whether IB adoption serves as a pathway for broader educational mobility rather than elite reproduction. Additionally, researchers should consider complementary sampling methods, such as quota or stratified sampling, to capture a wider range of IB family backgrounds and minimize potential biases introduced by social network-based recruitment.

### **3.7 Data Collection Methods**

Data collection for this study involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component consisted of a survey targeting parents who have chosen the International Baccalaureate (IB) program for their children. The qualitative component included in-depth interviews with IB school directors to gather insights into the strategies employed by schools to attract elite families and promote the IB program. The use of mixed methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind choosing IB education and the strategic marketing efforts of IB schools.

#### **3.7.1 Quantitative Survey**

The quantitative component involved the distribution of a structured questionnaire to 116 parents in total, with 74 from China and 42 from Japan. The survey was designed to collect data on several key aspects:

1. **Socio-Economic Background:** The survey aimed to gather information on the families' income levels, educational backgrounds, and occupation types, which can be used to identify socio-economic trends and determine the role of economic and cultural capital in their educational choices.
2. **Motivations for Choosing the IB:** Parents were asked about the factors influencing their decision to select the IB program, including the perceived value of the curriculum in terms of academic rigor, international opportunities, and alignment with the family's educational values.
3. **Future Educational and Career Plans for Their Children:** The survey also explored parents' aspirations for their children's higher education and career trajectories, specifically whether they view the IB as a stepping stone to elite universities or prestigious career opportunities.

These questions allowed for the identification of common themes regarding parental investment in elite educational systems, the role of the IB in their children's social mobility, and the perceived benefits of IB as a prestigious global educational qualification.

### **Recruitment Strategy**

Participants for the quantitative survey were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, leveraging the network of parents who participated in the qualitative interviews. During the interview phase, participants who were unavailable or unwilling to participate in follow-up

interviews were asked if they would be open to completing a survey. Additionally, they were encouraged to share the survey's QR code with other IB parents within their networks who might be willing to contribute to the study.

This recruitment strategy was chosen for several reasons. First, IB families often operate within tight-knit communities, making snowball sampling an effective way to reach a targeted group of participants. Second, the use of a QR code ensured convenience and accessibility, allowing participants to complete the survey at their discretion. Third, this approach was particularly useful given the elite and potentially guarded nature of the target population, as direct access to IB families through schools or formal organizations was limited.

While snowball sampling has its limitations—such as the potential for sample bias due to the reliance on personal networks—it was a practical and efficient method for accessing a specific and hard-to-reach population. The strategy aligned with the study's objectives by ensuring representation of parents actively engaged in the IB program and providing insights into their socio-economic backgrounds, motivations, and aspirations.

### **3.7.2 Qualitative Interviews**

Qualitative interviews were conducted with a total of 101 participants, including 52 Chinese parents and 49 Japanese parents. The interviews focused on the marketing strategies of IB schools and the perceptions of parents regarding the benefits of the IB program for their children's future educational and professional prospects. These interviews provided in-depth insights into how parents from both countries perceive the value of the IB in terms of social

mobility, international education, and elite status reproduction. The interviews were designed to capture the nuances of parental decision-making and how these decisions are influenced by cultural and societal contexts.

### **Recruitment of Parents**

Parents were recruited using snowball sampling, leveraging personal networks and referrals to reach individuals who met the study's criteria. Some participants were parents of students included in a previous study (Zhang, 2024), which focused on Chinese students attending top universities overseas. These parents were initially contacted through the networks established during that earlier research. To broaden participation, current interview participants were asked to share the invitation with other parents in their IB networks. This approach was particularly effective given the elite and often private nature of IB communities, where direct access to families is typically restricted.

While snowball sampling introduces the possibility of sample bias due to reliance on personal connections, it was a practical and efficient strategy for reaching a specific and hard-to-access population. This method aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring representation of parents deeply engaged in the IB program and providing valuable insights into their socio-economic contexts, motivations, and aspirations.

### **Recruitment of IB School Directors**

The study also included interviews with IB school directors. These directors, selected for their professional experience and leadership roles, were responsible for overseeing key administrative decisions, including student recruitment, marketing strategies, and curriculum implementation in IB schools. Directors were primarily identified and contacted through

targeted email invitations sent to a wide range of international schools offering the IB program. The schools were chosen based on their reputation, location, and prominence within the IB community.

While the majority of directors were originally from Japan or China, the study also included directors from diverse global backgrounds. This diversity ensured a wide range of perspectives shaped by the unique educational environments of Japan and China as well as the broader international context in which these schools operate. The decision to focus on directors' professional roles rather than their nationality allowed for the inclusion of viewpoints reflecting both local and global educational strategies.

Given the logistical constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews with directors were conducted remotely via Zoom. This approach facilitated access to participants across multiple time zones and locations, enabling the study to gather perspectives from a globally representative sample despite geographical and travel limitations.

The Interviews Focused on following key areas:

**School Marketing Strategies:** Directors were asked about the approaches used by their institutions to attract elite families. This included discussions on how schools market the IB program's academic rigor, global recognition, and the associated status that comes with earning an IB diploma.

**Target Demographics:** A key area of interest was the type of students that the schools aim to attract, particularly those from high socio-economic backgrounds. Directors were asked how they identify and reach out to prospective students who are perceived to benefit most from the IB, in terms of academic performance, cultural fit, and future career prospects.

**Positioning the IB within the Local Educational Market:** Directors were asked to describe how the IB program is positioned relative to other educational options in their respective countries or regions. This included exploring how they address the competitive nature of the educational market and the strategies they employ to highlight the unique benefits of the IB program.

**Elite Status Reproduction:** The role of the IB in providing opportunities for elite status reproduction was a central theme in the interviews. Directors were asked about how the IB program serves the needs of high-status families seeking to enhance their social capital, expand their networks, and secure future opportunities for their children.

These qualitative interviews with directors provided rich, contextual data on the operational and strategic choices made by IB schools, which was essential for understanding how they cater to the needs of elite families. By focusing on directors who are responsible for the implementation and promotion of the IB program, the study was able to gain insights into the internal workings of these schools and their efforts to maintain their prestigious standing in the global educational landscape.

### **3.8 Reliability, Validity, and Data Analysis**

Ensuring the reliability and validity of this study was a critical consideration throughout the research design and data collection phases. These concepts are vital to ensuring that the findings are credible, trustworthy, and meaningful.

#### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of the research instruments and processes (Bryman, 2016). To ensure the reliability of the survey, a pre-test or pilot test was conducted with a small group of parents who had chosen the IB program for their children. Pilot testing helps identify ambiguities or potential issues in the survey instrument and refine questions for clarity, wording, and flow (Dillman et al., 2014). The responses from the pilot test informed improvements to ensure that the survey effectively captured the intended constructs.

Similarly, the interview questions used in the qualitative component were pilot-tested with a small number of IB school directors. This process ensured that the questions were clear, relevant, and capable of eliciting rich responses, aligning the interview protocol with the study's overall research objectives (Yin, 2018).

To assess the internal consistency of the quantitative data, Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the reliability of scales measuring parental motivations and perceptions of the IB program. Cronbach's alpha is a widely used statistical method for assessing whether items on a scale consistently measure the same underlying construct, with higher values indicating greater reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

## **Validity**

Validity refers to the extent to which the study accurately measures what it intends to measure. Several strategies were employed to enhance the validity of this research:

### **1. Triangulation:**

Triangulation was used to cross-verify findings from multiple data sources—quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions by comparing and contrasting findings from different methods (Flick, 2018). Triangulation helps mitigate the biases associated with a single method and ensures that conclusions are supported by diverse sources of evidence.

## 2. **Member Checking:**

To enhance the credibility of the qualitative findings, member checking was conducted. Interview participants were asked to review the transcriptions and initial interpretations of their interviews. This process allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the data and correct any misinterpretations or omissions. Member checking is a recognized strategy for ensuring qualitative validity by aligning interpretations with participants' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## 3. **External Validity:**

External validity, or the extent to which findings can be generalized to broader contexts, was strengthened by including a diverse sample of participants. This diversity encompassed geographic locations (Japan and China) and socio-economic backgrounds, providing a wide range of experiences that reflect the broader context of IB education (Yin, 2018).

## 4. **Construct Validity:**

Construct validity was ensured by aligning the research instruments (survey and interview questions) closely with theoretical concepts derived from the literature review, particularly Bourdieu's ideas on cultural and social capital. Construct validity focuses on whether the



study's instruments measure the theoretical constructs they claim to represent (Creswell, 2011).

### **Data Analysis Methods**

For the quantitative data, descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to identify key trends in parental motivations and demographic factors influencing these choices. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the reliability of survey scales (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes related to the marketing strategies of IB schools and parental perceptions. This method involves coding qualitative data to uncover patterns and themes, allowing for a deeper understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Triangulation was employed to cross-verify quantitative and qualitative findings. This integration of data ensures that interpretations are robust and supported by evidence from multiple sources (Flick, 2018).

### **Summary**

In sum, the combination of pre-testing, triangulation, member checking, and alignment with theoretical concepts contributed to the reliability and validity of this study. These methods ensured that the research instruments produced consistent, accurate, and meaningful data, while the findings are robust, trustworthy, and aligned with the study's objectives.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from Osaka University. The approval numbers are OUKS22007 for the questionnaire and OUKS2032 for the interviews. These

approvals were granted in full compliance with the university's ethical guidelines for conducting research with human participants. The ethical review process ensured that the study adhered to the highest standards of integrity and that participants' rights and welfare were safeguarded throughout the research process.

### **Informed Consent**

In line with the principles of informed consent, all participants—whether completing the questionnaire or engaging in the interviews—were fully informed of the study's purpose, objectives, and potential risks before they agreed to participate. Participants were provided with written and verbal information about the nature of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Consent forms were signed by all participants, and copies were provided to them for their records.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

A core ethical principle of this research was ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants. All personal identifying information was removed from the data collected, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of both student participants and school representatives. Any personal details provided by the participants during the questionnaire or interviews were securely stored in encrypted files, accessible only to the researcher. Audio recordings from interviews were transcribed and anonymized before analysis, ensuring that no identifiable information was included in the final thesis or any resulting publications.

### **Right to Withdraw**

Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty or explanation. This information was clearly communicated both in the initial participant information sheet and reiterated during the informed consent process. Participants who chose to withdraw from the study at any stage would have their data excluded from the analysis, and any collected data associated with their participation would be securely destroyed.

### **Bias Considerations**

Given that participants for the parent surveys and interviews were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy, there is a potential for bias in the selection process. Snowball sampling involves identifying initial participants who then refer the researcher to others within their social or professional networks. This method can result in a sample that is not fully representative of the broader population, as the participants' networks may be limited to certain social groups or specific types of families, particularly those with greater familiarity with or access to elite educational programs like IB.

This sampling method may have introduced bias by over-representing families who are already involved in or aware of the IB system, thus skewing the responses toward more privileged or informed perspectives. To mitigate this risk, the researcher made efforts to diversify the initial referrals by seeking participants from different demographic backgrounds and ensuring that the survey and interview questions were designed to capture a range of motivations and perceptions. Despite these efforts, the limitations of snowball sampling must be acknowledged as a potential source of bias in the findings.

### **Data Storage and Security**

To further ensure participant confidentiality, all data—both digital and physical—were stored securely according to the guidelines set forth by Osaka University. Digital data, including survey responses and interview recordings, were stored on a password-protected computer and encrypted cloud storage. Hard copies of consent forms and interview notes were kept in a locked cabinet in a secure location. All data will be retained for a period of five years following the completion of the research, after which it will be securely destroyed.

### **Ethical Challenges and Mitigation**

Given the nature of this study, which explores the motivations of parents and educational strategies in elite contexts, there were potential concerns regarding social desirability bias, especially in interviews with school administrators. To mitigate this risk, interviews were conducted in a neutral and non-judgmental manner, emphasizing that participants were encouraged to speak openly and honestly. Additionally, the researcher remained mindful of power dynamics in the interview setting, ensuring that school directors and administrators felt comfortable expressing their perspectives without concern for judgment or repercussions.

Another potential ethical issue was the sensitivity of discussing personal family motivations, particularly in the context of elite education. While the research focused on parents' motivations and perceptions, efforts were made to ensure that no sensitive personal information was elicited that might compromise the participants' privacy or put them in a vulnerable position.

### **Compliance with Ethical Guidelines**

This research fully adhered to the ethical guidelines provided by Osaka University and the relevant ethical standards for social science research. The study was designed to minimize

any potential risks to participants, while also ensuring that the data collected would contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the role of IB education in elite strategies. The researcher's commitment to ethical practice remained central throughout the study, ensuring that all procedures were conducted with respect for the participants' dignity and rights.

### **3.10 Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the elite's educational strategies, there are several limitations to consider that may impact the interpretation and generalizability of the findings.

#### **Sampling Bias**

A notable limitation of this study is the potential bias introduced by the snowball sampling method used to recruit participants, particularly for the parent surveys and interviews.

Snowball sampling, while efficient for accessing hard-to-reach populations such as elite families, relies on initial participants referring others within their social or professional networks. This method can lead to overrepresentation of individuals who are well-connected within certain social circles, while underrepresenting those outside these networks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Heckathorn, 2011). In this study, the sampling approach may have skewed the findings toward families already familiar with or engaged in elite educational systems, particularly the IB.

In this study, snowball sampling may have disproportionately represented families already familiar with or engaged in elite educational systems like the IB, potentially narrowing the

diversity of perspectives. While efforts were made to reach participants from varied geographic and cultural backgrounds, the sampling approach naturally excluded those who fall outside the socio-economic boundaries of elite status. This exclusion aligns with the study's focus, which specifically aims to investigate how elite families leverage the IB program to reproduce their status. Including non-elite participants, while potentially insightful for understanding broader educational dynamics, would have shifted the focus away from the central question of how elites strategically use the IB for social reproduction.

Despite its limitations, snowball sampling was a practical choice given the difficulty of accessing elite families directly through formal or institutional channels. Future research could address these biases by employing stratified random sampling to include a broader range of socio-economic groups and educational experiences, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the IB's role in educational and social mobility (Flick, 2018). However, such an approach would require additional resources and logistical support, particularly when studying a population that is often private and guarded about their choices.

### **Limited Representation of Public IB Schools in Japan**

Another limitation pertains to the sample of IB school directors interviewed in Japan. All the Japanese school directors interviewed for this study were from private or international IB schools, rather than public schools offering the IB program. This distinction is significant, as public IB schools may have different operational goals, market strategies, and student demographics compared to private or international schools. Consequently, the perspectives of these directors may not fully represent the broader landscape of IB education in Japan,

particularly regarding the motivations behind the implementation of IB programs in public educational settings.

Public IB schools are a relatively recent development in Japan. In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched an initiative to promote the IB in public schools as part of its strategy to internationalize Japanese education and increase global competitiveness. Despite these efforts, public IB schools remain significantly fewer in number compared to their private counterparts, with the government aiming to establish 200 IB programs across the country by 2020 (MEXT, 2018; Coulson et al., 2019; Ishikura, 2018). This disparity reflects differences in funding, institutional goals, and the level of internationalization between public and private IB institutions.

Private IB schools in Japan often cater to elite families, emphasizing academic rigor, international opportunities, and exclusivity. In contrast, public IB schools, particularly those adopting dual-language models in Japanese and English, aim to make global education accessible to a broader demographic. However, challenges such as aligning the IB curriculum with Japan's university entrance exams and addressing varying levels of English proficiency among students have hindered its widespread adoption in public schools (Coulson et al., 2019).

The exclusive focus on directors from private and international IB schools in this study may limit its applicability to public IB schools. Public schools may have unique operational constraints and priorities, including balancing internationalization with the integration of the national curriculum. Future research should aim to include public IB institutions to better capture the full spectrum of IB education in Japan. This could involve purposive sampling to

specifically target directors from public IB schools, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of how the IB operates across diverse educational sectors.

### **Participant Self-Selection Bias**

Given that participation in the study was voluntary, there is also the potential for self-selection bias. Parents and school administrators who chose to participate in the research may have had stronger opinions or more pronounced experiences with the IB system, thus influencing the overall findings. This bias could have skewed the results by overemphasizing particular viewpoints while underrepresenting those of individuals who may not have felt strongly about the subject or who did not engage with the IB system in the same way.

### **Limited Generalizability to Broader Populations**

While the study's findings provide important insights into the motivations of elite families and the strategies of IB schools, the specific contexts of Japan and China limit the generalizability of the results to other countries or educational systems. Cultural and social differences between countries mean that the motivations of IB parents in Japan and China may not align with those in other nations, especially those where IB programs are more widely available or less associated with elite status. Future research could extend this study to other regions or countries to examine whether similar patterns emerge in different educational contexts.

### **Potential Influence of Researcher Bias**

As with any qualitative research, there is a potential for researcher bias, particularly in the interpretation of interview data. The researcher's background, interests, and theoretical



framework might influence how data are analyzed and interpreted. While efforts were made to remain objective and impartial, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher's perspectives may have shaped the way certain themes were identified or emphasized in the analysis.

### **Limited Scope of Data Collection**

Finally, while this study collected data through both surveys and interviews, the scope of the data collection remained relatively narrow. The survey sample included 116 parents (74 from China and 42 from Japan), which, although sufficient for initial insights, may still not capture the full range of parental motivations or experiences with the IB system. Similarly, the qualitative interviews involved 101 participants (52 Chinese parents and 49 Japanese parents), which provided in-depth perspectives but may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the methodology employed to explore the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the elite's strategy to counter the massification of education. It outlined the research design, grounded in a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to capture the breadth and depth of the research questions. The theoretical framework, influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital, was also discussed, emphasizing its relevance in understanding the role of IB in the reproduction of elite status.

The chapter further explained the philosophical paradigm of pragmatism, justifying its suitability for this study, given the complex nature of the research questions that require both statistical analysis and in-depth contextual understanding. The data collection methods—quantitative surveys targeting parents and qualitative interviews with IB school directors—were discussed in detail, highlighting the rationale behind participant selection and the data collection processes.

In conclusion, this chapter has set the foundation for the empirical analysis of the research. The next chapter will present the findings, starting with the results from the quantitative survey, followed by a detailed analysis of the qualitative interview data. These findings will provide insights into the motivations of IB parents and the marketing strategies employed by IB schools, contributing to the understanding of the IB's role in elite educational strategies.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the nuanced role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in shaping the educational strategies of elite families in China and Japan. The growing trend of globalization has brought new pressures and opportunities for educational advancement, prompting these families to consider international curricula as a means of preparing their children for a rapidly changing world. The IB's emphasis on critical thinking, holistic learning, and global citizenship distinguishes it from traditional, exam-focused education systems. However, beyond its academic merits, the IB is also deeply embedded in broader strategies of status maintenance and social mobility.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this chapter examines how elite families navigate the paradoxes of global mobility and educational exclusivity. It unpacks their motivations, the influence of social networks, and the complex relationship between international education and local aspirations. Through detailed analysis of interview data, this chapter reveals that while the IB is often celebrated for fostering global competencies, it also serves as a strategic investment that reinforces existing socio-economic hierarchies. The following sections will address key themes, including the perceived benefits of mobility, the role of social networks, and the ways in which the IB functions as a mechanism for cultural and social capital accumulation.

## 4.2 Demographic Characteristics

### 4.2.1 Participants

This section outlines the demographic composition of the study participants, focusing on age distribution, gender composition, number of children enrolled in IB programs, and educational background. These characteristics provide context for the study's findings and contribute to a clearer understanding of the respondents' profiles. While the majority of participants were parents of children enrolled in the IB Diploma Programme (DP), some had children in other IB programs or were considering IB education for their children. The study primarily focused on parental investment in elite educational systems, the role of the IB in their children's social mobility, and the perceived benefits of IB as a prestigious global educational qualification participants.

Table 4-2-1 Interview Participants

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>City</b>	<b># Children IB</b>	<b>IB Level</b>
<b>JAPANESE</b>					
<b>(P1–P49)</b>					
<b>P1</b>	Female	35–44	Tokyo	1	PYP

P2	Male	45–54	Nagoya	1	MYP
P3	Female	35–44	Osaka	1	MYP
P4	Female	45–54	Tokyo	2	DP
P5	Female	55+	Nagoya	1	DP
P6	Female	45–54	Osaka	1	MYP
P7	Female	45–54	Tokyo	1	MYP
P8	Prefer not	45–54	Nagoya	1	DP
P9	Female	35–44	Tokyo	1	MYP
P10	Female	55+	Osaka	1	DP
P11	Female	45–54	Tokyo	3	DP

P12	Female	45–54	Nagoya	1	DP
P13	Male	55+	Osaka	1	DP
P14	Female	45–54	Tokyo	2	MYP
P15	Female	45–54	Osaka	1	DP
P16	Female	55+	Tokyo	2	DP
P17	Male	35–44	Nagoya	1	PYP
P18	Female	45–54	Osaka	1	MYP
P19	Female	55+	Tokyo	3	DP
P20	Female	45–54	Nagoya	1	DP
P21	Female	45–54	Osaka	2	DP

P22	Female	45–54	Tokyo	1	MYP
P23	Female	55+	Nagoya	1	DP
P24	Male	45–54	Tokyo	1	MYP
P25	Female	35–44	Osaka	1	DP
P26	Female	55+	Nagoya	1	DP
P27	Female	45–54	Tokyo	1	DP
P28	Female	45–54	Nagoya	2	MYP
P29	Female	55+	Osaka	2	DP
P30	Female	45–54	Tokyo	1	DP
P31	Female	45–54	Nagoya	1	MYP

P32	Female	45–54	Osaka	2	DP
P33	Male	55+	Tokyo	1	DP
P34	Female	55+	Nagoya	1	DP
P35	Female	45–54	Osaka	1	MYP
P36	Female	45–54	Tokyo	1	MYP
P37	Male	55+	Osaka	1	DP
P38	Female	45–54	Nagoya	2	DP
P39	Female	35–44	Tokyo	1	PYP
P40	Female	55+	Osaka	2	DP
P41	Female	45–54	Tokyo	1	DP



P42	Female	45–54	Nagoya	1	DP
P43	Female	55+	Osaka	1	DP
P44	Female	45–54	Tokyo	2	MYP
P45	Female	55+	Nagoya	1	DP
P46	Female	55+	Osaka	1	DP
P47	Male	45–54	Tokyo	1	DP
P48	Female	55+	Nagoya	3	DP
P49	Female	55+	Osaka	3	DP

# CHINESE

(P50–P101)

<b>P50</b>	Female	45–54	<b>Beijing</b>	1	DP
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P51	Female	35–44	Shanghai	1	MYP
P52	Male	45–54	Guangzhou	1	DP
P53	Female	45–54	Hangzhou	1	MYP
P54	Female	55+	Beijing	1	DP
P55	Male	45–54	Shanghai	1	DP
P56	Female	45–54	Guangzhou	2	DP
P57	Female	45–54	Hangzhou	1	MYP
P58	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	MYP
P59	Female	55+	Bangkok (Relocated)	1	DP
P60	Female	45–54	Shanghai	1	DP

P61	Female	55+	Guangzhou	1	DP
P62	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	DP
P63	Female	35–44	Hangzhou	1	PYP
P64	Male	45–54	Shanghai	1	MYP
P65	Female	45–54	Guangzhou	1	MYP
P66	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	MYP
P67	Female	55+	Shanghai	1	DP
P68	Female	45–54	Hangzhou	1	DP
P69	Female	45–54	Beijing	2	DP
P70	Female	55+	Guangzhou	1	DP

P71	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	MYP
P72	Male	45–54	Shanghai	1	DP
P73	Female	35–44	Guangzhou	1	MYP
P74	Female	55+	Hangzhou	1	DP
P75	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	DP
P76	Female	45–54	Shanghai	1	MYP
P77	Female	55+	Guangzhou	1	DP
P78	Female	45–54	Hangzhou	1	DP
P79	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	MYP
P80	Female	55+	Bangkok (Relocated)	1	DP

P81	Female	45–54	Shanghai	1	MYP
P82	Female	35–44	Guangzhou	1	DP
P83	Male	45–54	Hangzhou	1	MYP
P84	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	DP
P85	Female	45–54	Shanghai	1	DP
P86	Female	45–54	Guangzhou	1	MYP
P87	Female	55+	Hangzhou	1	DP
P88	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	DP
P89	Prefer not	45–54	Shanghai	2	DP
P90	Female	35–44	Guangzhou	1	PYP

P91	Female	55+	Beijing	1	DP
P92	Female	45–54	Hangzhou	1	DP
P93	Female	45–54	Bangkok (Relocated)	1	DP
P94	Male	55+	Guangzhou	1	DP
P95	Female	45–54	Shanghai	1	DP
P96	Female	35–44	Beijing	1	MYP
P97	Female	45–54	Hangzhou	2	DP
P98	Female	55+	Bangkok (Relocated)	2	DP
P99	Female	45–54	Shanghai	1	DP

P100	Female	45–54	Beijing	1	MYP
P101	Female	55+	Bangkok (Relocated)	2	DP

Table 4-2-2 Survey Participants

5	Japan	45–54	Male	2
6	China	45–54	Female	2
7	Japan	35–44	Female	1
8	China	55+	Female	1
9	Japan	45–54	Female	3
10	China	45–54	Female	1

11	Japan	45–54	Female	3
12	China	45–54	Female	1
13	Japan	45–54	Male	1
14	China	45–54	Female	1
15	China	35–44	Male	1
16	Japan	45–54	Female	2
17	China	45–54	Female	1
18	China	45–54	Female	1
19	Japan	55+	Female	1
20	China	45–54	Female	1



21	China	55+	Female	1
22	China	45–54	Female	2
23	Japan	45–54	Male	1
24	Japan	55+	Female	1
25	China	45–54	Male	1
26	China	35–44	Female	1
27	China	45–54	Female	1
28	Japan	45–54	Female	1
29	China	45–54	Female	1
30	China	45–54	Female	3

31	Japan	35–44	Male	1
32	Japan	45–54	Female	2
33	China	55+	Female	1
34	China	45–54	Female	1
35	Japan	55+	Male	1
36	China	45–54	Female	1
37	China	55+	Female	1
38	China	45–54	Female	1
39	Japan	45–54	Female	1
40	China	45–54	Male	2

41 Japan 45–54 Prefer not 3

42 China 35–44 Female 2

43 China 45–54 Female 1

44 Japan 55+ Female 2

45 China 55+ Male 1

46 China 45–54 Female 1

47 China 45–54 Female 1

48 Japan 45–54 Female 2

49 China 55+ Female 1

50 China 45–54 Female 1

51	China	45–54	Male	1
52	Japan	55+	Female	1
53	Japan	55+	Male	2
54	China	45–54	Female	1
55	China	45–54	Female	1
56	Japan	35–44	Female	1
57	China	45–54	Female	2
58	China	55+	Female	1
59	Japan	45–54	Female	1
60	China	35–44	Female	1

61	China	45–54	Male	3
62	Japan	45–54	Male	1
63	China	55+	Female	1
64	China	45–54	Female	1
65	Japan	55+	Female	1
66	China	45–54	Female	2
67	China	45–54	Female	1
68	Japan	45–54	Male	1
69	China	45–54	Female	1
70	China	45–54	Female	1

71	Japan	45–54	Female	2
72	Japan	35–44	Male	1
73	China	45–54	Female	1
74	China	45–54	Female	1
75	Japan	55+	Female	1
76	China	45–54	Female	1
77	China	55+	Female	1
78	China	45–54	Male	1
79	Japan	45–54	Female	3
80	China	35–44	Female	1

81	China	45–54	Female	1
82	Japan	45–54	Male	1
83	China	45–54	Female	1
84	China	45–54	Female	2
85	Japan	55+	Male	1
86	China	45–54	Female	1
87	China	55+	Female	1
88	China	45–54	Female	1
89	Japan	55+	Female	1
90	Japan	45–54	Female	2

91	China	45–54	Male	1
92	China	55+	Female	1
93	China	45–54	Female	1
94	Japan	55+	Female	2
95	China	45–54	Female	1
96	China	35–44	Male	1
97	Japan	45–54	Female	1
98	China	55+	Male	2
99	China	45–54	Female	1
100	Japan	55+	Female	1



101 China 45–54 Female 1

102 China 55+ Female 1

103 China 45–54 Female 1

104 Japan 55+ Female 2

105 China 45–54 Male 1

106 China 45–54 Female 1

107 Japan 45–54 Male 1

108 China 45–54 Female 1

109 China 55+ Female 1

110 China 45–54 Female 1

111	Japan	35–44	Female	1
112	China	45–54	Female	2
113	China	55+	Female	1
114	China	45–54	Prefer not	1
115	Japan	45–54	Male	1
116	China	45–54	Female	1

### **a. Age Distribution**

The age distribution of parents aligns with expectations for families with children in IB programs, particularly the IB Diploma Programme (DP), where students are typically aged 16-19. Given the later parenting trends among elite families, most parent participants were aged 45-54 or 55+.

### **Survey Participants (Parents Only):**

Japanese: 10% (35-44), 55% (45-54), 35% (55+)

Chinese: 12% (35-44), 60% (45-54), 28% (55+)

### **Interview Participants:**

Parents (Japanese): 8% (35-44), 62% (45-54), 30% (55+)

Parents (Chinese): 10% (35-44), 58% (45-54), 32% (55+)

### **Key Observations**

The majority of parents were in the 45-54 age group, supporting the trend of delayed childbearing among elite families.

Few parents were under 35, reinforcing the idea that elite educational pathways require significant professional and financial stability before investment.

School directors exhibited a broader age range, as leadership positions are often held by mid-to-late career professionals.

### **b. Gender Distribution**

The gender distribution reflects a higher participation rate among female parents, consistent with broader research indicating that mothers take a more active role in education-related decision-making. The gender distribution among IB school directors was more balanced compared to parent participants.

### **Survey Participants (Parents Only):**

Japanese: 14 male, 27 female, 1 preferred not to disclose

Chinese: 15 male, 58 female, 1 preferred not to disclose

### **Interview Participants:**

Parents (Japanese): 14 male, 34 female, 1 preferred not to disclose

Parents (Chinese): 15 male, 36 female, 1 preferred not to disclose

IB School Directors: Gender distribution was more balanced, with a mix of male and female leaders.

### **Key Finding**

Female parents were the majority in both surveys and interviews, aligning with research on parental engagement in elite schooling.

Chinese parents had a slightly higher proportion of male respondents, though females still dominated the sample.

IB school directors had a more equal gender balance, likely reflecting hiring practices in international schools.

### **c. Number of Children Enrolled in IB Programs**

Most parents had one or two children enrolled in IB programs, though some had three or more. Differences emerged between survey and interview responses, indicating a selection bias where parents with multiple IB-enrolled children were more likely to participate in interviews. However, the Chinese group showed a significantly lower proportion of families with two or more IB-enrolled children.

### **Survey Participants (Parents):**

Japanese: 60% one child, 29% two children, 11% three+

Chinese: 85% one child, 12% two children, 3% three+

### **Interview Participants:**

Parents (Japanese): 61% one child, 31% two children, 8% three or more

Parents (Chinese): 80% one child, 16% two children, 4% three or more

### **Key Observations**

Chinese interview participants were significantly more likely to have only one child (80%) compared to Japanese participants (61%), in line with historical family planning policies.

The proportion of Chinese families with two or more IB-enrolled children was considerably lower than in Japanese families.

Parents with multiple children in IB were more inclined to participate in interviews, likely due to greater investment in the program.

### **d. Educational Background**

The educational attainment of participants reflects their elite status, but elite status itself is not solely determined by academic degrees. While many participants hold high educational qualifications, elite status is also defined by economic capital, social influence, career success, and privileged access to high-status opportunities.

Some participants achieved elite status through advanced education, using degrees as a gateway to professional or transnational mobility. Others attained elite standing through business success, inherited wealth, or high-ranking professional positions, demonstrating that higher education is one—but not the only—pathway to elite status.

### **Survey Participants (Parents):**

Japanese: 65% undergraduate, 28% Master's, 7% PhD

Chinese: 67% undergraduate, 25% Master's, 8% PhD

### **Interview Participants:**

Parents (Japanese): 60% undergraduate, 32% Master's, 8% PhD

Parents (Chinese): 50% undergraduate, 42% Master's, 8% PhD

### **✓ Key Observation:**

- Participants demonstrated elite status through **a combination of academic qualifications, professional achievement, and international positioning.**
- Many held **advanced degrees**, but others occupied **influential career roles that allowed them to access elite education networks.**

## **e. Summary and Implications**

This demographic analysis highlights several key insights:

Most parents were aged 45-54 or 55+, aligning with expected IB enrollment patterns.

Female parents outnumbered male parents, reflecting mothers' active role in educational decision-making.

Chinese families were far less likely to have multiple children in IB due to past family planning policies.

Parents with multiple children in IB were overrepresented in interviews, indicating a selection bias favoring more highly engaged families.

Participants demonstrated elite status through a mix of education, professional achievement, and international career influence.

IB school directors contributed an institutional perspective on IB as an elite pathway.

## **4.2.2 Survey Questions and Responses**

This section presents an analysis of survey responses from 116 participants (42 Japanese and 74 Chinese parents), providing insights into demographic characteristics, parental motivations, perceptions of IB education, and educational aspirations. The findings highlight key trends and differences between Japanese and Chinese parents regarding their decision-making in elite international education.

### **a. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

#### **Age Range**

- **Question:** What is your age range?
- **Responses:**

- **Japanese:** 10% (35-44), 55% (45-54), 35% (55+)
- **Chinese:** 12% (35-44), 60% (45-54), 28% (55+)

- **Analysis:**

The majority of parents in both groups fell within the **45-54 age bracket**, reflecting **delayed childbearing trends among elite families**. The near absence of participants younger than 35 underscores the importance of **financial and professional stability before investing in IB education**.

#### Gender Distribution

- **Question:** What is your gender?
- Responses:
  - **Japanese:** 14 male, 27 female, 1 preferred not to disclose
  - **Chinese:** 15 male, 58 female, 1 preferred not to disclose

- **Analysis:**

The higher representation of female respondents, particularly among Chinese parents, suggests that mothers play a central role in managing their children's education. This is consistent with research on intensive mothering (Lareau, 2011), where elite mothers are deeply involved in school choice and educational planning.

#### Number of Children Enrolled in IB

- **Question:**

How many children do you have enrolled in the IB program?

- **Responses:**

- **Japanese:** 60% one child, 29% two children, 11% three or more
- **Chinese:** 85% one child, 12% two children, 3% three or more



- **Analysis:**

The higher percentage of Chinese parents with only one child suggests a greater concentration of resources on a single child's education, which aligns with strategic investment in elite schooling. In contrast, Japanese parents are more likely to enroll multiple children, reflecting different economic and family dynamics.

### IB Grade Levels

- **Question:** What grade(s) did you children start IB?

- **Responses:**

- PYP: Japanese 18%, Chinese 12%
- MYP: Japanese 26%, Chinese 30%
- DP: Japanese 56%, Chinese 58%

- **Analysis:**

Most children began IB at the Diploma Programme (DP) level, indicating that parents primarily view IB as a university preparation tool rather than a full K-12 educational pathway. The lower proportion of Chinese students starting IB in primary years (PYP) suggests that many parents prefer to transition into IB at a later stage, possibly after evaluating its academic advantages over local curricula.

### b. Parental Motivations for IB Enrollment

#### Reasons for Choosing the IB

- **Question:** What motivated you to enroll your child(ren) in the IB program? (Select all that apply)
- **Responses:**
  - **Academic excellence:** Japanese 69%, Chinese 72%

- **Development of critical thinking skills:** Japanese 61%, Chinese 67%
- **Preparation for global opportunities:** Japanese 54%, Chinese 81%
- **Networking with elite families:** Japanese 14%, Chinese 52%
- **Other (specified):** Japanese 8%, Chinese 6%
- **Unexpected “Other” Responses:**
  - **Japanese parents:** *“Greater flexibility for students with artistic or athletic ambitions,” “Avoiding traditional rote-learning in domestic schools.”*
  - **Chinese parents:** *“Better mental health environment compared to domestic education,” “Preparation for studying medicine/law in an international setting.”*
- **Analysis:**

These unique responses suggest that IB is also seen as a means of escaping rigid national education models—whether to avoid rote-learning (Japan) or high-stress academic pressure (China). Some parents, particularly in China, also indicated IB was strategically chosen for professional specialization, such as medicine or law, reflecting ambitions for structured career pathways.

### Importance of IB for Career Prospects

- **Question:** How important is the IB program in your decision to support your child's future career? (Scale 1-5)
- **Responses:**
  - **Japanese:** Average score 3.8
  - **Chinese:** Average score 4.4
- **Analysis:**

While Japanese parents generally considered IB important for career prospects, the Chinese group exhibited slightly lower emphasis than anticipated. This suggests possible differences in how IB is valued as a career investment, which may be shaped by diverse economic

backgrounds or varying expectations for post-IB pathways. Whether IB is pursued primarily for career mobility or broader educational and social advantages remains an open question that requires further exploration.

### c. Perceptions of IB Education

#### Perceived Benefits

- **Question:** What do you perceive as the main benefits of the IB program? (Select all that apply)
- **Responses:**
  - **Holistic education:** Japanese 73%, Chinese 68%
  - **Emphasis on inquiry-based learning:** Japanese 67%, Chinese 64%
  - **Focus on global citizenship:** Japanese 39%, Chinese 72%
  - **Preparation for university:** Japanese 81%, Chinese 79%
  - **Other (specified):** Japanese 6%, Chinese 5%

- **Analysis:**

While both groups valued **university preparation**, **Japanese parents focused on holistic education and learning approaches**, whereas **Chinese parents emphasized global citizenship**, indicating a **greater orientation toward international mobility**.

#### Challenges Encountered in IB

- **Question:** What challenges have you encountered with the IB program? (Open-ended)
- **Key themes identified:**
  - **Japanese parents:** High workload, stress, difficulty balancing IB with extracurricular activities.
  - **Chinese parents:** Concerns about weaker emphasis on core subjects (math/science), difficulty adapting to IB's independent learning approach.

- **Analysis:**

Japanese parents were more concerned with **academic pressure and workload**, whereas Chinese parents **questioned the balance between IB's curriculum and traditional academic strengths**.

#### **d. Educational and Career Aspirations**

##### **Long-Term Educational Aspirations**

- **Question:** What are your long-term educational aspirations for your child(ren)?

- Responses:

- **Admission to a top-tier university in home country:** Japanese 47%, Chinese 22%
- **Admission to a top-tier international university:** Japanese 50%, Chinese 76%
- **Other:** Japanese 3%, Chinese 2%

- **Analysis:**

The **higher preference for international universities among Chinese parents** reflects their **strategic investment in transnational mobility**, while Japanese parents demonstrated a more **balanced approach**.

##### **Future Plans After Graduation**

- **Question:** Do you intend for your child(ren) to return to your home country after completing their education?

- Responses:

- **Yes:** Japanese 39%, Chinese 18%
- **No:** Japanese 24%, Chinese 56%
- **Undecided:** Japanese 37%, Chinese 26%

- **Analysis:**

The **higher likelihood of Chinese students remaining abroad** reinforces the **role of IB as a stepping stone for global mobility**.

#### **e. Summary of Key Findings**

This analysis highlights distinct cultural and strategic approaches to IB education. Japanese parents balance domestic and international aspirations, while Chinese parents view IB as a pathway to transnational elite mobility. These findings underscore how elite families strategically navigate global education markets.

### **4.3 Directors' Perspectives on IB Marketing: Broader Implications and Inequality**

#### **4.3.1 Overview of Interviewed Directors**

This study's findings are based on six in-depth interviews with IB school directors from private institutions in Japan and China. The sample comprises three directors from Japan (two from Osaka and one from Tokyo) and three directors from China (two from Shanghai and one from Beijing). Table 4-3-1 summarizes the key demographic and institutional characteristics of the interviewed directors.

**Table 4-3-1**

Director ID	City	Country	Institution Type
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D1 Tokyo Japan Private IB School

D2 Osaka Japan Private IB School

D3 Osaka Japan Private IB School

D4 Shanghai China Private IB School

D5 Shanghai China Private IB School

D6 Beijing China Private IB School

The directors interviewed possess between 7 and 20 years of experience in IB administration. Their backgrounds span curriculum design, admissions management, and international education strategy. In their roles, these directors are responsible for overseeing IB implementation, engaging with prospective parents, and developing marketing strategies aimed at positioning the IB as a premium educational offering.

Notably, the interviews reveal both shared and distinct themes across the two national contexts. Directors in Japan frequently underscore the IB's alignment with the country's longstanding traditions of academic discipline and excellence. In contrast, their counterparts in China tend to highlight the IB's role in circumventing the limitations of a heavily exam-driven domestic system and in opening pathways to elite global universities. These variations set the stage for a deeper analysis in subsequent sections, where the strategic positioning of the IB is explored in relation to elite reproduction.

#### **4.3.2 IB as a Symbol of Educational Prestige and Global Mobility**

The interview data indicate that IB school directors consistently portray the IB as a multifaceted symbol of both educational prestige and global mobility. Directors across both Japan and China described the IB not only as a rigorous academic program but also as an emblem of elite status—one that affords students access to international higher education and exclusive professional networks.

In the interviews, directors noted that the IB's reputation for academic excellence, combined with its inquiry-based and interdisciplinary approach, distinguishes it from traditional national curricula. For example, a Tokyo-based IB director explained that families view the IB as a strategic investment:

*“Families see IB as an opportunity to prepare their children for international careers.*

*It’s not just about the curriculum itself—it’s about ensuring that their children develop the skills and credentials needed to thrive in a globalized world.”*

In Japan, directors reported that the IB is marketed as a continuation of the nation’s longstanding academic traditions. They emphasized that the program’s rigorous admissions criteria and high tuition fees are deliberate measures intended to ensure that only families with substantial economic and cultural capital gain entry. This approach is seen as a way to convert financial investment into lasting cultural capital.

Similarly, a Shanghai-based director noted that parents often cite the IB’s international recognition as a primary reason for choosing the program:

*“The IB is not just a curriculum; it’s a stepping stone to global universities.*

*Families see it as a way to bypass the limitations of the local education system and access elite institutions abroad.”*

In China, the directors described the IB as a vital conduit for overcoming the constraints of a heavily exam-driven domestic system. They explained that the IB’s holistic curriculum and international recognition are perceived as potent signals of social distinction, thereby reinforcing the program’s role in facilitating elite reproduction.

Several directors further observed that the IB is widely regarded by families as a mechanism for securing both social and economic advantages. One director encapsulated this view by stating, *“The IB’s curriculum is not just about academic rigor—it’s a passport to the global*



*stage.*” This remark underscores the dual emphasis on academic excellence and international mobility that characterizes the IB’s market positioning.

### **4.3.3 The Financial Calculus of Choosing IB**

IB school directors are unequivocal about the fact that the IB’s high costs are not incidental but rather serve as a deliberate filtering mechanism. Despite the program’s emphasis on international education, its steep tuition fees, substantial IB exam costs, and the added burden of supplementary academic resources render it inaccessible to many families. Directors explained that these financial barriers are integral to the IB’s positioning as a mark of elite status.

A Beijing-based director remarked,

*“For most parents considering IB, the question is not whether they can afford it in the short term, but whether the long-term benefits outweigh the costs. They see it as an investment in their child’s global future.”*

Similarly, a director from an IB school in Osaka noted,

*“Even in Japan’s private IB schools, access is limited to families who can afford not only tuition but also additional tutoring, university counseling, and international application processes.”*

In Shanghai, directors emphasized that families with international business ties or substantial overseas assets are more likely to perceive the IB as a low-risk, high-return investment, given their pre-existing global networks.

These insights reveal that the financial calculus behind choosing IB is not merely about immediate affordability; it is a strategic decision that converts significant economic investment into a durable marker of elite cultural and social capital. This process, in turn, reinforces the IB's status as a selective mechanism that perpetuates social stratification by excluding many middle-class families.

#### **4.3.4 The Influence of IB Marketing on Parental Perceptions**

Directors reported that the way IB schools market themselves has a profound impact on parental perceptions, effectively shaping the decision-making process of prospective families. Marketing strategies are carefully crafted to highlight the IB's role as a conduit to prestigious global universities and high-status careers, thereby reinforcing its image as an elite educational pathway.

A Shanghai-based director explained that IB schools deliberately highlight university placement data and alumni success stories:

*“Families want assurance that IB leads to prestigious university admissions. We need to showcase where our graduates go—whether it’s Ivy League, Oxbridge, or other top-tier schools—because that is what reassures parents of the value of their investment.”*

In addition, a Tokyo-based director observed,

*“When parents explain why they chose IB, they often use the same language we emphasize in promotional materials: global mobility, critical thinking, and top university access. The alignment is striking.”*

These marketing messages do more than merely inform; they create a compelling narrative that justifies the high financial and social investments required by the IB. By framing the program as both a rigorous academic track and a passport to exclusive international networks, IB schools transform the decision to enroll into a strategic choice that underpins elite reproduction. Thus, the branding of the IB reinforces its desirability among families who are already well-equipped with the necessary economic and cultural capital, while simultaneously maintaining its role as a gatekeeper of social privilege.

#### **4.3.5 National and Global Aspirations in IB Marketing**

The data reveal that although IB schools in both Japan and China promote an elite international education model, the directors tailor their messaging to reflect each country's unique educational landscape and cultural context. In China, the IB is predominantly framed as a transformative alternative to a rigid, exam-driven system. Directors explain that many parents are dissatisfied with the limitations of rote learning and high-stakes national exams, and therefore, they view the IB as a means to foster inquiry, global citizenship, and independent thinking. One Shanghai-based director explained,

*“Parents don’t just want their children to learn in English; they want a different approach to education—one that emphasizes inquiry, global citizenship, and independent thinking. That is why IB stands out.”*

This positioning not only signals a break with traditional domestic practices but also underscores the IB's potential to facilitate access to elite global universities.

In Japan, by contrast, the IB is marketed as a hybrid model that adeptly reconciles international ambition with continuity in domestic academic traditions. Directors in Japan emphasize that the IB's rigorous standards and global credentials do not require a complete departure from the established national system. As one Tokyo-based director observed,

*“Many families want an international education but don’t want to disconnect entirely from Japan’s academic framework. Our job is to show them that IB offers both—a global outlook while keeping doors open for domestic opportunities.”*

This dual approach reflects a strategic effort to appeal to families who value both innovation and tradition.

Comparative analysis indicates that these divergent strategies are adaptive responses to local market conditions. In China, the emphasis on bypassing the limitations of the national exam system aligns with the aspirations of families seeking to secure international opportunities. In Japan, the focus on maintaining academic tradition while embracing global perspectives resonates with families who desire a balanced, risk-mitigated pathway. These strategic variations illustrate the directors' adeptness at navigating the interplay between local educational norms and global competitiveness, reinforcing the IB's role as a flexible yet exclusive vehicle for elite reproduction.

#### **4.3.6 Conclusion: IB as a Marketed Product and Elite Pathway**

The findings indicate that IB school directors position the IB not merely as a curriculum, but as a branded commodity that acts as a gateway to elite academic and professional networks. Several critical insights emerge from the data:

**Financial Inaccessibility:** High tuition fees, exam costs, and the expense of supplementary academic resources act as deliberate filters, ensuring that only families with substantial economic capital can access the IB. This financial calculus transforms monetary investment into a visible marker of elite status.

**Strategic Marketing:** The promotional narratives crafted by directors significantly shape parental perceptions. By emphasizing the IB's alignment with elite global universities and its role in fostering exclusive social networks, IB schools create a persuasive value proposition that parents often echo in their own justifications.

**Divergent National Strategies:** The branding of the IB differs markedly between China and Japan. In China, the IB is marketed as a revolutionary alternative that circumvents the constraints of a traditional, exam-focused system, whereas in Japan, it is presented as a dual-track model that offers both international exposure and domestic academic continuity.

**Mechanism for Elite Reproduction:** Ultimately, these marketing strategies contribute to the IB's function as a mechanism for elite reproduction. Rather than democratizing access, the IB's design and promotional practices ensure that its benefits are concentrated among those already endowed with significant financial and cultural capital.

These findings contribute to broader discussions on how elite international education serves to reinforce, rather than mitigate, existing social hierarchies. Although the IB is promoted as a means of fostering global citizenship and academic excellence, its strategic branding—as revealed through director interviews—confirms its role as a powerful tool for consolidating socio-economic privilege.

## 4.4 Parental Motivations for Choosing IB

### 4.4.1 General Trends in Parental Motivations (Survey Results)

A total of 116 parents (42 Japanese, 74 Chinese) participated in the survey, offering a snapshot of why families choose the International Baccalaureate (IB). While academic excellence and global outlook were universal themes, parents from each country framed the IB's benefits in culturally specific ways:

- **Japanese Parents (42 total):**

- Around 40% positioned the IB as a tool to gain an advantage in Japan's competitive university admissions (especially for institutions like the University of Tokyo or Kyoto University).
- Over three-quarters also emphasized the IB's holistic approach—critical thinking, open inquiry, and global awareness—as a refreshing alternative to Japan's traditionally test-oriented model.

- **Chinese Parents (74 total):**

- Roughly 60% singled out top-tier Western universities (Ivy League, Oxbridge) as their primary goal, seeing the IB as a strategic stepping stone to international success.
- More than half additionally emphasized the networking benefits and prestige associated with the IB, focusing on building transnational social capital.

These survey data provide a broad backdrop for the in-depth interviews (49 Japanese, 52 Chinese), which offer more personalized accounts of how families weigh academic, social, and cultural considerations.

#### **4.4.2 Specific Motivations (Illustrative Interviews)**

##### **Japanese Parents**

## 1. Strategic Pathway for Domestic University Success

Many Japanese parents perceive the IB as a differentiator in an exam-centric educational environment.

- A mother from Tokyo

(P14, female, 45–54, 2 children in MYP) explained:

*“We want our kids to think critically—essential for top Japanese universities.*

*IB fosters analysis and debate, rather than pure memorization.”*

- A father in Osaka

(P13, male, 55+, 1 child in DP) added:

*“Employers and universities increasingly want students who can present*

*ideas. The IB teaches my son to reason and communicate, which sets him*

*apart in Japan’s rote system.”*

- A mother from Nagoya

(P5, female, 55+, 1 child in DP) commented:

*“Before, success was all about test scores. Now, universities look for*

*leadership and creativity, too. The IB diploma shows our daughter can handle*

*a globally recognized curriculum.”*

## 2. Holistic Education and Global Competencies

Many Japanese parents also celebrate the IB’s holistic, inquiry-driven approach.

- A mother from Osaka

(P25, female, 35–44, 1 child in DP) said:

*“It’s more than achieving high marks. IB encourages creativity,*

*problem-solving, and respect for different perspectives—skills my child will*

*need anywhere.”*

- A father in Tokyo

(P24, male, 45–54, 1 child in MYP) observed:

*“Group projects, CAS, research essays—these help students learn collaboration and global awareness. In Japan’s rapidly changing society, that broader perspective is invaluable.”*

### 3. Concerns About Workload and Cultural Alignment

Despite IB’s perceived benefits, some Japanese families worry about excessive demands and tension with traditional norms.

- A father from Tokyo

(P47, male, 45–54, 1 child in DP) explained:

*“My daughter loves the IB approach, but she’s juggling so many assignments and CAS hours. Sometimes I worry about burnout—it’s a lot of pressure on a teenager.”*

- A mother in Nagoya

(P28, female, 45–54, 2 children in MYP) noted:

*“The IB encourages students to question and debate teachers, which can clash with Japan’s norm of deference. We love it, but re-entry into local universities might be tricky.”*

### 4. Evolving Perspectives on Global Citizenship

Others emphasize how the IB fosters ethical awareness, global citizenship, and a sense of social responsibility.

- A mother from Osaka

(P40, female, 55+, 2 children in DP) pointed out:

*“CAS projects really broaden their horizons. My kids volunteer in local*



*communities, which develops empathy and leadership—qualities not always prioritized in standard Japanese schools.”*

- A mother in Tokyo

(P19, female, 55+, 3 children in DP) added:

*“Yes, academic rigor matters, but so does global responsibility. Through the IB, they realize they’re part of a larger world, not just a test-driven system.”*

## **Chinese Parents**

### **1. Pathway to Elite Global Universities**

Many Chinese parents directly link the IB to international prestige, aiming for top-tier Western institutions.

- A mother from Shanghai

(P85, female, 45–54, 1 child in DP) said:

*“We see IB as the key to universities like Harvard or Cambridge. China’s system excels at exam prep, but IB cultivates independent thinking, which foreign schools favor.”*

- A mother in Beijing

(P71, female, 45–54, 1 child in MYP) observed:

*“My son wants to study in the U.K. The Extended Essay and Theory of Knowledge show colleges he can do real research and argue logically—things they look for in admissions.”*

### **2. Networking and Social Capital**

Chinese families often underline elite peer groups and high-status networks within IB schools.

- A father from Hangzhou

(P83, male, 45–54, 1 child in MYP) commented:

*“We’re talking about classmates whose parents are business owners, diplomats, even celebrities. These relationships can matter as much as grades in the long run.”*

- A mother in Beijing

(P66, female, 45–54, 1 child in MYP) noted:

*“When you join an IB school, it’s not just about academics—you enter a circle of globally minded families. That social environment is part of why we chose IB.”*

### 3. Global Career Mobility

Another theme is preparing children for **transnational careers**, where English fluency and cross-cultural competence are critical.

- A mother from Beijing

(P50, female, 45–54, 1 child in DP) explained:

*“She collaborates with classmates from various nationalities, which is perfect if she wants to work in a multinational company or even start her own business.”*

- A father in Shanghai

(P72, male, 45–54, 1 child in DP) said:

*“Chinese growth is strong, but competition is fierce. If my daughter can also navigate Western culture, she’ll have more leverage—whether she stays in China or goes abroad.”*

#### 4. Transnational Relocation for IB Access

A vital discovery is how a subset of Chinese families relocate internationally to secure cost-effective or high-quality IB schools.

- A mother from Beijing

(P93, female, 45–54, relocated to Bangkok, 1 child in DP) recalled:

*“We compared tuition at international schools in Beijing and realized it was cheaper to move to Thailand. I left my career, but we believe the IB here is equally good, and the savings are substantial.”*

- A mother from Beijing

(P80, female, 55+, also relocated to Bangkok, 1 child in DP) similarly stated:

*“My husband stayed behind for work. Living apart is tough, but this IB school in Bangkok is highly reputable and more affordable. We’re investing in our son’s future; hopefully it pays off.”*

- A father from Guangzhou

(P94, male, 55+, 1 child in DP) offered a related perspective:

*“I only see my wife and son on visits now. It’s financially and emotionally difficult, but the IB in Thailand is recognized worldwide and cheaper than the top-tier schools back home.”*

These relocation stories reveal the extraordinary lengths some upper-middle-class Chinese families take to secure an IB education, balancing cost constraints with high aspirations for global mobility and elite university pathways.

#### 4.4.3 Synthesis of Motivational Patterns

Bringing these Japanese and Chinese accounts together, we see four main points that integrate both the survey data and parents' specific comments:

### **1. The IB as a Multi-Faceted Credential**

- Japanese parents harness the IB to excel in a domestic exam culture, while building broader thinking skills.
- Chinese parents see the IB as a passport to elite international universities, especially in Western countries.
- In both contexts, the IB's international recognition is pivotal, signaling academic rigor and "world-class" status.

### **2. Holistic vs. Traditional Education**

- Many families embrace the IB's emphasis on critical thinking, inquiry, and reflection, contrasting it with more rote-based approaches in Japan and China.
- However, some fret about heavy workloads, cultural mismatch (e.g., questioning teachers in Japan, less emphasis on rote math in China), and the stress of balancing IB demands with local exam expectations.

### **3. Social Capital and Networking**

- Chinese parents frequently stress how IB schools bring together affluent, influential families, creating peer networks that can lead to powerful future connections.
- Japanese parents focus more on skill-based or holistic benefits, though a few do acknowledge that studying alongside global-minded peers fosters broader horizons.

### **4. Transnational Mobility and Relocation**

- A noteworthy subset of Chinese parents relocate to countries like Thailand for more affordable IB programs, reflecting upper-middle-class resourcefulness and a willingness to split households for educational goals.
- Japanese relocations typically stem from corporate postings or professional moves, with IB schooling being a benefit rather than the primary reason for emigration.

In essence, families adapt the IB's global curriculum to their local aspirations and material capacities. Whether seeking domestic prestige, foreign university admission, or cost-friendly transnational options, parents consistently frame the IB as more than an educational model—it is a strategic investment in social mobility, international credibility, and future-ready skill sets.

## **4.5 The Role of Mobility in Elite Education**

### **4.5.1 The Importance of Mobility for Japanese Families**

For Japanese families, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program represents a carefully calibrated balance between global perspectives and traditional values. One of the primary attractions is the IB's holistic approach, which many parents feel complements Japan's academically rigorous but rigid educational system. As one Japanese parent explained:

*“The IB’s holistic approach aligns well with our values. It helps our child adapt to both international environments and fit seamlessly back into the Japanese system.”*

*(P14, female, 45–54, Tokyo, 2 children in MYP)*

Despite valuing the global mobility associated with the IB, Japanese parents do not necessarily envision permanent relocation abroad. Instead, they see the IB as an investment aimed at broadening opportunities in both prestigious international and domestic universities. The program's emphasis on critical thinking and adaptability is perceived as essential for a future that may involve global exposure while retaining ties to Japan. A parent remarked:

*“We see the IB as an investment in our child’s future. Despite the cost, its academic rigor and comprehensive preparation are worth it.”*

*(P25, female, 35–44, Osaka, 1 child in DP)*

Social networks also play a significant role in the Japanese IB experience. Parents noted that they formed supportive circles among fellow IB families, helping them navigate the program's complexities and affirming their choices. However, dissatisfaction with Japan's traditional education system—a perception that it is overly rigid and lacks a focus on critical thinking—often serves as the initial motivation for considering the IB.

#### **4.5.2 The Role of Mobility for Chinese Families**

Chinese parents view the IB program as essential for their children's educational and career advancement. They appreciate the inquiry-based curriculum and international orientation, which they see as equipping students with the language skills and cultural awareness necessary to excel in a globalized job market. One Chinese parent highlighted:

*“The IB program is not just about academics; it’s about preparing our children to thrive in a globalized world. The language skills and cultural awareness they gain are invaluable.”*

*(P71, female, 45–54, Beijing, 1 child in MYP)*

Social networks significantly influence awareness and perceptions of the IB among Chinese parents. Many reported that their first exposure to the program came through conversations with colleagues and friends, who described the IB as an attractive alternative to the high-pressure local education system. As one parent noted:

*“Our colleagues and friends spoke about how the IB could help our children escape the painful pressures we faced in our own education.”*

*(P66, female, 45–54, Beijing, 1 child in MYP)*

While international mobility is a central component of the IB’s appeal, many Chinese families express a strong desire for their children to return to China eventually. In our survey, parents were asked, “After completing their education, do you intend for your child(ren) to return to your home country?” The possible responses were “Yes,” “No,” or “Undecided.” Among the Chinese parents, 60% answered “Yes”, noting that they hope their children will ultimately leverage their global education for career advancement within China. This dual goal underscores how mobility serves not only as a means of international exposure but also as a strategy for securing domestic advantage in an increasingly globalized economy.

#### **4.5.3 The Global Mobility Paradox**

The paradox of global mobility among elite families illustrates how the IB program simultaneously facilitates international exposure and reinforces ties to national socio-economic networks. Both Chinese and Japanese parents value the IB's holistic education and global focus but ultimately prioritize opportunities within their home countries.

For Chinese parents, social and professional networks were often the initial source of information about the IB program. Conversations among friends and colleagues introduced them to the IB as an alternative to the intense, test-focused local education system. These parents appreciated the IB's inquiry-based approach and holistic perspective, which they saw as starkly contrasting with the high-pressure educational environments of their own youth. As one parent reflected:

*“Our education felt unnecessarily painful, and we want something different for our children.”*

*(P85, female, 45–54, Shanghai, 1 child in DP)*

Similarly, Japanese parents emphasized the importance of strong networks within IB communities, which they formed after enrolling their children. These social circles provided critical support for navigating the program's challenges and affirmed its value. However, such networks also highlighted the exclusivity of the IB, reflecting its appeal primarily to families with significant socio-economic resources.

Notably, while both groups value global education, neither equates it with permanent relocation abroad. Chinese families often see mobility as a stepping stone, allowing their children to gain international credentials before returning to contribute to China's elite sectors. Japanese families, in contrast, focus on balancing global exposure with reintegration



into domestic educational and professional systems. This duality underscores the IB's function as both a gateway to international experiences and a mechanism for enhancing status within national contexts.

The IB's appeal lies in its ability to prepare students for global citizenship while simultaneously offering advantages at home. These choices are intricately shaped by parents' shared histories, cultural values, and social networks, demonstrating how international education serves as a strategic investment for navigating both global and local landscapes.

## **4.6 Elite Status Reproduction through IB**

### **4.6.1 Parental Aspirations and Elite Status**

Based on the data presented in Sections 4.1–4.5, many Japanese and Chinese families in this study appear to use International Baccalaureate (IB) programs—particularly the Diploma Programme (DP)—as a strategic means of sustaining or enhancing their social standing. While some families also enrolled children in earlier IB tracks (PYP or MYP), our interviews suggest that preparing for the DP emerged as a core goal, given its high recognition among top universities and employers.

One Japanese parent (Participant 2) articulated this sentiment:

*“High grades alone are not enough in today’s world. The IB gives our children the skills and networks they need to stand out.”*

This finding aligns with broader sociological analyses, such as Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, wherein elites accrue and transmit socially valued knowledge and credentials to

preserve their privileged status. Here, parents (P57) emphasize the IB's global reputation and its holistic focus on critical thinking, communication skills, and intercultural awareness—traits deemed crucial for success in transnational professional spheres.

*“The IB prepares students for more than just tests. It teaches them to think critically and engage with the world, which is what today's leaders need.”*

Although not every family cites status maintenance as their sole motivation, a substantial number highlight how IB credentials and associated social networks can position their children advantageously for leadership roles, university admissions, and international career opportunities. For many, the DP represents a pathway to influential peer groups and high-prestige higher education institutions, both at home and abroad.

Ultimately, this strategic use of the IB underscores how elite families anticipate shifts in global education markets, adapting to new demands for critical inquiry and cross-cultural competence. By investing in an IB education, they aim to future-proof their children's standing in a rapidly evolving and highly competitive global landscape.

#### **4.6.2 Social and Cultural Capital of IB**

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital provide a valuable framework for understanding how the IB facilitates elite status reproduction. Through its curriculum, the IB fosters cultural capital that is internationally recognized, equipping students with knowledge, skills, and dispositions that distinguish them from peers educated in traditional systems. This distinction is especially appealing to elite families, who view the IB as a mechanism for maintaining their advantage in competitive academic and professional spheres.

As Bourdieu notes, cultural capital is not merely about academic success but includes behaviors, tastes, and dispositions that signal elite status. The IB's emphasis on multilingual proficiency, global perspectives, and critical thinking directly contributes to these traits. One director explained:

*“The IB program cultivates a mindset that is as important as the knowledge itself. It's about producing individuals who can lead and adapt in diverse environments.”*

*(Director D1, Tokyo)*

In addition to cultural capital, the social capital gained through the IB is profound. IB schools often attract a like-minded demographic, creating exclusive communities where students and families form lasting connections. These networks frequently extend into elite universities and professional circles, reinforcing social hierarchies.

For Japanese families, these networks are often cultivated after enrollment, with parents forming tight-knit communities that share resources and strategies for navigating the IB. For example, one Japanese director noted:

*“The IB families form a supportive network that reinforces the value of their choice, creating a shared sense of purpose and belonging.”*

*(Director D2, Osaka)*

In contrast, Chinese families often encounter the IB program through existing social circles, which shape their initial perceptions. A parent reflected:

*“Our friends recommended the IB as a way to escape the intense pressures of the local system and provide our children with a more balanced education.”*

*(P66, female, 45–54, Beijing, 1 child in MYP)*

This interplay of cultural and social capital underscores how the IB functions as a tool for elite reproduction. While promoting ideals of global citizenship, the program remains accessible primarily to families with significant resources, reinforcing social stratification. As such, the IB simultaneously reflects and perpetuates the inequalities inherent in elite education systems.

## **4.7 Summary of Findings**

This chapter has demonstrated how elite families in China and Japan strategically leverage the International Baccalaureate (IB) program to secure and reproduce their social status within an increasingly globalized educational landscape. Although the IB purports to promote global citizenship and egalitarian educational opportunities, parental motivations are predominantly driven by pragmatic considerations related to future prospects and socio-economic positioning. Employing a mixed-methods approach that triangulates survey data (N = 116) with qualitative interview data (N = 101), several salient themes have emerged.

### **4.7.1 Strategic Use of Mobility**

Elite families in both China and Japan perceive the IB not only as a vehicle for international exposure but also as a mechanism to facilitate reentry into domestic elite institutions.

### **Japanese Families**

Japanese parents tend to balance global aspirations with a commitment to preserving local educational and cultural values. The IB is frequently regarded as a complementary asset rather than a wholesale substitute for domestic educational systems. Quantitative findings indicate that approximately 40% of Japanese respondents pursued the IB primarily for advantages in domestic university admissions. Qualitative data further reveal nuanced perspectives: while parents endorse the cultivation of “global skills,” they concurrently maintain a strong commitment to reintegrating their children into Japan’s established academic and professional networks.

### **Chinese Families**

In contrast, Chinese families predominantly view international education as a strategic stepping stone. They anticipate that the acquisition of globally recognized credentials will enhance their children’s prospects upon returning to China, where such qualifications are instrumental in attaining leadership roles within the nation’s competitive economic sectors. Triangulated data indicate that around 60% of Chinese respondents envisage eventual reintegration into China’s elite institutions. Interviews underscore that parents conceptualize attendance at prestigious international universities as a means to accrue cultural capital, thereby positioning their children for future leadership within domestic contexts.

Overall, these findings underscore that, despite the IB’s international orientation, the program is strategically appropriated by elite families to navigate and reinforce both global and local educational trajectories.

### **4.7.2 Influence of Social Networks**

Social and professional networks constitute a pivotal determinant in shaping parental awareness and influencing decisions regarding the International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

### **Chinese Networks**

Quantitative survey findings indicate that many Chinese respondents first encountered the IB through interactions with colleagues and friends, who presented the program as an attractive alternative to the locally prevalent, test-centric educational system. This pattern is further substantiated by qualitative interview data, wherein participants provided detailed narratives of “word-of-mouth” dissemination from credible and trusted sources. The convergence of these data sources underscores the instrumental role of social networks in both the propagation of information about the IB and the formation of favorable perceptions among parents.

### **Japanese Networks**

In the Japanese context, post-enrollment, families often establish closely knit communities that serve as essential support networks for navigating the IB’s rigorous demands. While survey results reflect high levels of parental satisfaction with the peer environment fostered by the IB, in-depth interviews reveal that such satisfaction derives not solely from academic considerations but also from the social cohesion and collective problem-solving inherent within these networks. This dual influence of social dynamics highlights how social networks contribute to both the academic and psychosocial dimensions of the IB experience.

In sum, the triangulated evidence from both survey and interview methodologies affirms that social networks function as critical conduits for information exchange and mutual support.

They play a decisive role in parental decision-making processes and ultimately reinforce the appeal and sustainability of the IB program within diverse cultural contexts.

### **4.7.3 Reproduction of Elite Status**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program serves as a conduit for the accumulation of both cultural and social capital, mechanisms that are critical in the maintenance and reproduction of elite status.

#### **Cultural Capital**

Quantitative survey data reveal a broad appreciation for the IB's emphasis on critical thinking, global perspectives, and leadership skills—attributes that transcend traditional academic performance. Qualitative interviews further illuminate how parents perceive these competencies as essential for success in transnational corporate and professional settings. This finding aligns with Bourdieu's assertion that culturally valued behaviors, dispositions, and credentials significantly shape elite trajectories.

#### **Social Capital**

The selective and exclusive environment of the IB fosters the development of robust peer networks that extend beyond the school setting into prestigious universities and influential career circles. Triangulated data—from surveys indicating that over half of Chinese parents cite “elite networks” as a key motivation, and from interviews featuring multiple accounts of active, collaborative IB parent groups—underscore the role of these social connections in reinforcing established social hierarchies, even as the IB promotes ideals of global opportunity.

In sum, the IB's dual facilitation of cultural and social capital not only enhances international educational mobility but also perpetuates the reproduction of elite status, thereby reinforcing entrenched patterns of social stratification.

#### **4.7.4 Triangulation**

Although the above sections emphasized key findings, it is crucial to underscore how survey and interview data (and, where relevant, official IB or school documents) were cross-validated:

##### **1. Survey → Interview Protocols**

- Broad patterns from the survey (e.g., motivations for IB, demographic splits, plans for children's return) informed targeted interview questions, ensuring quantitative trends were probed further.

##### **2. Interview Narratives → Survey Interpretation**

- Certain interviewees (e.g., parents who relocated to Bangkok) added depth to why relocation was chosen. This qualitative insight recontextualized survey findings (e.g., cost concerns, desire to develop global networks) by highlighting personal experiences behind the numbers.

##### **3. Converging Data Points**

- For instance, 60% of Chinese parents reported wanting their children to return home post-IB; interviews confirmed that such return is viewed as an economic and social advantage. Similarly, ~40% of Japanese respondents cited



“domestic university advantage,” which aligned with interview accounts emphasizing the dual quest for both global and local success.

By integrating these datasets, the study achieved a more nuanced understanding of how and why parents adopt the IB—thus fulfilling the triangulation principle of mixed methods.

#### **4.7.5 Concluding Reflections**

In summary, the International Baccalaureate (IB) functions as both a conduit to international opportunities and a strategic instrument for the reproduction of elite status in Japan and China. The mixed-methods analysis—integrating survey and interview data—reveals several key dynamics:

##### **Global Aspirations versus Local Reintegration**

Both Chinese and Japanese families actively seek to cultivate global competencies through the IB, yet their ultimate orientation remains firmly rooted in domestic contexts—whether in leveraging global credentials to secure leadership positions within China’s economic sectors or in enhancing prospects within Japan’s established university pathways.

##### **Social and Professional Influences**

The findings underscore the pivotal role of social and professional networks in shaping IB adoption. Social capital emerges as a critical driver alongside academic objectives, highlighting how interpersonal connections and shared cultural values inform parental decision-making.

##### **Elite Reproduction**

Despite the IB’s emphasis on global citizenship, its inherent costs and the selective nature of

its associated networks serve to perpetuate existing socio-economic hierarchies. This duality illustrates a persistent tension between the program's ideals of openness and the realities of exclusivity.

Overall, the IB's appeal is closely aligned with parental aspirations for their children's future success. The data confirm that these strategies extend beyond the mere acquisition of international credentials; they represent a nuanced navigation and reinforcement of elite pathways within a rapidly globalizing world.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Engage with the Literature Review**

#### **5.1.1 Introduction to Literature and Theoretical Context**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program is widely recognized for its emphasis on critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and holistic learning (IBO, n.d.-c). Scholars such as Marginson (2016) argue that internationally recognized credentials, like those offered by the IB, confer substantial symbolic and practical advantages by acting as gateways to elite socio-economic spheres. At the same time, critics—including Ball (2003) and Furlong (2013)—highlight significant barriers to inclusivity, noting that high costs, demanding workloads, and other structural constraints ensure that the IB disproportionately benefits already affluent families.

#### **5.1.2 Addressing the Literature Gap**

Despite extensive documentation of the IB's innovative curriculum components such as Theory of Knowledge (TOK) and Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) (Resnik, 2012), there remains a notable paucity of research on how non-Western contexts—specifically Japan and China—engage with the IB's global ethos. Much of the existing scholarship treats “elite IB families” as a homogenous group (Reay, 2004), neglecting the internal stratifications that emerge even among privileged households. This study addresses this gap by examining the nuanced ways in which Japanese and Chinese parents adapt and negotiate the IB, thereby revealing a broader spectrum of socio-economic realities and local educational concerns.

### **Conceptualizing Global Education: Literature Meets Empirical Insights**

### **Global Citizenship vs. Socioeconomic Exclusivity**

The literature portrays the IB as a transformative educational model that aspires to cultivate global citizens equipped for leadership in an interconnected era (IBO, n.d.-f; Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). Yet, scholars like Ball (2003) and Sellar & Lingard (2013) document persistent socio-economic barriers that limit these aspirations to wealthier families. Our findings corroborate these critiques: financial costs, uneven regional IB provisions, and differences in cultural readiness result in a skewed access pattern—favoring upper- and upper-middle-class households. Notably, while ultra-wealthy parents can finance IB education with relative ease, other affluent families often resort to precarious, resource-intensive strategies (such as relocating to reduce costs) to secure the associated benefits.

### **Bourdieu's Capital Conversion**

Bourdieu's framework is instrumental in understanding how educational investments convert economic capital into cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2003). Prior research suggests that programs like the IB function as pathways for elite reproduction (Maire & Windle, 2021). In our study, interviews with Chinese parents underscore how the Diploma Programme is strategically used to acquire transnational academic credentials—credentials that are then leveraged in a competitive job market upon their return. In Japan, however, families tend to use the IB to gain an edge within domestic or multinational corporate arenas. These findings reveal local variations in the process of capital conversion, illuminating how the IB contributes to the perpetuation of elite status in different cultural contexts.

### **Counterpoints from Pedagogical Theories**

John Dewey's educational philosophy offers a useful counterpoint. Dewey (1938) emphasized experiential learning and argued that education should equip individuals to navigate and contribute to their socio-economic environments. Although Dewey championed inclusivity and the development of critical thinking, his vision was more closely aligned with enhancing the capacities of the working and middle classes. In contrast, while the IB does promote critical inquiry and global citizenship, its structural exclusivity—reinforced by high tuition and additional costs—limits its reach to those already advantaged. This ethical tension between the IB's inclusive rhetoric and its practical barriers underscores a critical contradiction in its design.

### **Global-Local Tensions and Transnational Education**

The interplay between global aspirations and local educational norms is particularly pronounced in Japan and China.

In Japan, the IB is introduced into an exam-centric system dominated by rote learning (Ishikawa, 2017). Families enrolling in the IB often face the dual challenge of embracing a curriculum that fosters broader skills while simultaneously supplementing it with additional test-preparation for domestic university entrance exams. This hybrid model not only intensifies financial and logistical burdens but also reflects the deep-seated cultural tension between traditional academic expectations and progressive pedagogical approaches.

In China, the IB is viewed as a pathway to prestigious Western universities and transnational employment opportunities. At the same time, many families strive to retain cultural identity amid rapid modernization. Chinese parents selectively integrate the IB's skill sets—such as

English proficiency, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness—with traditional values. However, as our data reveal, the substantial financial and academic barriers ensure that only families with significant resources can fully capitalize on these opportunities, further reinforcing existing inequalities.

### **Comparison with Existing Studies and Theoretical Contributions**

Supporters of the IB emphasize its breadth and its capacity to foster a holistic worldview (Resnik, 2012). Both our findings and previous studies acknowledge that the IB nurtures creativity and problem-solving abilities essential for navigating complex global challenges. Yet, as Furlong (2013) and others have noted, the high economic barriers inherent in the IB system perpetuate a hierarchy among participants. Our study extends this critique by revealing internal stratifications within the so-called “elite IB community.” Ultra-wealthy families engage with the IB seamlessly, while others must adopt innovative, sometimes precarious strategies to secure its benefits—an observation that aligns with Reay’s (2004) argument on the varied manifestations of socio-economic advantage.

Furthermore, the analysis refines Bourdieu’s framework in non-Western contexts by illustrating how Japanese and Chinese families convert economic investments into social and cultural capital in distinct ways. These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of elite reproduction, demonstrating that even within elite groups, access to global education is not uniform but is stratified along both economic and cultural dimensions.

#### **5.1.3 Highlighting Socioeconomic Exclusivity**

Researchers such as Furlong (2013) have long noted that IB participation entails significant economic barriers, encompassing high tuition, exam fees, and supplementary costs. The present findings reinforce this view: even among ostensibly “elite” families, some must adopt resource-intensive strategies—relocation, family separation, or substantial personal loans—to secure IB enrollment. These outcomes reveal a nuanced hierarchy within affluence itself, confirming that the IB community cannot be regarded as uniformly privileged. Instead, a stratification of economic capacity exists, in line with Reay’s (2004) argument that socio-economic advantage manifests in diverse ways.

#### **5.1.4 Diverse Experiences Among Affluent Families**

While the IB community is frequently portrayed as a homogenous elite, this study exposes a far more complex range of socio-economic realities. Ultra-wealthy families typically engage with the IB seamlessly, selecting schools based on prestige, location, or personal preference with minimal financial concern. Conversely, families at the lower end of the upper class often resort to creative or precarious tactics—such as relocating to regions with lower tuition costs—to secure the IB’s benefits. These varied strategies illuminate a hierarchy within privilege itself, shaped by differing levels of economic security.

One illustrative case involves a Chinese family who moved to Thailand to reduce educational expenses, thereby incurring significant logistical and emotional costs. As the mother recounted, *“We made the move so our son could study at a top IB school without putting undue pressure on our finances. But it meant living apart as a family—my husband had to stay in Beijing to work while we adjusted to a completely new environment.”* Such scenarios

highlight how transnational education can demand more than just financial outlay, even for relatively affluent households.

Japanese families encounter distinct challenges. Although they appreciate the IB's global curriculum, it frequently conflicts with Japan's exam-driven academic culture. As one parent observed, *"The IB fosters creativity and critical thinking, but these skills don't align with Japan's rigid university entrance exams. It's like walking two roads at the same time."* This duality underscores the cultural friction inherent in transnational education models, wherein families must reconcile global aspirations with local priorities.

Collectively, these findings lend further credence to Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital conversion, underscoring how varying levels of economic, cultural, and social capital shape families' navigation of the IB system. This diversity complicates monolithic portrayals of privilege, highlighting that even within affluent groups, access to global education remains stratified.

### **5.1.5 Cultural and Educational Norms in Japan and China**

#### **Japan: Reconciling Creativity with Rigor**

In Japan, the IB's inquiry-based curriculum and emphasis on global citizenship stand in marked contrast to deeply ingrained traditions of rote memorization and exam-focused instruction. Families must therefore negotiate a delicate balance between the IB's progressive ethos and Japan's assessment-driven academic culture. As one parent remarked, *"The IB's global outlook is valuable, but it doesn't prepare students for the realities of Japanese exams."* This tension illustrates the broader challenge of integrating creative, critical thinking



skills into a system that prizes standardized test performance as the primary benchmark of academic success. Consequently, many families supplement the IB with additional tutoring or preparatory courses to ensure competitiveness in domestic university pathways.

Schools implementing the IB in Japan similarly grapple with dual pressures: preserving the integrity of the IB's inquiry-driven pedagogy while adapting it to align with local standards of academic rigor. This compromise reflects a broader cultural negotiation in which global education models must be recalibrated to fit local contexts. The result is a complex environment where the promise of international education coexists uneasily with entrenched exam-based norms.

### **China: Negotiating Global Competence and Cultural Identity**

In China, the IB is widely viewed as a conduit to global mobility and admission to prestigious Western universities. Nevertheless, parents frequently voice concerns about preserving cultural identity amidst the pursuit of international success. As one parent explained, "*We want our child to succeed internationally, but we don't want them to lose their connection to their roots.*" This dual imperative—acquiring global competencies while safeguarding cultural values—creates a dynamic tension.

To address this, Chinese IB schools often blend Western-centric curricular elements with local traditions, aiming to equip students for an increasingly globalized workforce without eroding cultural foundations. However, the IB's high costs can compound socio-economic disparities. Wealthier families are better positioned to afford private tutoring or additional language programs, thereby enhancing student performance and perpetuating a hierarchy even among the already affluent. Thus, although the IB aspires to broaden educational

horizons, its benefits largely accrue to those with the financial resources to fully leverage them, reinforcing the socio-economic stratification inherent in elite international education.

### **5.1.6 Key Theoretical Contributions**

#### **Refining Bourdieu's Framework in Non-Western Contexts**

By examining how Japanese and Chinese families convert economic resources into IB-based cultural and social capital, this study extends Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of elite reproduction. The diverse strategies—relocation, supplementary tutoring, and parental involvement—underscore that the path to maintaining or enhancing elite status is neither uniform nor effortless, even within affluent communities.

#### **Highlighting Internal Variation Within Elites**

The findings challenge assumptions of a homogenous upper class, revealing considerable hierarchies and trade-offs. Some families engage with the IB effortlessly, while others confront significant financial and emotional sacrifices—an insight aligning with Reay's (2004) contention that privilege manifests in varied ways.

#### **Progressive Pedagogy vs. Structural Inequalities**

Although the IB's curriculum emphasizes global citizenship and holistic education, market-driven exclusivity persists. This tension resonates with Dewey's (1938) ideals of experiential learning and democratic access, yet the IB's high costs and selective nature effectively limit participation to those with substantial economic capital.

#### **Localizing "Global" Credentials**

Families in both Japan and China adopt the IB not merely for transnational mobility but also to bolster local status. Japanese parents juggle the IB's inquiry-based model with exam-centric domestic expectations, while Chinese families leverage IB credentials for re-entry into China's increasingly globalized job market. This localized appropriation of a global curriculum underscores the intricate interplay between international education and national socio-economic structures.

### **5.1.7 Summary**

In sum, the IB occupies a paradoxical space: while it promotes ideals of critical thinking, international-mindedness, and academic excellence, its cost and structural constraints reinforce socio-economic stratification. By situating the IB within the cultural contexts of Japan and China, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how families negotiate global aspirations alongside local educational norms. These findings offer an important contribution to debates on global education and elite reproduction, illustrating the complex, layered nature of privilege even within seemingly monolithic “elite” communities.

## **5.2 Addressing Research Questions**

### **5.2.1 What Are the Motivations of Parents in Japan and China for Choosing the IB Diploma Programme for Their Children?**

The motivations of Japanese and Chinese parents for enrolling their children in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme reflect a confluence of aspirations, pragmatism, and calculated strategies. These decisions emerge at the intersection of global opportunities and local cultural expectations, with families viewing the IB as a means to

secure social mobility, ensure elite positioning, and reconcile competing demands for global competence and cultural continuity.

### **Elite Education as a Strategy for Social Reproduction**

For many parents, the IB transcends the boundaries of academic achievement, functioning as a deliberate strategy to sustain or enhance socio-economic status. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction elucidates how education transforms economic resources into cultural and social capital, facilitating the maintenance of elite privilege across generations (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003).

### **Chinese Families**

In China, parents often describe the IB as a pathway to prestigious universities abroad and elite international networks. By aligning with Western higher education systems, the IB's interdisciplinary and inquiry-driven curriculum is perceived as a necessary platform for global leadership. This outlook underscores how the IB is viewed as both an educational framework and a status symbol. By emphasizing critical thinking, intercultural fluency, and academic independence, Chinese families strategically position their children to thrive in an interconnected economy.

### **Japanese Families**

Japanese parents, by contrast, tend to see the IB as a counterpoint to the rigidity of the nation's exam-centric educational system. While Japan's academic traditions favor rote memorization and standardized testing, the IB encourages creativity, critical thinking, and holistic development. Consequently, many Japanese families highlight how the IB introduces

a breadth and depth not typically found in local curricula—allowing their children to approach knowledge more collaboratively and analytically.

However, these parents also acknowledge that, despite the IB's holistic ethos, their choices are linked to socio-economic reproduction. By equipping children with distinctive skills and credentials in a globally competitive marketplace, Japanese families reinforce their privileged status. In this sense, the IB's alternative pedagogy ultimately supports a broader strategy to secure long-term advantage in a fast-changing, globally oriented society.

Overall, Chinese and Japanese parents demonstrate similar underlying objectives—to acquire a form of cultural capital that will set their children apart in both domestic and international arenas. Yet, the pathways differ due to local academic norms and cultural contexts. Chinese parents emphasize global mobility and Western university admissions, while Japanese parents underscore a holistic developmental approach that can complement or offset the country's exam-centric paradigm. In both cases, the IB is utilized as a tool for reproducing or enhancing elite status through internationalized education.

### **Unified Objective of Social Reproduction**

Despite differing emphases—Chinese families often prioritizing global mobility and Japanese families seeking a modernized approach to education—parents in both contexts tend to use the IB as a tool for elite reproduction. While Chinese parents frequently emphasize cultivating critical thinking and preparing for global leadership, Japanese parents highlight the IB's capacity to offer creativity and adaptability not found in exam-centric domestic curricula. Nevertheless, all these strategies reflect a shared determination to secure

socio-economic advantage for the next generation. The IB thus functions as a mechanism for modernizing traditional forms of social reproduction, simultaneously acknowledging the global demands of education while perpetuating existing social hierarchies. Ultimately, even where goals appear to diverge, the overarching objective remains consistent: leveraging the IB to convert economic capital into durable cultural and social advantages that maintain or elevate elite status.

### **Global Competence and Educational Prestige**

The IB's emphasis on global competencies (critical thinking, multilingualism, and intercultural awareness) resonates strongly with parents' aspirations in both Japan and China. Although the program aspires to foster global citizenship, many parents also regard the IB's prestige as central to their choice, believing that its international recognition can distinguish their children within highly competitive academic and professional arenas.

#### **Japanese Families' Dual Focus**

Japanese families, while praising the IB's holistic approach, often describe being acutely aware of tension between the IB's inquiry-driven model and Japan's exam-focused traditions. To address this mismatch, families frequently invest in additional resources—such as private tutoring—to ensure children remain competitive in local entrance exams, while benefiting from the IB's more expansive skill development.

#### **Chinese Families' Global Orientation**

Chinese families commonly view the IB's international outlook as providing a competitive edge, particularly for admission to prestigious Western universities. The program's focus on critical inquiry and global citizenship is often seen as an essential foundation for future academic and professional success. In this context, the IB serves both as an educational framework and a status symbol, reflecting families' aspirations for positioning their children within a global elite.

### **Economic Sacrifices and the Fragility of Capital Conversion**

For both Japanese and Chinese families, pursuing an IB education can entail significant financial outlays. Tuition costs, fees for private tutoring, and even relocation expenses place considerable strain on many households—though they remain relatively affluent. Some Chinese parents, for instance, relocate to countries with more affordable IB schools, thereby reducing tuition while maintaining access to the IB's perceived benefits. This sometimes results in split-household arrangements where one parent remains employed in the home country while the other oversees the child's education abroad.

Japanese parents also incur sizeable expenses, often relying on supplementary services (e.g., cram schools or specialized tutors) to align the IB's inquiry-based methods with the exam-driven rigors of Japan's higher education pathways. Monthly expenditures for private instruction can be substantial, yet families willingly assume these costs, viewing them as an investment in securing a child's future success. Although these households are relatively privileged, the substantial financial commitments highlight a fragility in the capital

conversion process—even within the elite—where families accept short-term sacrifices to achieve long-term gains in cultural and social capital.

## **Reconciling Local and Global Aspirations**

### **Japan's Dual Challenge**

Despite the IB's promotion of global competencies, Japanese families must reconcile these ideals with domestic academic requirements. The program's inquiry-driven pedagogy does not always align smoothly with Japan's emphasis on rote learning and entrance exams, prompting families to find creative solutions that blend IB preparation with local exam training. This dual commitment illustrates the hybrid nature of IB adoption: families adopt the IB's holistic outlook but continue to meet the stringent expectations of the national system.

### **China's Balancing Act**

Chinese families frequently grapple with ensuring that global education does not undermine cultural identity. While the IB's international orientation can be pivotal for accessing esteemed universities or careers abroad, parents often emphasize preserving traditional values and local social ties. Consequently, many families aim for children to develop a robust global perspective and transnational skill set while remaining rooted in national heritage—signaling a deliberate balancing act between cosmopolitan ambitions and cultural continuity.

## **Cultural Misalignment: Global Competencies in Local Contexts**

### **Japan's Exam-Oriented Culture**

In Japan, the IB's inquiry-based, holistic approach encounters friction when placed alongside



standardized testing pathways, which remain the cornerstone of academic success. Families commonly report a sense of “walking two paths at once,” directing children to develop the IB’s creative thinking while simultaneously drilling for local exam content. As a result, private tutoring centers often become indispensable for bridging any competency gaps between the IB curriculum and Japan’s rigorous entrance exam standards.

### **China’s Western-Oriented Individualism**

In China, parents who choose the IB appreciate the focus on critical thinking and individual expression but express concerns about potential conflicts with traditional norms, such as respect for authority or collective values. Some worry about erosion of cultural identity if children internalize Western-centric views, though many remain optimistic that a global skill set and familiarity with Western academic practices can lead to long-term advantages in China’s rapidly evolving market.

### **Sacrifices and Long-Term Aspirations**

Participation in the IB can require significant sacrifices, yet these are frequently characterized as necessary investments in a child’s future. Families cite the program’s capacity to foster creativity, adaptability, and a global mindset that might be lacking in standard national curricula. In Japan, dissatisfaction with exam-centric education motivates parents to invest in an IB path they believe better prepares their children for innovation and critical thinking. In China, the pursuit of prestigious international universities and elite professional opportunities forms a broader strategy to maintain or enhance intergenerational privilege and global mobility.

These narratives reinforce the extent to which IB enrollment exemplifies a high-stakes endeavor in stratified educational markets. Despite financial strain, emotional challenges, and lifestyle disruptions (e.g., relocation), families tend to justify these choices as crucial for their children's socio-economic and cultural capital accumulation. The long-term expectation is that the child's IB experience will yield returns in the form of elite networks, global credentials, and leadership opportunities—illustrating the IB's role as an aspirational yet selective platform for educational and social advantage.

### **Economic and Cultural Capital: Converting Resources into Opportunity**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) serves as a powerful mechanism for converting economic capital into cultural and social advantages—an illustration of Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion in a globalized context. Families perceive the IB as a strategic investment in credentials, skills, and networks that can position their children for success in elite spaces. Yet, the uneven distribution of this benefit reveals disparities even within affluent groups.

#### **Japanese Families**

Many Japanese parents regard the IB's focus on creativity, critical thinking, and global engagement as addressing deficits in the nation's exam-driven curriculum. They emphasize that the IB helps children develop analytical abilities and a global outlook—attributes increasingly valued in Japan's shifting economy, where adaptability is prized. The IB is thus

seen as an innovative supplement to an otherwise rigid academic system, offering children opportunities to think more independently and globally.

### Chinese Families

In China, parents tend to view the IB's global orientation as essential for international mobility and leadership, frequently linking the program to prestigious Western universities and competitive opportunities in global academic and professional markets. By emphasizing critical thinking, inquiry, and intercultural fluency, the IB is often framed as an indispensable platform for success in a rapidly globalizing economy.

### Stratified Access and Financial Trade-offs

Despite these advantages, not all affluent families enjoy the same financial flexibility. Some Chinese households, for instance, relocate to lower-cost IB schools (e.g., in Thailand), disrupting family dynamics in pursuit of more affordable tuition. Likewise, many Japanese families invest heavily in supplemental tutoring—an additional cost that compounds the IB's expense. Such investments illustrate how capital conversion is not automatically seamless; even among wealthy parents, financial outlays can be burdensome. Only those with ample resources can fully capitalize on the IB's promise of cultural and social elevation.

This uneven accessibility reinforces the IB's role as both an empowerment tool and a marker of privilege. While it can enrich students' skill sets and horizons, participation remains bounded by a family's capacity to absorb significant financial costs. The IB's exclusivity thus perpetuates socio-economic stratification, as families with sufficient resources reap the full benefits of transforming economic capital into cultural and social capital.

## **Conclusion**

The motivations of Japanese and Chinese parents for choosing the IB reflect a nuanced interplay of economic pragmatism, cultural ambition, and social strategy. For these families, the IB is not merely an academic program but a deliberate framework for navigating globalization, fostering cultural distinction, and securing intergenerational privilege.

These dynamics underscore the broader tensions within global education systems, where programs like the IB promise inclusivity yet reinforce existing hierarchies. By framing their choices within this context, families demonstrate how education functions simultaneously as a pathway to opportunity and a mechanism of exclusion, perpetuating inequalities embedded in transnational education markets.

These findings directly address the first research question, revealing how families employ financial strategies—such as relocation, private tutoring, and supplementary investments—to navigate the IB system. Through these efforts, they convert economic resources into cultural and social capital, strategically leveraging the IB as a tool for long-term socio-economic advantage.

### **5.2.2 How Do IB Schools in Japan and China Market Themselves to Appeal to Elite Families?**

IB schools in Japan and China deploy sophisticated, multifaceted marketing strategies that are meticulously crafted to resonate with the ambitions of elite families. At the heart of these strategies lies the IB's dual promise: it simultaneously offers an education of unmatched academic rigor and the cultivation of globally relevant competencies, while also functioning as a potent symbol of social distinction. This dual promise is not simply promoted—it is leveraged to create a compelling value proposition that positions the IB as more than an academic track, but as a holistic, long-term investment in a student's future. This investment secures sustained access to exclusive academic and social networks, thereby cementing elite status.

A critical element of this marketing paradigm is the pronounced emphasis on prestige and exclusivity. IB schools deliberately frame their programs as gateways to elite opportunities by aligning the IB diploma with access to the world's most selective universities and high-status career pathways. This is achieved not merely by touting academic outcomes, but by underscoring how rigorous admissions criteria and steep tuition fees operate as deliberate gatekeeping mechanisms. In effect, these financial and institutional barriers transform monetary investment into a visible marker of elite capital, thereby reinforcing the notion that the IB is inherently selective and contributes to the reproduction of entrenched social hierarchies.

Beyond the realm of academic credentials, IB schools also foreground the importance of global networks and social capital. They portray themselves as exclusive hubs for the

formation of lifelong connections among future leaders—a network that transcends geographical boundaries and confers substantial professional and personal advantages. In this context, the IB is marketed as a social incubator where elite status is nurtured not only through intellectual achievement but also through the cultivation of influential relational ties. This strategy powerfully appeals to parents who view robust social networks as indispensable assets in an increasingly interconnected world.

Moreover, the distinctive educational philosophy of the IB is promoted as a forward-thinking curriculum designed to prepare students for the dynamic challenges of globalization. In Japan, where traditional educational paradigms are steeped in rote memorization and standardized testing, the IB is positioned as a progressive alternative that fosters creativity, critical inquiry, and adaptability. Conversely, in China, the IB is strategically framed as an antidote to the limitations of the domestic exam system, aligning with Western academic standards to provide a competitive advantage on the international stage. This nuanced differentiation allows IB schools to address the specific cultural and systemic needs of each market while simultaneously asserting the universal value of the IB framework.

A further dimension of these strategies is the artful balance between tradition and modernity. IB schools adeptly reconcile global aspirations with local cultural preservation. In Japan, marketing narratives assure parents that the IB enriches, rather than undermines, the country's time-honored academic traditions, ensuring that students remain well-prepared for domestic university entrance examinations. In China, the emphasis on bilingual education and

culturally tailored programs reassures families that international exposure need not come at the expense of local identity. This dual approach not only broadens the IB's appeal but also strategically limits its benefits to those families already endowed with significant economic and cultural capital.

In synthesis, IB schools in Japan and China harness a comprehensive, strategically layered marketing approach that meticulously interweaves academic excellence, global network formation, and culturally sensitive messaging. By doing so, they effectively position the IB as both a vehicle for elite social reproduction and a robust mechanism for sustaining long-term privilege. Despite its globalized appeal, the IB remains a highly exclusive instrument—its advantages accessible primarily to those who already occupy the upper echelons of society. This dual dynamic is central to understanding the intricate interplay between globalization and elite education, highlighting how transnational educational systems continue to reinforce, rather than disrupt, existing social hierarchies.

### **5.2.3 The Role of the International Baccalaureate in the Elite's Strategy to Reproduce Itself**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) functions as a critical mechanism by which elite families convert economic capital into cultural and social capital, thereby perpetuating and even enhancing their privileged status. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion, the findings illustrate that elite parents not only invest heavily in core tuition but also allocate substantial resources toward supplementary elements such as private tutoring, advanced language courses, and specialized cultural programs. These additional investments are viewed

as essential for boosting academic performance while simultaneously opening pathways to influential social networks and prestigious academic institutions.

### **Transforming Economic Capital into Cultural and Social Capital**

The IB curriculum's emphasis on critical thinking, multilingualism, and intercultural competence is highly valued in global markets and leadership roles. Elite families strategically use the IB as a vehicle to transform their considerable financial investments into enduring cultural distinction. In this context, the additional expenditures—beyond standard tuition—are not viewed as mere costs but as deliberate investments that differentiate students in fiercely competitive social circles. This process effectively converts economic resources into cultural capital, reinforcing elite status across generations.

### **Cultural Distinction and Global Prestige**

The IB is marketed as an alternative to conventional education systems, one that champions international-mindedness and intellectual rigor. In Japan, where the prevailing education system is largely characterized by rote learning and standardized testing, the IB is promoted as a progressive, forward-thinking model that nurtures creativity and analytical prowess. In contrast, Chinese IB schools emphasize the program's alignment with Western academic standards and its capacity to facilitate entry into elite global universities. In both cases, the globally recognized IB credential serves as a powerful symbol of cultural sophistication and academic excellence, thereby consolidating social distinction through both educational achievements and social signaling.

### **Educational Strategies, Social Stratification, and the Connection Issue**



Despite its international appeal, the inherent high costs, selective admissions, and extensive ancillary expenses ensure that the IB remains accessible predominantly to affluent families. This exclusivity is not accidental; rather, it is a critical aspect of the IB's function as a mechanism of elite reproduction. In China, for example, survey data indicate that 52% of parents identify “networking with elite families” as a decisive factor in choosing the IB, underscoring the centrality of social connections in their educational strategy. The cultural practice of *guanxi* further reinforces this dynamic, as families actively cultivate reciprocal relationships that yield insider advantages in university admissions, elite extracurricular opportunities, and long-term career prospects.

In contrast, Japanese IB families tend to place relatively less emphasis on pre-enrollment networking—only 14% of Japanese parents cited elite networking as a significant factor. In Japan, the IB is primarily valued for its academic merits, and social capital tends to develop organically after enrollment, predominantly through academic guidance and university planning. This divergence reflects broader cultural and institutional differences: while Chinese families deliberately leverage social networks as an integral part of their strategy to secure global opportunities, Japanese families rely more on the historical prestige and continuity of established academic credentials.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the IB emerges as a strategic instrument in the elite's broader educational playbook. Its design—encompassing rigorous academic standards, global networking opportunities, and culturally tailored supplementary programs—enables elite families to convert substantial

financial investments into enduring social and cultural advantages. However, this conversion process simultaneously reinforces social stratification by ensuring that the benefits of the IB remain largely confined to those already possessing significant economic and cultural capital. In this way, the IB functions as both an educational credential and a potent mechanism for elite reproduction in a globalized world.

### **5.3 Discussion Based on Theoretical Framework**

Bourdieu's theoretical constructs of economic, cultural, and social capital, alongside habitus, provide a robust framework for understanding how elite families navigate the International Baccalaureate (IB) as a strategic tool for securing intergenerational privilege. This section expands on the applicability of Bourdieu's concepts to contemporary global education, exploring their relevance in a world shaped by transnational mobility, digital networking, and globalization. By analyzing the IB's dual role as a progressive educational initiative and a mechanism of exclusion, this discussion sheds light on the tensions, contradictions, and ethical dilemmas inherent in global education systems.

#### **5.3.1 Theoretical Integration Using Bourdieu's Framework**

##### **Bourdieu's Framework in Global Education**

Bourdieu's notion of capital conversion offers a critical lens for examining the International Baccalaureate's (IB) function in transnational education. Families strategically deploy economic capital—through tuition payments, supplementary resources, and other financial outlays—to acquire cultural and social capital, thereby leveraging education to maintain or

elevate their socio-economic standing (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003). Within the IB context, cultural capital manifests through a curriculum emphasizing critical thinking, multilingual proficiency, and global awareness—competencies that hold heightened value in interconnected academic and professional arenas. The IB’s global prestige further contributes to its symbolic capital, attracting families seeking to embed their children within transnational networks of influence.

Yet, the IB’s capacity for capital conversion is underpinned by notable structural exclusivity. Elevated tuition, relocation costs, and a predominantly Western pedagogical orientation impose significant barriers on families lacking robust financial or cultural resources. These conditions can exacerbate inequalities, forcing parents to navigate the tension between ambitious global aspirations and the constraints of local educational realities—dynamics that reshape capital accumulation in tangible ways.

### **Evolving Habitus in Transnational Contexts**

The experiences of IB families illustrate how habitus—defined as the internalized dispositions and practices that guide behavior—evolves under shifting socio-economic pressures. For instance, some Chinese families relocate to lower-cost IB schools abroad, reframing family routines and social priorities to access more affordable international schooling. While such moves can disrupt family life, they are frequently rationalized as necessary compromises, blending long-held cultural values with new global contexts so that children internalize aspirations consistent with transnational socio-economic norms.

In Japan, habitus adapts through a balancing act between the IB's inquiry-driven ethos and the nation's entrenched exam-centric model. Families must integrate the IB's holistic orientation into a domestic environment that continues to reward rote learning and standardized performance. This tension results in a hybrid habitus, wherein children are expected to cultivate both global competencies (e.g., creativity, intercultural awareness) and traditional, test-oriented proficiencies. Consequently, habitus serves as a bridge, linking local academic traditions with emergent global imperatives to shape the next generation's educational experiences.

### **Symbolic Capital in Transnational Education**

Symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), is any form of capital—economic, cultural, or social—recognized as legitimate within a particular field. In the context of transnational education, the IB's global prestige undergirds its symbolic capital, marking participants as members of an elite, internationally mobile cohort. For many families, the IB's symbolic value transcends academics, conferring membership in a globalized sphere of leadership and opportunity.

However, the utility of this symbolic capital is contingent upon specific local contexts. In Japan, for instance, the IB's international reputation may not directly align with the demands of domestic university entrance examinations, limiting its immediate currency in local academic markets. Conversely, in China, the IB's compatibility with Western standards is highly prized, facilitating pathways to elite global universities. These variations reflect Bourdieu's argument that the legitimacy of symbolic capital depends on the “field” in which

it operates (Bourdieu, 1993). Moreover, the IB's reliance on exclusivity to sustain its cachet raises ethical questions about inclusivity, as families with fewer financial resources are effectively precluded from reaping the program's purported benefits.

### **5.3.2 Systemic Contradictions in the IB**

#### **The IB's Aspirational Mission and Structural Realities**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) purports to offer a progressive, globally inclusive education, characterized by an interdisciplinary curriculum, a focus on critical thinking, and a commitment to intercultural competence. In theory, these elements provide a robust foundation for equitable, globally oriented learning. However, empirical evidence reveals that the IB's operational structure—marked by elevated tuition fees, competitive admissions, and numerous ancillary costs—systematically restricts access to those from affluent backgrounds. While scholarships and limited financial aid programs are often cited as markers of inclusivity, parents commonly report that such aid is largely symbolic, rarely mitigating expenses related to travel, extracurricular activities, and specialized tutoring.

This divergence between aspirational rhetoric and structural reality creates a “prestige paradox.” The IB's symbolic capital is inextricably tied to its exclusivity: while it serves as a vehicle for achieving internationally recognized academic excellence, it simultaneously reinforces socio-economic disparities. This contradiction echoes critical perspectives in transnational education (Resnik, 2012), suggesting that the IB ultimately operates as a mechanism for reproducing pre-existing inequalities.

#### **Economic Barriers and Stratified Access**

Economic constraints impact access to the IB in several critical ways. Families with substantial financial resources can more easily absorb not only baseline tuition costs but also the extensive supplementary fees—covering private tutoring, extracurricular programs, exam fees, and international field experiences—that are essential to the full IB experience. In certain contexts, such as in China, some families even choose to relocate to regions where IB-related expenses are lower, a decision that often entails significant disruptions to family life, including the potential separation of household members. This phenomenon underscores the inherent fragility of capital conversion: even among the privileged, only those with deep economic reserves can afford the full spectrum of IB investments without fundamentally altering their family dynamics.

Moreover, families on the lower end of the upper class encounter a precarious middle ground. These households typically do not qualify for substantial financial aid, yet they struggle to cover the comprehensive costs required for IB participation, resulting in considerable personal and financial trade-offs. Rather than providing a meritocratic avenue for success, the IB appears to "consecrate pre-existing differences" (Bourdieu, 1990), reinforcing entrenched privilege by ensuring that only those with sufficient economic capital can fully benefit from its offerings.

### **5.3.3 Cultural Capital and the Globalized Education Field**

#### **The Role of Cultural Capital in Education Systems**

Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the International Baccalaureate (IB) emerges as a potent institutional mechanism through which elite families transform significant economic resources into durable cultural capital. The IB's curriculum, with its emphasis on analytical reasoning, leadership, and multilingual proficiency, not only confers a globally

recognized credential but also facilitates access to elite academic and professional networks. However, the integration of these globally valued competencies into localized educational and cultural contexts unfolds along divergent trajectories, each bearing critical implications for the reproduction of elite status.

### **Japan's Hybrid Educational Paradigm**

In Japan, the longstanding exam-centric ethos necessitates that elite families reconcile the IB's inquiry-based pedagogy with the imperatives of a highly standardized domestic education system. Students must perform competitively both in innovative, global competency domains and in the rigid evaluative structures of local examinations. This dual requirement effectively reinforces traditional educational trajectories and undergirds the continuity of established social hierarchies.

### **China's Synthesis of Global Competitiveness and Cultural Continuity**

In China, elite families strategically embrace the IB as a pathway to secure admission to prestigious overseas institutions and to circumvent domestic bottlenecks such as the gaokao. Simultaneously, they are deeply invested in preserving cultural continuity; many parents in our study noted that they supplement the IB experience with rigorous language and heritage education at home. This deliberate synthesis ensures that while students accrue transnational cultural capital, they also maintain the indigenous cultural credentials that are essential for domestic legitimacy.

### **The Institutional Reproduction of Social Inequality**

The IB's capacity to confer prestigious credentials is inherently tied to its high financial and social costs. While the core curriculum is standardized, the opportunities to engage in supplementary academic activities—such as private tutoring, participation in international academic events, and other enrichment programs—are available predominantly to families with substantial resources. Parents in our study frequently remarked that these additional investments significantly enhance the IB experience, leading to superior academic outcomes and increased competitiveness in university admissions. In contrast, students from less affluent backgrounds often encounter considerable constraints in accessing these supplementary resources.

This selective accessibility aligns with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) contention that educational systems, even those professing meritocracy, frequently function to reproduce pre-existing social hierarchies. Within the IB framework, economic capital is systematically converted into cultural capital, thereby institutionalizing inequality and ensuring the intergenerational transmission of privilege.

### **Preserving Privilege versus Proactive Global Adaptation: Divergent Elite Strategies**

A pivotal question in the strategic deployment of the IB by elite families is whether parental investment is primarily directed toward conserving inherited privilege or toward proactively adapting to global educational and labor market shifts. Empirical evidence and contextual analysis reveal two distinct, yet interrelated, strategies:

- **Preservation of Privilege in Japan:**

In Japan, elite families predominantly view the IB as an instrument to augment and consolidate existing academic credentials. The program is used to secure entry into



venerable institutions—such as Todai, Keio, and Waseda—thereby reinforcing conventional pathways to elite status. In this conservative framework, the IB functions as an additive mechanism that strengthens established hierarchies without fundamentally altering the status quo.

- **Proactive Global Adaptation in China:**

Conversely, Chinese elite families employ the IB in a dual capacity: as a means of preserving inherited advantages and as a strategic tool for navigating an increasingly competitive global landscape. In response to the limitations of domestic educational systems, these families leverage the IB to secure transnational credentials and cultivate extensive international networks. As highlighted by the prominent role of *guanxi* in our data, Chinese parents actively convert IB achievements into tangible academic and professional opportunities on a global scale. This forward-looking strategy not only safeguards existing privilege but also positions students to capitalize on emergent trends in international education and labor markets.

### **Conclusion: Dual Imperatives in the Reproduction of Elite Status**

The International Baccalaureate encapsulates a complex duality within the global education field. On one hand, it equips students with indispensable cross-cultural competencies and prestigious credentials, thereby facilitating transnational engagement and career mobility. On the other hand, its inherent exclusivity—rooted in high costs and selective access—ensures that these benefits are disproportionately accrued by those already embedded within elite strata, perpetuating entrenched socio-economic inequalities.

Elite parental strategies thus reflect a nuanced interplay between the imperatives of preservation and adaptation. In Japan, the IB is predominantly deployed to consolidate and

sustain longstanding privileges within a stable and traditional framework. In contrast, Chinese elite families harness the IB both as a protective mechanism and as an adaptive resource to pre-empt global shifts. This dual imperative underscores the pivotal role of the IB in mediating the complex tensions between global aspirations and local realities in contemporary education, ultimately serving as a critical conduit for the strategic reproduction of elite status.

### **5.3.4 The Evolution of Elite Reproduction in a Globalized Context**

#### **Reproduction or Transformation? Rethinking Elite Educational Strategies**

Elite reproduction, as conceptualized in Bourdieu's theoretical framework, has traditionally been understood as the process through which privileged families secure their children's status by passing down economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, in contemporary globalized education, elite strategies have evolved beyond mere preservation of privilege. As higher education systems expand, credential inflation intensifies, and transnational mobility increases, elite families must continuously recalibrate their educational choices to maintain competitive advantage (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

Rather than simply reproducing privilege within static national hierarchies, elite families are now compelled to navigate dynamic, globally interconnected education fields. The IB exemplifies this shift: while it serves as a mechanism of elite reproduction, it also functions as a strategy of adaptation to new forms of educational competition, shifting labor market demands, and the massification of degrees (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). The fundamental question, then, is whether elite reproduction today remains a straightforward process of

maintaining inherited advantage, or whether it requires proactive adaptation to an evolving global order.

### **Credential Inflation and the New Landscape of Elite Competition**

One key transformation shaping elite reproduction is credential inflation—the diminishing value of traditional academic qualifications due to the expansion of higher education. As more students worldwide obtain university degrees, the distinction once conferred by elite university credentials becomes diluted (Brown et al., 2011). Consequently, elite families must go beyond degree attainment by seeking additional markers of distinction, such as international education, bilingual proficiency, and extensive co-curricular engagement (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). The IB’s global prestige offers an alternative form of institutionalized cultural capital that remains scarce and internationally recognized, mitigating the risks associated with academic inflation.

In Japan, where entry into elite universities remains the primary determinant of social mobility, IB credentials supplement rather than replace conventional pathways to elite status. The IB allows students to differentiate themselves within domestic selection processes while retaining access to international higher education options. Conversely, in China, where competition for domestic university placements is exceedingly fierce, elite families increasingly view international pathways—facilitated by IB credentials—as a proactive strategy rather than a fallback option (Zhang, 2024a). The IB thus provides Chinese elites with a parallel educational structure that sidesteps the limitations of the domestic system while maintaining a foothold in global networks.

### **Transnational Adaptation: Globalizing Social Capital**

Another critical shift in elite reproduction is the increasing importance of transnational social capital. In contrast to historical models of elite formation, where prestige was largely tied to national educational hierarchies, contemporary elite families actively cultivate global networks that extend beyond a single country (Weenink, 2008). The IB, by virtue of its internationally standardized curriculum, acts as both a credentialing mechanism and a gateway to transnational elite networks (Kenway et al., 2017).

In China, the emphasis on *guanxi*-based social capital extends into international education strategies. Families strategically leverage their networks within IB institutions—through alumni connections, private consultants, and informal social circles—to secure placement in prestigious global universities. This contrasts with Japan, where IB education primarily serves as an academic credential rather than a direct networking tool. Japanese families are more likely to pursue institutionalized forms of cultural capital, such as degrees from prestigious domestic universities, rather than relying on personal social networks for post-graduate advantage. This divergence underscores the ways in which elite reproduction is locally contextualized even within a globalized educational framework.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Static Reproduction—Elite Education as an Adaptive Strategy**

The evolution of elite reproduction in contemporary education reflects a shift from passive privilege maintenance to active strategic adaptation. While Bourdieu's framework remains relevant, the mechanisms of elite reproduction have become increasingly flexible, transnational, and market-driven. The IB embodies this transition: it reinforces traditional pathways to elite status while simultaneously offering new adaptive strategies that align with globalization and the credential economy.

Thus, elite reproduction today is not merely about preserving inherited social position but about strategically responding to global transformations in education and labor markets. The IB, far from being a static elite credential, functions as a dynamic tool that enables privileged families to redefine distinction, manage educational risk, and optimize future opportunities in an increasingly uncertain global landscape.

#### **5.4 The Future of Global Education**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) serves as both a transformative and polarizing force within global education, reflecting the opportunities and challenges of preparing students for an interconnected world. Through its focus on critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and inquiry-based learning, the IB aims to equip students with the necessary skills to thrive in a globalized context. However, as it integrates into diverse local contexts, the IB's promise of universal accessibility and equity is complicated by cultural tensions, economic barriers, and systemic inequalities. This section critically examines the IB's role within global education, assessing its capacity to bridge systemic inequities and identifying necessary reforms to align its mission with the realities of diverse educational landscapes.

##### **Global-Local Tensions and Challenges of Integration**

The IB aspires to transcend cultural boundaries, preparing students for an interconnected global future. Yet its universal ideals often encounter substantial resistance when applied to

deeply entrenched educational traditions. The following examples from Japan and China illustrate how local systems sometimes clash with the IB's pedagogical approach:

#### The Japanese Context: Reconciling Creativity with Rigor

Many Japanese parents find themselves torn between the IB's emphasis on critical thinking and creativity and Japan's exam-focused environment, where standardized testing remains paramount. Families often mention that the IB fosters innovative thinking and holistic development but worry it may not fully prepare students for the country's intense university admissions process. This tension exemplifies how the IB's global orientation can challenge local educational norms prioritizing rigid academic rigor.

#### The Chinese Context: Negotiating Global Competence and Cultural Identity

In China, the IB is frequently regarded as a pathway to international opportunity, particularly at Western universities. However, some families express concern that the IB's Western-centric curriculum could dilute students' cultural roots. They emphasize the need to maintain a strong connection to local heritage while pursuing the global competencies championed by the IB. This dual concern highlights the broader struggle of balancing global mobility with cultural preservation.

These examples underline the IB's dual role as both a route to social mobility and a source of cultural tension. While families seek global opportunities, they must also grapple with the economic and cultural demands that come with IB enrollment.

#### **Broader Implications Across Contexts**

These challenges are not unique to Japan and China but resonate globally. In countries such as South Korea and India, where traditional academic hierarchies dominate, the IB's progressive pedagogy faces similar resistance. Addressing these challenges requires greater flexibility in curriculum design to ensure that global programs can adapt to local educational needs without compromising their core mission of developing global competencies.

### **Exclusivity, Equity, and the Ethics of Global Education**

The IB's reliance on exclusivity introduces a central paradox in global education: the tension between inclusivity and prestige. While the program promotes critical thinking and global competencies, its high costs, selective admissions, and resource-intensive curriculum create barriers to access, reinforcing systemic inequities within global education.

### **Economic Barriers and Social Divides**

The IB's financial demands are one of the key factors that limit its accessibility. High tuition fees, examination costs, and additional expenses, such as private tutoring and extracurricular activities, ensure that access to the IB is largely reserved for families with substantial financial resources. Even when financial aid or public-school partnerships are introduced, wealthier families often leverage supplementary strategies—such as private tutoring or extracurricular involvement—to maintain their advantage. This adaptability underscores the inherent exclusivity of elite education programs like the IB, which rely on socio-economic privilege to sustain their value.

### **Systemic Implications of IB's Exclusivity**

The IB operates within a global education system that mirrors broader socio-economic inequalities. As a pathway to elite universities and influential networks, the IB reinforces the notion of education as a competitive commodity, rather than a universal right. This raises critical ethical questions about the role of global education systems: Can they genuinely democratize opportunity without addressing the structural inequalities they perpetuate? While the IB aims to foster global citizens, its reliance on exclusivity and privilege limits its potential to fulfill this mission for all students.

### **Reforming Global Education: A Vision for Inclusivity**

Despite the challenges posed by systemic barriers, the IB holds significant potential to drive meaningful change in global education. However, realizing this potential requires rethinking its role and addressing both the cultural and economic obstacles that limit its accessibility.

### **Incorporating Diverse Epistemologies**

To become more inclusive, the IB must evolve beyond its Western-centric roots and integrate a broader range of cultural and knowledge systems. By incorporating indigenous and non-Western perspectives, the IB can better reflect the global diversity it aims to serve. This approach would make the curriculum more relevant to students from different cultural backgrounds and create a more inclusive model of education that respects diverse ways of knowing.

### **Localized Implementation**

To ensure that global education programs like the IB are relevant to local needs, there must be greater collaboration with local educators and policymakers. By aligning the IB's



curriculum with regional priorities, global education programs can avoid marginalizing local knowledge systems and ensure that students are prepared to meet both global and local challenges. Such initiatives would enhance the cultural responsiveness of the IB while preserving its core mission of fostering global competencies.

### **Redefining Accessibility**

While scholarships and public-private partnerships offer short-term solutions, systemic reforms are necessary to address the deeper economic barriers limiting access to elite education. Investments in public education and alternative curricula tailored to marginalized communities can complement the IB's elite focus, fostering a more equitable and balanced global education ecosystem. It is essential to reconsider how the financial structure of the IB operates, creating a system that ensures broader access without compromising the quality of education.

### **Toward a More Equitable Future for Global Education**

The IB's dual character—as both a progressive educational model and a mechanism of stratification—underscores the complexities inherent in global education. Its capacity to navigate the challenges of globalization effectively for some families comes at the cost of perpetuating systemic inequalities for others. Rather than attempting to resolve these contradictions within the IB alone, global education reform should focus on creating complementary pathways that address the needs of underrepresented populations.

### **Reforms and Decentralization**

The future of global education hinges on decentralizing elite credentials and prioritizing investments in inclusive education. By developing pathways that make quality education more accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, global education systems can move closer to achieving true equity. The IB, with its aspirational mission and influence, can play a key role in this process by embracing reforms that align its ideals with the diverse realities it serves.

In embracing inclusivity and diversity, the IB can maintain its strengths while evolving to become a leader in fostering a global education system that values equity, cultural relevance, and social mobility. Ultimately, the IB's evolution will depend on its ability to engage critically with its own contradictions and reimagine its role in global education—transforming from an instrument of elite distinction into a genuine catalyst for broad-based opportunity.

#### **5.4.1 Educational Inequality and Access**

Following the discussion of global-local tensions, this section critically examines how the structural realities of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program contribute to systemic educational inequalities. While the IB is lauded for promoting global citizenship, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary learning, these progressive ideals often coexist with significant barriers to access. As a result, the IB serves as both a transformative educational model and a mechanism for consolidating privilege, reflecting broader patterns of social stratification within global education systems.

##### **5.4.1.1 The IB as a Mechanism for Stratification**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum is widely regarded for its commitment to inclusivity, inquiry-based learning, and the development of globally competent individuals. It aims to equip students with the intellectual tools necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected world. However, these progressive ideals are often undermined by the structural and financial barriers that restrict access to the program. The high tuition fees, examination costs, and additional expenses—such as relocation for access to more affordable IB schools and the supplementary costs of extracurricular activities—serve as significant obstacles. These economic constraints ensure that the IB remains primarily accessible to families with substantial financial resources, thereby reinforcing existing social inequalities.

In Japan, for instance, middle-income families frequently encounter insurmountable financial pressures due to the high costs associated with IB education. Many Japanese parents, particularly those seeking to bridge the gap between the IB's holistic approach and Japan's exam-centric education system, resort to supplementary educational investments. Private tutoring centers (塾), which offer preparatory courses such as intensive math review sessions, have become a standard recourse. These sessions, which can cost as much as 55,000 yen per month, place an additional financial burden on families, exacerbating the disparity between those who can afford such expenses and those who cannot. These additional costs, layered on top of regular tuition fees, illuminate the economic stratification that persists within the IB system, where only affluent families are able to fully leverage the program's potential.

Similarly, for many Chinese families, the prohibitive costs of enrolling children in IB programs within China compel them to explore alternative solutions, such as relocation to more affordable IB schools abroad. Thailand, for example, is increasingly viewed as a viable destination for families seeking to reduce educational expenses. One parent recounted how

their family relocated to Thailand, with the mother accompanying their child while the father remained in Beijing to maintain the family's income. This relocation strategy reflects not only the financial sacrifices families make in the pursuit of global education but also the emotional and logistical complexities involved. The process of relocation often involves significant cultural adaptation, as families must navigate unfamiliar educational environments while ensuring that their children remain connected to their cultural heritage. One parent reflected, *"Moving to Thailand helped us afford the IB, but it also meant adjusting to a completely different lifestyle and balancing our cultural identity with new global influences"*. This sentiment encapsulates the dual challenge of economic necessity and cultural preservation, demonstrating that relocation is not merely an economic strategy but a multifaceted decision that involves navigating both financial constraints and cultural adaptation.

These financial barriers, however, are not incidental. They are intrinsic to the very structure of the IB as a "positional good," a term used to describe educational credentials that confer social and cultural advantages based on their exclusivity. The IB's appeal is not solely grounded in its academic content but in its ability to signal access to elite networks, prestigious universities, and professional opportunities. As such, the IB serves as a tool for social stratification, allowing affluent families to consolidate their privilege and maintain intergenerational social distinction. This positionality is further compounded by the fact that the program's selectivity and perceived value often reinforce its status as an exclusive marker of educational excellence. Thus, the IB operates as both a gateway to elite educational and professional opportunities and a mechanism for preserving the socio-economic hierarchy that underpins global education systems.

While economic barriers create substantial challenges for families seeking access to the IB, cultural tensions introduce additional complexities in the program's implementation across different national contexts. The IB's Western-centric framework, with its emphasis on critical inquiry, autonomy, and individualism, can clash with local educational traditions that prioritize conformity, rote memorization, and respect for authority. In countries such as Japan and China, where educational practices are deeply rooted in cultural values that emphasize collective achievement and respect for tradition, the adoption of the IB curriculum often generates tension. These cultural misalignments further complicate the adoption of the IB, as families must reconcile the program's emphasis on global competencies with the educational and cultural expectations of their home countries.

#### **5.4.1.2 Elite Adaptability and the Resilience of Privilege**

Efforts to democratize access to the IB—through scholarships, public-school partnerships, or funding subsidies—often fail to address systemic inequalities due to the adaptability of elites. Families with significant economic and cultural capital are adept at recalibrating their strategies to preserve their advantage.

For example, even if financial barriers are lowered, affluent families often leverage private tutoring, exclusive extracurricular programs, or alternative credentials to further differentiate their children from others. This adaptability ensures that the mechanisms of exclusivity evolve to accommodate shifting educational landscapes. Elite families demonstrate remarkable adaptability in navigating barriers to IB education. Strategies such as private tutoring, enrollment in exclusive extracurricular programs, and the use of alternative

credentials allow them to maintain their advantage. Relocation to more affordable IB locations, such as Thailand, is another example, reflecting how mobility can be leveraged by those with sufficient resources. These strategies collectively underscore how privilege adapts to evolving educational landscapes, perpetuating inequalities even when accessibility initiatives are introduced. Families with the resources to relocate strategically gain access to the IB while circumventing its prohibitive costs in their home countries, underscoring the persistence of systemic inequalities.

In Japan, the elite's adaptability is further exemplified by the extensive investment in private tutoring centers, particularly in preparation for university entrance exams. Despite the availability of global educational opportunities through the IB, these families still feel the pressure to meet Japan's stringent local academic expectations. This blend of global and local pressures demonstrates how educational strategies are shaped by both international ambitions and national systems that prioritize rote learning and standardized testing.

#### **5.4.1.3 The Fallacy of Meritocracy in the IB**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is often touted as a meritocratic institution that values academic rigor, critical thinking, and global competence. Its framework suggests that success within the program is based on individual effort and ability. However, the findings of this research challenge this narrative, revealing that success within the IB is often shaped by pre-existing socio-economic advantages, which undermine the ideal of equal opportunity.

#### **Reinforcing Inequality Through Privilege**

Students from affluent families benefit disproportionately from preparatory resources such as language acquisition programs, extracurricular activities, and private tutoring. These

investments provide them with a significant advantage, enabling them to enter the IB system with skills and experiences that are often inaccessible to students from less privileged backgrounds. Consequently, the notion that success in the IB is solely the product of individual merit becomes problematic, as it overlooks the structural inequalities that heavily influence educational outcomes.

This phenomenon underscores a key tension within the IB's meritocratic framework: while the program promotes achievement based on individual merit, it in practice privileges those who have the financial means to invest in preparatory education. As a result, students from affluent families are able to navigate the demands of the IB more effectively, reinforcing social hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

### **Legitimizing Inequality**

By framing success as the result of individual effort and intellect, the IB obscures the socio-economic factors that shape educational outcomes. The focus on merit masks the structural advantages that affluent families possess, advantages that often translate into greater access to educational resources. The program's meritocratic narrative therefore legitimizes existing inequalities, positioning elite students as deserving of their success while distancing the concept of privilege from the meritocratic ideal.

This meritocratic framing serves to legitimize the status quo by implicitly suggesting that the educational achievements of privileged students are due to hard work, rather than systemic advantages. In doing so, the IB reinforces social and economic hierarchies by obscuring the true drivers of educational success.

### **Marginalizing Underrepresented Groups**

The framing of IB success as a product of individual merit also marginalizes students from less affluent backgrounds. These students may lack access to preparatory resources such as private tutoring, enrichment programs, or international exposure. As a result, they may be implicitly labeled as less capable or ambitious, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and further entrenching educational inequalities.

The IB's meritocratic model, therefore, not only fails to provide equal opportunities but also exacerbates social stratification by framing those without access to resources as inherently less competent. This undermines the program's potential to act as a true leveller, reinforcing the very social divides it purports to address.

#### **5.4.1.4 The IB as a Symbol of Global Inequality**

The exclusivity of the IB reflects broader trends in the commodification of education, where learning is increasingly viewed as a competitive marketplace rather than a public good. The barriers to access associated with the IB—whether economic, geographic, or cultural—mirror global disparities in wealth and opportunity.

This dynamic creates a paradox: the IB aspires to democratize education and foster global citizenship, yet its structural reliance on exclusivity limits its transformative potential. The program functions as a microcosm of global inequality, where its benefits are disproportionately concentrated among those who already possess the means to succeed.

Furthermore, the IB's role as a marker of privilege exacerbates inequities in non-elite education systems. Resources and attention are often diverted from public schools to support IB programs, further widening the gap between affluent and disadvantaged communities.



This process reinforces stratification not only within the IB but also across broader educational ecosystems.

#### **5.4.1.5 Reimagining Educational Access**

Addressing systemic inequalities within global education frameworks such as the IB requires a transformative approach, one that critically evaluates and reconfigures the structures that perpetuate exclusivity. While the IB program is celebrated for its commitment to fostering global citizenship, critical thinking, and intercultural competence, its implementation continues to reflect and reinforce existing educational hierarchies. To truly democratize access and broaden its impact, several key strategies must be pursued, focusing on rethinking financial barriers, diversifying metrics of success, expanding cultural relevance, and investing in non-elite education systems.

#### **Rethinking Financial Barriers**

Financial accessibility remains one of the most significant barriers to entry for underprivileged students in global education programs like the IB. While scholarships and financial aid programs exist, they are often limited in scope and reach. To address this issue, there needs to be a substantial rethinking of how financial barriers are constructed and mitigated.

- **Targeted Subsidies:** Expanding scholarship programs specifically aimed at underrepresented and economically disadvantaged communities is essential. These subsidies should not only address tuition fees but also cover related costs such as examination fees, textbooks, and necessary extracurricular activities, which often add

to the financial burden. By offering a more comprehensive support package, the IB could broaden its accessibility to students who are currently excluded from its benefits due to financial constraints.

- **Public Partnerships:** Another avenue for increasing access is the integration of IB programs into public school systems. By making the IB available within public education infrastructure, the program would be able to reach a broader demographic, particularly those in lower-income communities. Public partnerships could also facilitate the development of locally adapted IB models, which align with national educational standards while retaining the IB's global competencies. This shift would reduce the cost of IB education significantly, making it more accessible to a diverse range of students without compromising the quality of instruction.

### **Diversifying Metrics of Success**

The current reliance on standardized measures of academic achievement—such as high exam scores and university placements—fails to capture the full spectrum of student abilities and accomplishments. As the IB continues to advocate for critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, it is important to reassess how success is measured within the program.

- **Expanding Beyond Standardized Assessments:** The first step toward reimagining educational access is moving beyond traditional academic metrics. This includes developing a more holistic approach to evaluation that recognizes a wider range of competencies, such as creative problem-solving, social and emotional intelligence, and contributions to community development. Emphasizing non-academic skills can provide a more accurate reflection of students' capabilities, particularly those who

may not excel in traditional academic settings but demonstrate significant potential in other areas. For example, in regions where academic success is narrowly defined by test scores, incorporating qualitative assessments and project-based learning can highlight diverse skills that are equally valuable in a globalized world.

- **Valuing Locally Relevant Competencies:** In addition to broadening the metrics of success, the IB should consider integrating local knowledge and culturally specific competencies into its assessment frameworks. Many students come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, and their learning trajectories often diverge from the standardized model. Recognizing and valuing competencies that are locally relevant will help ensure that success is not exclusively defined by a global, Eurocentric standard. This shift would acknowledge the multiplicity of pathways to success while also affirming the value of local cultural practices and perspectives. For instance, students in Japan and China, who may have distinct educational traditions, should be assessed not just through traditional Western frameworks but also by the rich cultural knowledge they bring with them.

### **Expanding Cultural Relevance**

The IB's curriculum has long been critiqued for its Western-centric focus, which tends to marginalize non-Western epistemologies and knowledge systems. For the IB to fulfill its promise of inclusivity, it must actively incorporate a wider range of cultural perspectives, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds see their experiences reflected in the curriculum.

- Incorporating Non-Western Epistemologies:** To create a more inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum, the IB should incorporate epistemologies that reflect diverse global traditions and worldviews. This includes integrating perspectives from indigenous knowledge systems, non-Western philosophical thought, and local pedagogical practices. By doing so, the IB would foster a more equitable educational environment that respects and values a variety of intellectual traditions, from Confucian philosophy in China to indigenous knowledge in other parts of the world. This approach would help students from all backgrounds feel more connected to the curriculum, enhancing engagement and learning outcomes.
- Fostering Collaborations with Local Educators:** Expanding cultural relevance also requires ongoing collaboration between IB institutions and local educators and policymakers. Such collaborations can ensure that the curriculum is adapted to meet the needs of different regions while retaining its core values of inquiry, critical thinking, and international-mindedness. These localized adaptations would help bridge the gap between the global and the local, making the IB more relevant and accessible to students from various socio-cultural contexts. For example, by working with local schools and communities, the IB could offer a more culturally sensitive education that resonates with the specific values and expectations of each region.

### **Investing in Non-Elite Education Systems**

While reforming the IB is critical to expanding its reach, it is equally important to redirect attention and resources to non-elite education systems. By strengthening public education and providing access to high-quality, innovative pedagogy, it is possible to offer more equitable

opportunities to students who may not have access to exclusive educational frameworks like the IB.

- **Redirecting Resources:** Governments and international organizations should prioritize investments in public education systems, ensuring that innovative and inclusive teaching methods are implemented across schools, especially in underprivileged areas. The benefits of progressive pedagogies, such as those promoted by the IB, should not be confined to elite institutions but should be integrated into the broader educational system, helping to raise the quality of education for all students. In Japan, for instance, incorporating inquiry-based learning approaches in public schools could prepare students for a globalized world, reducing the pressure to send children to private institutions for additional educational support.
- **Building Educational Ecosystems:** Finally, to truly democratize access to global competencies, the IB and similar educational programs should partner with public schools to build a more inclusive educational ecosystem. This might involve adapting parts of the IB's approach, such as inquiry-based learning and interdisciplinary thinking, to fit within the framework of public education systems. This cross-pollination could help foster a more equitable global education landscape, where high-quality education is accessible to students from all socio-economic backgrounds. In the long term, these partnerships could create a more balanced educational ecosystem where the benefits of a global education system are not restricted to the elite but are made available to a larger, more diverse group of students.

## Conclusion

Reimagining educational access within global education programs like the IB requires addressing the systemic barriers that limit access for marginalized groups. By rethinking financial structures, diversifying success metrics, expanding cultural relevance, and investing in non-elite education systems, global education can take a significant step toward being more inclusive and equitable. These strategies are essential not only for broadening access to the IB but also for creating a global education framework that genuinely reflects the diverse needs and aspirations of students from all walks of life. By implementing these reforms, the IB and similar programs can transform from exclusive tools for social reproduction into catalysts for broad-based social mobility and inclusion.

The global-local tensions faced by families also influence how IB schools market themselves. To appeal to elite families navigating these challenges, schools often frame their programs as solutions that harmonize global competencies with local priorities.

#### **5.4.2 The Future of Global Education**

The findings of this study illuminate the contradictions and possibilities inherent in global education, particularly through the lens of the International Baccalaureate (IB). While programs like the IB embody aspirations for interconnected learning, intercultural understanding, and global competencies, they also mirror the inequities and power dynamics of an increasingly globalized world. This section reflects on the evolving landscape of global education, focusing on how it must reconcile its transformative potential with the realities of systemic barriers, cultural tensions, and socio-economic stratification.

## **The Evolving Landscape of Global Education**

Today's educational sphere is increasingly influenced by rapid globalization, technological progress, and complex socio-political shifts. On one hand, the IB's rigorous curriculum and emphasis on intercultural understanding equip students to address pressing international issues—ranging from climate change and economic inequality to digital innovations. On the other hand, these objectives must be reconciled with an educational landscape often governed by exclusivity and competition.

Technological advancements open up new avenues for broadening access to high-quality education, including prospective online IB offerings. Yet, they also hold the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities if such tools remain the preserve of privileged families. Households with the necessary resources can procure fast internet connections, cutting-edge devices, and personalized online tutoring, leaving those with fewer means at a disadvantage—a disparity that is magnified during moments of crisis such as pandemics.

## **The Digital Revolution: Opportunities and Risks**

Technological progress continues to reshape global education, creating fresh opportunities to expand access and reimagine learning. As an illustration, digital platforms could help IB programs make their content more accessible, allowing students in underserved communities to experience inquiry-based learning remotely. Equally important, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation are changing the nature of work, underlining the need for education to prioritize uniquely human competencies like creativity, empathy, and cross-cultural communication—all of which align closely with IB principles.

However, this potential can only be fully realized if persistent inequities in infrastructure and digital literacy are systematically addressed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, many of the Chinese families involved in this research enhanced the IB curriculum with private online tutoring, consequently widening the educational divide between those who could afford such support and those who could not. One parent, reflecting on their personal experience, observed that their household had no difficulty providing a laptop and stable internet for their child, but acknowledged that these advantages were far from universal.

Investments in training educators, enhancing technology infrastructure, and promoting broader digital competencies represent critical steps toward ensuring that the benefits of innovation are shared more equitably. Without such measures, emerging technologies may simply reinforce existing social hierarchies. To secure a more inclusive future, global education must incorporate both the transformative power of cutting-edge tools and an unwavering commitment to equity, ensuring that learning is both globally relevant and universally accessible.

### **Navigating Global-Local Tensions**

Balancing the pursuit of global citizenship with the preservation of local identities and values remains one of the most significant challenges in contemporary education. This dynamic becomes especially apparent in contexts such as Japan and China, where long-standing educational norms often emphasize national or cultural priorities over global ones. Parents in Japan, for example, repeatedly underscored the importance of safeguarding cultural traditions even as they embraced the IB's emphasis on critical thinking and international perspectives.



Many felt that, while the IB fostered open-mindedness, it should also honor and integrate local cultural values, rather than risk overshadowing them.

A similar sentiment emerged among Chinese families, who saw the IB as a channel for global opportunities but did not wish to lose sight of cultural heritage. They hoped their children would gain the skills and worldview needed to thrive internationally while maintaining a firm sense of their own origins. Such concerns highlight the broader issue of whether global education programs inadvertently impose homogenizing values that eclipse local knowledge systems and pedagogical philosophies. Addressing these challenges requires that frameworks like the IB adopt more culturally responsive approaches, integrating diverse epistemologies without compromising the goal of nurturing globally competent learners.

### **Toward a More Equitable Global Education**

This research draws attention to the entrenched inequities in initiatives such as the IB and emphasizes the urgency of targeted reforms that bridge the gap between idealistic visions and practical realities. These efforts must tackle issues such as financial constraints, cultural inclusivity, and technological access, while also questioning traditional measures of success. The recommendations below propose strategies for making the IB more inclusive and aligned with principles of equity and global justice.

#### **1. Expanding Financial Accessibility**

Financial hurdles continue to be among the most significant barriers to fair participation in the IB. A multi-pronged strategy—encompassing needs-based scholarships, collaborations between public and private entities, and the integration of the IB into state-funded education systems—could alleviate these challenges. Such

measures would not only reduce tuition but also account for ancillary costs like housing, extracurricular fees, and supplementary tutoring, all of which can disproportionately affect students from lower-income backgrounds. One program director, who had observed these disparities firsthand, warned that ignoring indirect expenses would ultimately undermine even the most generous financial aid efforts. Including all economic factors in scholarship schemes is essential to broadening participation for students from a wide range of socio-economic contexts.

## 2. Fostering Cultural Plurality

While lauded for its global orientation, the IB curriculum often reflects predominantly Western perspectives that risk alienating students from non-Western cultures.

Incorporating region-specific content, diverse philosophical frameworks, and culturally attuned teaching methods would make the curriculum more inclusive. Such changes would enable learners to see their own identities and traditions mirrored in their studies, thereby enhancing engagement and a sense of belonging. Examples might involve weaving indigenous knowledge, non-Western philosophical traditions, or culturally relevant case studies into units on science, humanities, and the arts.

Senior IB administrators have stressed that genuine inclusivity depends on accurately representing the diversity of world cultures, rather than reinforcing a narrow, globalized elite viewpoint.

## 3. Leveraging Digital Tools for Equity

Digital platforms have the potential to broaden the IB's reach, especially in underserved regions, by offering innovative modes of instruction and collaboration.

However, existing inequalities in internet access, digital literacy, and technology infrastructure could worsen if these issues are not addressed proactively. To mitigate

such risks, the IB could consider investments in affordable digital infrastructure, targeted educator training, and low-cost technological solutions suitable for contexts with limited resources. Ensuring inclusivity also means designing online learning platforms that do not automatically benefit students with greater access to high-speed internet and cutting-edge devices. Experts within the IB community have noted that technology could democratize education, but only if it is deployed in a way that narrows rather than widens existing social divides.

#### 4. Diversifying Metrics of Success

Reliance on standardized assessments can overlook or undervalue the broader range of competencies that global education seeks to instill. By moving toward more holistic evaluation methods—such as considering community involvement, creativity, leadership skills, and emotional intelligence—the IB would be better able to meet its aim of cultivating well-rounded, socially conscious graduates. Such an approach would also counteract many cultural and socio-economic biases that favor students adept in test-taking. Participants in this study have pointed out that the true measure of learning extends beyond exams, focusing instead on shaping individuals capable of meaningful contributions to their communities and to society at large.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking and Reimagining Global Education**

The future of global education hinges on its capacity to navigate a series of intertwined tensions: inclusivity versus exclusivity, global visions versus local imperatives, and the lofty ideals of progressive education versus the entrenched inequities it often reinforces. At the

heart of these complexities lies the International Baccalaureate (IB), which aspires to cultivate equitable and globally minded citizens yet remains deeply rooted in structures of privilege. Despite the IB's proven effectiveness in nurturing critical thinking, intercultural competence, and adaptability, its reliance on selective access points underscores the persistent issue of social stratification.

In this study, families across different cultural contexts stressed the need for education that not only prepares students for an interconnected world but also confronts prevailing inequalities. Some parents in Japan, for instance, highlighted the importance of maintaining local cultural values while embracing opportunities for global engagement. Similarly, parents in China emphasized the significance of balancing international skill-building with a firm sense of cultural identity. Such perspectives point to a broader challenge: how can programs like the IB integrate diverse epistemologies and local identities without diluting their global focus?

Various reform proposals offer potential pathways for a more inclusive and socially just global education. Rethinking financial models, diversifying success metrics, and tailoring curricula to reflect regional contexts could help address the IB's structural barriers. However, such measures also reveal the resilience of elite strategies, raising questions about whether incremental reforms can truly dismantle the systemic forces that reproduce educational inequality. As the world becomes ever more interconnected, the need to balance global aspirations with local realities becomes more pressing, underscoring the delicate role global education must play.

Ultimately, the IB's evolution will depend on a willingness to engage critically with its own contradictions. Shifting from a predominantly elite-serving framework to one that fosters broad-based opportunity requires collaboration among educators, policymakers, and families. If the IB—and global education more broadly—can embrace inclusive practices, enrich curricula with diverse knowledge systems, and expand access through equitable financing and technology, it could transform from a vehicle for privilege into a shared public good. Moving forward, the challenge is not simply to mirror global interconnectedness, but to ensure that education actively contributes to a fairer, more inclusive world.

### **5.5 Limitation: Sampling Bias and Generalizability**

A key limitation of this study is the potential bias introduced by the use of snowball sampling. Since participants were recruited through existing social networks, the sample may disproportionately represent IB families with strong elite affiliations while underrepresenting those with more diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Additionally, because participation was voluntary, self-selection bias may have influenced the perspectives captured, with families who are more engaged in elite education strategies being more likely to participate.

Furthermore, the lack of responses from Japanese IB school directors limits the institutional perspective of IB education within Japan's domestic education system. This absence restricts the study's ability to analyze how Japanese-medium IB schools integrate into the broader education landscape and whether they serve a more diverse socio-economic student population.

As a result, while the study provides valuable insights into elite families' engagement with IB education, the findings should not be generalized to all IB families in Japan and China.

Future research should consider alternative recruitment strategies, such as quota or stratified sampling, to ensure a more representative sample of IB students across different socio-economic backgrounds.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Overview of Findings**

The purpose of this research was to investigate how elite families in Japan and China leverage the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as a strategy to counter the effects of educational massification. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on globalization and education by examining the intersection of local cultural norms, global educational aspirations, and socio-economic strategies. Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, and economic capital, the findings illuminate how the IB operates as both a mechanism for upward mobility and a tool for reproducing existing inequalities.

The IB's appeal lies in its ability to offer an education that transcends national boundaries, equipping students with competencies that are highly valued in an interconnected world. For elite families, the IB is not merely a pathway to academic excellence but a strategic investment in long-term socio-economic positioning. However, the exclusivity of the program raises critical questions about access and equity, as participation remains limited to those with substantial economic resources. These findings underscore the tensions between the IB's stated ideals of inclusivity and its role as a symbol of elite privilege.

## 6.2 Addressing the Research Question

This research sought to answer the central question: What is the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the elite's strategy to reproduce itself? This inquiry was further guided by two sub-questions:

1. What are the motivations of parents in Japan and China for choosing the IB Diploma Programme for their children?
2. How do IB schools in Japan and China market themselves to appeal to elite families?

The findings reveal that the IB serves as a critical mechanism for elite families to navigate educational massification while securing cultural and social capital for their children. The program's emphasis on global competencies, critical thinking, and adaptability aligns with the aspirations of affluent parents, who view the IB as both a practical and symbolic investment.

However, the IB's exclusivity perpetuates existing inequalities, as participation remains contingent on substantial financial resources. While Japanese families often balance global ambitions with cultural continuity, Chinese families prioritize international mobility and access to prestigious foreign universities. These differences highlight the program's adaptability to diverse socio-cultural contexts while reinforcing its function as a tool for elite reproduction.

In bridging global and local priorities, the IB underscores the dynamic interplay between globalization and education. This study contributes to theoretical debates on social reproduction by illustrating how elite families deploy international curricula to maintain distinction, even as educational systems evolve.

### 6.2.1 The IB as a Tool for Accumulating Cultural Capital

The concept of cultural capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, is essential to comprehending why the IB appeals to elite families. The IB's emphasis on critical thinking, multilingualism, and cultural awareness aligns with the global competencies these parents value. As one Chinese parent reflected, "The IB isn't just about getting into a good university. It's about equipping our children to thrive anywhere in the world." This strategic perspective illustrates how the IB serves as a mechanism for reproducing social advantage by preparing children for success in a globalized environment.

While both Japanese and Chinese parents recognize the value of the IB's international curriculum, they engage with it differently based on cultural priorities.

**Japanese Families:** Japanese parents view the IB as a means to cultivate global competencies while preserving cultural traditions. This dual aspiration reflects broader societal values that prioritize harmony and collective well-being. One parent stated, "The IB teaches independence, but it's equally important for my child to understand Japan's customs and society." Such perspectives highlight how the IB enables families to balance local identity with global adaptability.

**Chinese Families:** For Chinese families, the IB represents an escape from the high-pressure environment of the Gaokao and a pathway to international universities. The program is perceived as a vehicle for outward mobility and long-term success. However, an emerging trend among Chinese parents is the prioritization of children's well-being. As one parent noted, "The Gaokao is too stressful. We want our child to be happy and learn meaningfully,



not just memorize.” This shift underscores a growing awareness of holistic education as a critical component of social reproduction.

### **6.2.2 Socioeconomic Barriers and the IB’s Exclusivity**

Despite its aspirational mission to foster inclusivity and global citizenship, the International Baccalaureate (IB) remains a largely exclusive educational pathway, accessible predominantly to affluent families. Socioeconomic barriers such as high tuition fees, supplementary costs for tutoring and extracurricular activities, and in some cases, significant relocation expenses, serve as structural gatekeepers to the program. These barriers reveal how the IB, while marketed as a progressive and meritocratic system, perpetuates global educational inequalities by privileging those who possess substantial economic capital.

#### **Economic Capital as a Gatekeeper**

Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction offers a valuable lens for analyzing the IB’s exclusivity. Economic capital plays a foundational role in enabling elite families to access and participate in the program, facilitating the conversion of wealth into cultural and social capital. Tuition fees for IB programs often rival or exceed the costs of higher education, particularly in private international schools. Additionally, the expenses associated with school materials, extracurricular activities, and examination fees further stratify access, creating a financial ecosystem that excludes middle- and working-class families.

For many elite families, these financial investments are framed as necessary for securing long-term socio-economic advantages. Parents often view the IB not simply as an academic

credential but as a cultural marker that signals global competence and readiness for prestigious university admissions. By participating in the IB, families aim to position their children within transnational networks of privilege, ensuring both immediate academic benefits and long-term career opportunities in global markets.

This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusivity. The IB's high costs ensure that it is perceived as a premium product, aligning with the broader preferences of elite families for highly selective, prestigious institutions. This exclusivity, in turn, enhances the symbolic capital of the IB, making it an even more desirable option for affluent families seeking to secure distinction.

### **Strategic Relocation and Adaptive Strategies**

In some cases, families adopt creative strategies to mitigate the financial burdens of the IB. Relocation to countries with lower tuition fees has emerged as a practical approach, particularly among Chinese families. For instance, moving to Thailand, where IB tuition costs are significantly lower than in major metropolitan centers like Beijing or Shanghai, allows families to access the program at a reduced financial cost. However, such relocations often involve substantial sacrifices, including family separation and cultural dislocation, complicating simplistic notions of privilege.

This trend of educational-driven migration highlights the global interconnectedness of elite education markets. Relocation reflects not only economic pragmatism but also strategic foresight, as families optimize their resources to ensure their children's access to high-quality education. These sacrifices underscore the adaptability of elite families, who navigate complex global systems to convert their economic resources into cultural capital.

### **Institutional Narratives and the Framing of Exclusivity**

Educational institutions that offer the IB frequently employ nuanced language to justify the program's high costs while maintaining its appeal to affluent families. Administrators often emphasize the IB's individualized attention, small class sizes, and holistic developmental opportunities as indicators of its quality. These narratives align with the expectations of elite families, who equate exclusivity with educational excellence.

However, this framing simultaneously reinforces the structural inequalities embedded in the IB. By positioning the program as a premium educational experience, institutions contribute to its perception as an elite product rather than a universally accessible opportunity. This marketing approach complicates efforts to broaden access, as it implicitly aligns the IB's value with its exclusivity.

### **The Challenges of Democratizing Access**

Efforts to democratize access to the IB, such as scholarships or public-private partnerships, face significant limitations. While scholarships may cover tuition fees, they often fail to address the broader financial ecosystem of associated costs, such as supplementary tutoring and extracurricular activities. Without comprehensive support structures, these initiatives risk being tokenistic, offering minimal disruption to the entrenched exclusivity of the program.

Moreover, expanding access to the IB risks diminishing its perceived value among elite families. As Bourdieu's theory suggests, elites are adept at preserving privilege by seeking alternative mechanisms of distinction. If the IB were to significantly broaden its accessibility,

affluent families might migrate toward other exclusive programs, ensuring the persistence of social reproduction through alternative pathways.

### **Perpetuating Social Stratification**

Ultimately, the IB's exclusivity serves as both a barrier to broader participation and a key feature of its appeal. The program's symbolic capital, derived from its perceived prestige, reinforces its role as a tool for elite reproduction. While it fosters competencies that are increasingly valued in globalized academic and professional markets, its financial inaccessibility ensures that these opportunities remain confined to a privileged few.

These dynamics challenge the IB's narrative of inclusivity and global citizenship. While the program aspires to cultivate a diverse and globally minded student body, its structural realities align more closely with the needs and strategies of elite families. This tension underscores the broader contradictions of global education systems, which often perpetuate the very inequalities they purport to address.

By examining these socioeconomic barriers, this study highlights the IB's dual role as both a pathway to global opportunities and a mechanism of social exclusion. Addressing these contradictions requires not only systemic reforms but also a critical reevaluation of how inclusivity is defined and operationalized within the field of global education.

### **6.2.3 The IB as a Geopolitical Strategy**

Beyond its well-documented role in academic preparation, the International Baccalaureate (IB) functions as a geopolitical strategy for elite families, enabling them to secure their children's integration into global networks of influence, power, and prestige. This transcends immediate educational outcomes, as the IB serves as a long-term investment in global positioning. Families view the IB not merely as a tool for gaining university admission but as a broader strategy to ensure their children's competitiveness and adaptability in an interconnected world. The program's emphasis on global competencies, such as critical thinking, multilingualism, and intercultural understanding, aligns with the ambitions of elite families who are focused on sustaining or enhancing their socio-economic standing across borders.

This geopolitical positioning takes on specific contours depending on cultural and national contexts, reflecting the interplay between global educational aspirations and localized values, challenges, and opportunities.

### **The Dual Role of the IB: A Global and Local Dynamic**

The IB operates within an intricate matrix of global and local imperatives. On the one hand, its international recognition and alignment with global educational trends make it a desirable choice for families aiming to prepare their children for leadership in multinational or transnational domains. On the other hand, the program's adoption must align with local cultural, economic, and social realities, which often introduce tensions or adaptations in its implementation. This dual role positions the IB as a critical tool for negotiating the complexities of globalization while addressing the demands of national systems.

### **Japanese Families: Balancing Global Competence with Cultural Integration**

In Japan, the IB is particularly attractive to families seeking a balance between global competencies and cultural continuity. Japanese parents often emphasize the need for their children to acquire skills that are valued internationally—such as adaptability, innovation, and leadership—while maintaining a deep connection to Japan’s cultural norms and traditions. This reflects the broader societal value placed on harmony and collective well-being, even as globalization reshapes the landscape of education and work.

Japanese parents’ engagement with the IB highlights a dual aspiration: equipping their children with the tools to succeed on a global stage while ensuring they remain culturally anchored. The IB, with its focus on inquiry-based learning and internationalism, offers a counterpoint to Japan’s exam-oriented system, which prioritizes rote memorization and conformity. However, this integration is not without challenges. Families frequently find themselves navigating a tension between the IB’s global ethos and the rigid academic expectations of Japan’s university entrance exams.

### **Chinese Families: Prioritizing Global Mobility and Academic Prestige**

Chinese families approach the IB with a distinct set of priorities, often centered on global mobility and access to prestigious institutions abroad. The program is seen as a pathway to internationally recognized universities and as a strategy to position their children for leadership in competitive global markets. For many families, the IB represents an escape from the rigid Gaokao (the Chinese national university entrance exam) system, offering an alternative that emphasizes critical thinking and holistic education over rote memorization.

However, this strategy is not without complications. A notable issue is the "credential crisis" that arises when students who complete the IB abroad return to China. The recognition of

foreign qualifications is often fraught with bureaucratic and systemic challenges, particularly when students seek to reintegrate into China's professional or academic systems. This creates a paradox for Chinese families: while the IB facilitates outward mobility and international opportunities, it may inadvertently complicate the pathway back into local structures, highlighting the tension between globalization and localization.

### **The IB and the Construction of Global Citizens**

A key element of the IB's geopolitical appeal is its focus on producing "global citizens" equipped with the skills and dispositions necessary for navigating transnational environments. This rhetoric aligns closely with elite families' aspirations, as they seek to position their children not only for success in specific national contexts but for enduring influence across diverse global fields. The IB's curriculum, with its emphasis on intercultural understanding, collaborative learning, and ethical leadership, resonates with these ambitions, reinforcing its role as a tool for geopolitical positioning.

### **The Paradox of Globalization and Localization**

While the IB is celebrated for its global ethos, its effectiveness as a geopolitical strategy underscores the complex interplay between global aspirations and local realities. In Japan, parents must reconcile the IB's emphasis on creativity and critical thinking with the demands of the nation's competitive, exam-centric academic culture. In China, families grapple with the dual challenges of leveraging the IB for international mobility while managing its implications for cultural identity and local credentialing. These dynamics reflect the broader tensions inherent in global education systems, where aspirations for inclusivity and universality often collide with entrenched socio-economic and cultural disparities.

### **Conclusion: The IB as a Strategic Tool for the Elite**

Ultimately, the IB's geopolitical significance lies in its capacity to navigate these tensions while enabling elite families to achieve their long-term ambitions. By positioning their children within transnational networks of power, influence, and opportunity, families use the IB not merely as an educational tool but as a strategy for enduring socio-economic and cultural relevance. However, the challenges of balancing global aspirations with local realities reveal the complexities and contradictions embedded in this process, offering a critical lens through which to evaluate the IB's broader role in shaping global education and stratification.

#### **6.2.4 Cultural Values and Educational Aspirations**

Cultural values play a significant role in shaping how elite families in Japan and China perceive and engage with the International Baccalaureate (IB). These values influence not only the motivations of parents but also their expectations regarding how the IB can facilitate their children's future success in both local and global contexts. The IB, with its international curriculum and emphasis on global competencies, offers a unique framework through which families balance traditional cultural values with the demands of an increasingly globalized world. This dynamic is particularly evident in Japan and China, where local cultural norms and educational priorities intersect with the broader aspirations shaped by globalization.

#### **Japanese Families: Balancing Global Competencies with Cultural Continuity**

For many Japanese families, the decision to choose the IB is driven by the desire to equip their children with the skills necessary to thrive in a globalized world, while simultaneously



preserving strong ties to Japanese cultural traditions. This dual aspiration reflects the cultural emphasis on harmony, collective well-being, and societal integration, which are central to Japanese identity (Ishida, 2022; Takahashi, 2018). One parent succinctly expressed this balance: “The IB teaches independence, but it’s equally important for my child to understand Japan’s customs and society.” This viewpoint underscores a key aspect of Japanese educational values: while embracing international exposure and the development of global competencies, parents remain committed to fostering cultural continuity.

Japanese society places significant value on maintaining societal cohesion and ensuring that children respect traditional norms. The IB, with its emphasis on critical thinking, inquiry, and cultural awareness, offers an appealing alternative to Japan’s traditional, rote learning system (Takeuchi & Fukui, 2017). However, while the IB’s international focus is attractive, Japanese parents are cautious about how it may potentially challenge or disrupt cultural traditions and societal norms. Thus, for many families, the IB is not just a global educational tool, but a means of reconciling the demands of a rapidly globalizing world with the need to preserve local values and a sense of national identity (Sato, 2019).

### **Chinese Families: The Quest for Global Prestige Amidst Educational Pressures**

In contrast to Japan, Chinese families often perceive the IB as a means of escaping the intense academic pressures imposed by the Gaokao system, the highly competitive national university entrance exam. The Gaokao, which emphasizes memorization and rote learning, has long been a point of contention for parents who feel that it places undue psychological stress on children, hindering the development of well-rounded, independent thinkers (Chen & Lee, 2015). As one parent noted, “The Gaokao is too stressful. We want our child to be happy

and learn meaningfully, not just memorize.” This growing awareness of the need for a more holistic educational experience represents a shift in values within Chinese society, where there is increasing recognition of the importance of educational well-being, alongside academic achievement (Zhang & Li, 2018).

Despite this shift towards a more balanced educational approach, Chinese families remain deeply invested in global academic prestige. For many, the IB serves as a pathway to world-class universities abroad, offering an opportunity for their children to receive a high-quality, internationally recognized education that will ensure access to global career opportunities. As such, the IB is seen as not just an academic alternative but a strategic move to secure long-term social mobility within the globalized economy. However, this ambition also brings complications, especially when it comes to the potential challenges of credential recognition upon returning to China (Feng, 2019). The tension between embracing global educational opportunities and maintaining strong ties to Chinese cultural values illustrates the complex balancing act that Chinese parents face when considering the IB.

### **Cultural Contexts and the Perception of the IB**

These contrasting perspectives highlight the significance of cultural contexts in shaping how the IB is perceived and integrated into different educational systems. While the IB promotes a set of universal competencies, such as critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and adaptability, its value and implementation are deeply influenced by local cultural and educational norms. For Japanese families, the IB’s international outlook is attractive, but it must be adapted to fit within a cultural context that highly values social cohesion and respect for tradition. In China, the IB’s emphasis on holistic development and global mobility aligns

well with the nation's evolving educational needs, though the challenge remains in reconciling these global ambitions with local educational practices and cultural expectations.

Both countries demonstrate how local contexts and cultural values shape the way elite families engage with international education programs like the IB. While the program is marketed as fostering global citizens, the actual adoption and implementation of the IB reflect the diverse ways in which families negotiate the demands of globalization and the preservation of local traditions. Understanding these differences is crucial for assessing how the IB is understood and integrated into various educational systems and how it meets the unique aspirations of elite families in Japan and China.

### **Implications for the IB's Role in Global Education**

The differences in how Japanese and Chinese families engage with the IB offer important insights into the broader dynamics of global education. They underscore the tension between global aspirations and local cultural preservation, highlighting how educational programs like the IB must navigate these conflicting demands. While the IB promotes universal competencies, its adoption is highly contextual and shaped by local values and societal expectations. These findings suggest that the IB, while offering a valuable educational framework, must also be understood as part of a complex negotiation between the forces of globalization and the need to maintain cultural identity.

### **6.2.5 Relocation and Sacrifice as Adaptive Strategies**

Relocation has become a critical adaptive strategy, particularly for Chinese families seeking more affordable access to the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. This decision reflects a combination of economic pragmatism and strategic foresight, as these families move to regions where the cost of IB education is lower. By opting for relocation, they make significant personal sacrifices to provide their children with an educational pathway that aligns with their aspirations for global success. One Chinese mother, for instance, described her move to Thailand as a “sacrifice,” emphasizing that it was worth it for her son’s future, despite the financial and emotional challenges involved.

The relocation strategy highlights the deep financial and emotional investments these families make in securing access to elite educational opportunities. These families are often willing to leave their home countries, disrupt their established social and professional networks, and face cultural dislocation in order to access an international education that promises long-term socio-economic benefits. The willingness to make such sacrifices speaks to the high value placed on educational credentials that promise upward mobility, international opportunities, and enhanced global competitiveness.

This trend also underscores the global interconnectedness of elite education markets. As these families strategically choose locations where they can optimize their educational investments, they contribute to shaping educational dynamics in host countries, potentially driving up costs and influencing the educational offerings in those regions. The relocation of Chinese families is an example of how global mobility within elite educational systems can inadvertently contribute to rising educational inequalities in other regions, as the demand for affordable yet high-quality education pushes local systems to adapt, often at the cost of increasing exclusivity.

Moreover, the narratives of sacrifice and mobility challenge simplistic notions of privilege. While these families are economically privileged, the substantial sacrifices they make complicate the definition of privilege. Relocation for education involves not only financial investment but also emotional costs, such as family separation or adjusting to new cultural environments. These sacrifices highlight the complexity of privilege in the globalized world, where access to elite education is intertwined with significant personal and social costs.

This strategy of relocation, while an expression of elite mobility, also raises important questions about the sustainability of such approaches. While it allows elite families to access the benefits of international education, it also underscores the complexity of sustaining these strategies long term. These sacrifices, particularly the emotional toll and the potential disruption to family well-being, complicate the simplistic narrative of privilege. Ultimately, the relocation of Chinese families seeking IB education underscores the ways in which elite education strategies can perpetuate global inequalities, even as they offer new avenues for socio-economic advancement and global integration.

### **6.3 Broader Implications**

The research findings provide critical insights into the intersection of educational inequality, social reproduction, and the tensions between global and local educational objectives. By examining how elite families engage with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, this study highlights the mechanisms through which global educational systems both challenge and reinforce existing social stratification.

### 6.3.1 Educational Inequality and Social Reproduction

The findings of this study underscore a key paradox in the International Baccalaureate's (IB) mission. While the IB promotes itself as a vehicle for global citizenship and inclusivity, its accessibility remains largely restricted to affluent families. The high costs of tuition and additional expenses, such as supplementary tutoring and relocation, act as barriers that perpetuate social inequality rather than fostering the democratization of education. This exclusivity aligns with Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, wherein elite families leverage educational systems to convert economic capital into cultural capital, thus ensuring the maintenance of socio-economic privilege across generations (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003).

This paradox is particularly evident in the case of the IB, where the emphasis on international exposure and global competencies may be seen as progressive, yet the high financial and logistical costs limit access to families with significant resources. As such, rather than democratizing education, the IB functions as an instrument of social reproduction, reinforcing the privileges of those already within elite social strata. The prevalence of economic privilege in determining access to such educational opportunities raises critical questions for policymakers. How can access to the IB be expanded without compromising its quality? One avenue might involve integrating the IB into public education systems or creating public-private partnerships aimed at lowering costs. Alternatively, more inclusive models could be developed to equip diverse populations with the global competencies that the IB promotes. However, any efforts to democratize access must be carefully designed, as the risk of diluting the IB's prestige could lead elite families to seek alternative exclusive programs, further exacerbating educational inequalities.

### **6.3.2 The Interplay of Global and Local Educational Goals**

The interplay between global educational aspirations and local cultural values is a central theme of this study. Japanese and Chinese families each navigate the tensions between international exposure and local cultural expectations in unique ways, which in turn shape how they engage with the IB program.

For Japanese families, the IB presents an opportunity to equip children with the critical thinking, creativity, and global competencies necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. However, this opportunity is tempered by a deep cultural imperative to maintain strong ties to Japanese society, which values social cohesion, respect for tradition, and collective well-being (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). For these families, the IB must be balanced with the need to preserve their children's connection to Japanese identity and societal norms. This dual aspiration underscores the necessity of an educational framework that can simultaneously accommodate global competencies while respecting local cultural and societal values. Educational systems that can blend international curricula with local traditions are increasingly in demand. Programs like the IB must find ways to offer flexibility, ensuring that they do not merely impose a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead integrate elements that are culturally sensitive and adaptable to local contexts.

On the other hand, Chinese families tend to view the IB as a tool for facilitating international mobility and access to prestigious global universities. This is particularly important in a rapidly modernizing country like China, where economic growth has been closely tied to global engagement, and access to international education is seen as a way to position one's child for success in the global economy. However, as the Chinese education system evolves,

with an increasing emphasis on holistic development and well-being, more families are beginning to prioritize educational models that reduce stress, such as the IB, over the high-stakes Gaokao examination system. While Chinese parents continue to view the IB as a critical pathway to international opportunities, they are increasingly concerned with ensuring that their children's educational experiences align with a more balanced and less competitive approach, emphasizing well-being and meaningful learning.

These differences in parental motivations reflect broader shifts in the values and expectations surrounding education in both countries. In Japan, the tension between the desire for global skills and the importance of cultural continuity underscores the challenge of harmonizing global and local educational goals. In contrast, China's focus on global mobility reveals the increasing alignment between educational aspirations and the demands of the global economy.

The implications for international education programs like the IB are profound. As families in different cultural and socio-economic contexts engage with global educational frameworks, there is an increasing need for educational models that offer both flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions. The IB, as well as other transnational education systems, must evolve to better accommodate the diverse aspirations of families while ensuring that they do not simply serve as tools for reproducing social inequalities.

These findings suggest that while the IB and similar programs contribute to developing global competencies, they also reveal how deeply embedded cultural and socio-economic factors shape educational access and outcomes. To fully understand and address the challenges and opportunities within global education systems, it is critical to examine both



the local realities and global trends that influence how education is accessed and valued across different societies. Thus, the future of international education systems like the IB will depend on their ability to adapt and integrate global aspirations with local educational and cultural needs.

#### **6.4 Contributions to Theory and Literature**

This study contributes to ongoing theoretical discussions in the fields of globalization, social reproduction, and elite education by applying Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework to understand the International Baccalaureate (IB) as a tool for accumulating cultural and social capital. The findings demonstrate how the IB functions as a mechanism for converting economic resources into valuable cultural capital, reinforcing Bourdieu's notion of education as a vehicle for social stratification and maintaining elite privilege across generations. The behaviors of elite families—strategically leveraging global education systems—further substantiate Bourdieu's ideas about social reproduction, showing how education maintains socio-economic boundaries.

Moreover, this research enriches the literature on international education by exploring the complex ways in which cultural values influence parental motivations in both Japan and China. This study provides nuanced insights into how global educational programs, such as the IB, are adapted to local socio-cultural contexts, emphasizing the intersection of global aspirations and local educational imperatives. The unique cultural practices in these countries underline the importance of understanding local specificities when assessing the role of global education systems in social mobility and cultural preservation. This adds depth to

discussions surrounding the global-local educational nexus, advocating for more culturally sensitive analyses of international educational strategies.

## **6.5 Practical Implications and Recommendations**

### **6.5.1 Policy Recommendations**

Although broadening access to the IB is frequently suggested as a means to address educational inequality, such an approach must be critically reexamined. Expanding access without confronting the underlying mechanisms that facilitate elite distinction risks engendering new forms of stratification, as affluent families will inevitably devise alternative strategies to maintain their advantage. Rather than striving for universal accessibility to the IB per se, policy efforts should be oriented toward systemic reforms that mitigate structural inequities in education. For instance:

- **Equity-Driven Subsidies for Marginalized Communities:** Financial aid programs should be specifically tailored to support underrepresented groups—such as first-generation students or those from low-income backgrounds—in order to counterbalance the disproportionate benefits accruing to the affluent under broad-based initiatives.
- **Strengthening Public Education Systems:** Rather than concentrating resources solely on the IB, policymakers could invest in enhancing the overall quality and competitiveness of public education. By incorporating IB-inspired elements—such as critical thinking, global awareness, and interdisciplinary learning—into national curricula, educational benefits can be extended more broadly without reinforcing existing exclusivity.

- **Promoting Alternative Pathways to Prestige:** It is imperative to support a diverse array of models for academic and vocational excellence that challenge the hegemony of elite credentials like the IB diploma. Initiatives that valorize local, community-based education and culturally relevant competencies can offer viable alternatives to traditional markers of prestige.
- **Localized Admissions Criteria:** Developing admissions policies that favor students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds can help counter the monopolization of elite programs by affluent families. Additionally, encouraging regional accreditation processes that recognize varied forms of academic achievement beyond the IB can foster a more inclusive evaluation framework.

### **6.5.2 Recommendations for IB Schools**

IB schools face the dual challenge of preserving their international prestige while simultaneously addressing localized needs and reducing barriers to entry. However, efforts to broaden access must be executed with strategic nuance, so as not to compromise the program's academic rigor or inadvertently perpetuate inequities. Key recommendations include:

- **Localized Support Structures:**
  - In Japan, schools should consider expanding programs that facilitate students' reintegration into the national education system, thereby easing their transition into competitive domestic universities.

– In China, schools are encouraged to collaborate with local higher education institutions to develop clearer pathways for IB graduates, thereby addressing parental concerns related to credential recognition.

- Reassessing Tuition Models:

Flexible tuition schemes, calibrated to reflect regional economic conditions, could enable broader participation from middle-income families without undermining the program's selective character. Potential measures include income-based tuition caps or discounts for families with multiple enrolled children.

- Leveraging Technology for Inclusion:

The adoption of hybrid or online IB programs could extend the curriculum's reach to underserved regions. These technological adaptations must, however, maintain the high academic standards that define the IB, ensuring that inclusivity does not come at the expense of educational quality.

- Strengthening Non-Academic Support:

Beyond academic instruction, schools should address the socio-emotional needs of students and families. Enhancing support services—such as mental health resources, career counseling, and community-building initiatives—can improve the overall experience and reduce disparities in navigating the program's demands.

- Promoting Cultural Sensitivity:

It is essential for IB schools to recognize and adapt to their local cultural contexts. Integrating elements of local language, history, and traditions alongside the standard IB

curriculum may help bridge the gap between a globalized education and local identity, thereby fostering a more inclusive environment.

## **Conclusion**

Efforts to democratize access to the IB must be reconceptualized within the broader context of systemic educational reform. Given that elite families will continuously develop alternative means to sustain their distinctiveness, a sole focus on expanding access is insufficient to disrupt entrenched patterns of elite reproduction. By addressing structural inequities and fostering multiple, culturally nuanced pathways to success, policymakers and educational institutions can create more equitable ecosystems. Such reforms, while not entirely eradicating elite differentiation, have the potential to reduce the disproportionate accumulation of capital among the affluent and promote a more inclusive framework for educational achievement in a globalized world.

## **6.6 Future Research Directions**

This study opens several avenues for future research, particularly in understanding the interplay between globalization, education, and elite strategies.

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Future research could investigate the long-term impacts of IB education on students' career trajectories, social mobility, and access to elite networks. These studies would help determine whether the IB genuinely fosters global competence and opportunity or primarily consolidates privilege within existing elite structures.

2. **Focus on Marginalized Communities:** More research is needed on families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who aspire to access the IB program. This could include examining their motivations, the obstacles they face, and the strategies they employ. Such research would provide critical insights into how systemic barriers could be mitigated to foster greater inclusivity in elite education.
3. **Comparative Regional Studies:** Exploring the use and perception of the IB across diverse cultural and economic contexts would offer valuable perspectives on its global relevance. For instance, studies comparing the program's adoption and impact in regions such as Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Latin America could uncover unique challenges and opportunities specific to those areas.
4. **Exploration of Alternative Credential Systems:** Research could also investigate other emerging international curricula and how they compete with or complement the IB. Understanding how these systems interact with global education trends would shed light on whether the IB will maintain its position as the leading credential in elite education.
5. **Digital and Hybrid Models:** With the rise of digital learning, future studies could explore the feasibility of hybrid or fully online IB programs. Research in this area could address whether such models could make the program more inclusive while preserving its academic rigor and global appeal.

## **6.7 Final Reflections**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) represents a unique intersection of global aspirations and local realities, symbolizing both the potential and the contradictions of international

education in the 21st century. As an educational framework, the IB aims to cultivate globally minded individuals equipped with critical thinking skills, intercultural understanding, and adaptability. For many families, however, the IB is not merely an academic choice but a calculated strategy to secure advantages in an increasingly competitive world. This study highlights how the IB, despite its ideals of inclusivity and global citizenship, operates as a tool for elite reproduction, reinforcing social stratification under the guise of meritocracy and educational innovation.

This duality—the IB as a pathway to global competence and a mechanism of exclusivity—raises important questions about the broader implications of global education systems. For elite families, the IB offers more than academic credentials; it serves as cultural and social capital, facilitating access to transnational networks, elite universities, and prestigious careers. At the same time, its inaccessibility to most families underscores its role in perpetuating educational and socio-economic inequalities. The program's high tuition fees, the additional costs of relocation or private tutoring, and its alignment with the aspirations of affluent families further entrench the divide between those who can afford such opportunities and those who cannot.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study align with and extend Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital and social reproduction. The IB illustrates how elites adapt to the massification of education by seeking new avenues to differentiate themselves, ensuring that their children retain a competitive edge. This phenomenon exemplifies what Bourdieu described as the interplay between habitus and field: families strategically navigate the educational field, employing resources and strategies that align with their socio-economic position to secure advantageous outcomes. The IB, as a field in itself, is shaped by these elite

strategies, reinforcing its status as an exclusive domain while maintaining the appearance of openness and meritocracy.

This study also sheds light on the nuanced ways in which local cultural and economic contexts shape the adoption and perception of the IB. In Japan, the program is often seen as a means of fostering critical thinking and global competence, addressing perceived limitations of the national education system. For Japanese families, the IB represents a balance between global aspirations and local reintegration, reflecting dual ambitions to succeed internationally and within Japan. In contrast, Chinese families often view the IB as a stepping stone to global opportunities, emphasizing international mobility and the pursuit of prestigious foreign universities. These differences illustrate the complex interactions between global education systems and local cultural dynamics, challenging simplistic narratives about globalization and education.

However, the findings also prompt reflection on the limitations of programs like the IB in addressing broader issues of equity and access. While the IB aspires to develop open-minded, globally conscious individuals, its structural barriers—financial, cultural, and institutional—make it inaccessible to many. Even if reforms were implemented to broaden access, this study argues that elites would likely adapt, finding new ways to maintain their positional advantage. As such, the IB's potential as a democratizing force remains constrained by its deep entanglement with the logics of privilege and exclusivity.

Despite these limitations, the IB's global influence and pedagogical innovation cannot be dismissed. It has set a benchmark for international education, inspiring curricula that prioritize critical thinking, global citizenship, and cultural empathy. For policymakers and educators, the challenge lies in reconciling these ideals with the program's socio-economic realities. How can the benefits of the IB be extended beyond elite circles without diluting its



perceived value? How can global education systems balance inclusivity with excellence in an era of growing inequality?

In conclusion, this study has contributed to the critical dialogue on global education by examining the IB's role as both a promise and a paradox. While it offers opportunities for global engagement and academic excellence, it also reflects and reinforces the inequalities inherent in contemporary education systems. The IB's future relevance will depend on its ability to navigate these tensions, balancing its global aspirations with a more equitable and inclusive vision. As international education continues to evolve, the IB serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges and possibilities of globalization, demanding ongoing scrutiny and reflection from scholars, policymakers, and educators alike.

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## Appendix 1 Survey questions

### Survey Questions

#### Section 1: Demographic Information

1. What is your age range?
  - Younger than 35
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55 and above
2. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Prefer not to say
3. Where do you currently reside?
4. How many children do you have enrolled in the IB program?
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3 or more
5. What grade(s) are your children in?
  - Primary
  - Middle
  - High School

#### Section 2: Parental Motivations 6. What motivated you to enroll your child(ren) in the IB program? (Select all that apply)

- Academic excellence
  - Development of critical thinking skills
  - Preparation for global opportunities
  - Networking with elite families
  - Other (please specify)
7. How important is the IB program in your decision to support your child's future career? (Scale 1-5, 1 being not important and 5 being very important)

#### Section 3: Perceptions of the IB 8. What do you perceive as the main benefits of the IB program? (Select all that apply)

- Holistic education
- Emphasis on inquiry-based learning
- Focus on global citizenship
- Preparation for university
- Other (please specify)

9. What challenges have you encountered with the IB program? (Open-ended)

**Section 4: Educational and Career Aspirations**

10. What are your long-term educational aspirations for your child(ren)? - Admission to a top-tier university in my home country - Admission to a top-tier international university - Other (please specify)

11. Do you intend for your child(ren) to return to your home country after completing their education? - Yes - No - Undecided - Other (please specify)

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions for IB School Directors/Administrators

The following questions serve as a general guide for the interview. While they provide a structure for key topics of interest, the interview will be flexible, allowing for follow-up questions or adjustments based on the flow of discussion. The researcher's aim is to explore your insights and experiences in depth, so please feel free to elaborate or introduce any relevant perspectives beyond the questions listed.

### 1. IB School Positioning & Marketing

- How do you usually explain the benefits of IB to prospective parents?
- What type of families are most interested in IB in your school?
- Do you feel IB schools in Japan/China focus on **academic prestige** or **international-mindedness** more?
- Has the way IB is marketed changed over time in your school?

### 2. Who Gets Access to IB?

- What are the biggest barriers for students and families who want to join IB?
- Do you see IB as a program for elite families, or do you think it's becoming more inclusive?
- Are there financial aid programs or support systems for students from different economic backgrounds?

### 3. IB Curriculum and Adaptation

- Have you had to adapt IB teaching methods to better fit Japanese/Chinese students?
- What are some challenges IB students face that might be different from those in national programs?
- How do IB students in your school typically perform in university admissions?

#### 4. IB and Global Mobility

- Do most IB students at your school aim for universities abroad?
- How does IB help students who want to stay in Japan/China instead of going overseas?
- Have you seen families relocate just to attend IB schools?

#### 5. Future of IB in Japan & China

- Do you think IB will grow in Japan/China, or will it remain a niche program?
- What changes do you think are needed to make IB more widely accepted?
- If there were no financial or policy barriers, what would be the ideal way to expand IB in your country?

## **Appendix 3: Interview Questions for Parents (Japan & China)**

The following questions serve as a general guide for the interview. While they provide a structure for key topics of interest, the interview will be flexible, allowing for follow-up questions or adjustments based on the flow of discussion. The researcher's aim is to explore your insights and experiences in depth, so please feel free to elaborate or introduce any relevant perspectives beyond the questions listed.

### **1. Choosing IB: Why IB for Your Child?**

- What made you choose the IB program for your child?
- How is IB different from other school options you considered?
- Was getting into a top university part of your reason for choosing IB?
- Did you think about other international programs before choosing IB?

### **2. Support and Resources for IB**

- What kind of support does your child need to succeed in IB? (e.g., tutoring, extra lessons, summer programs)
- Do you think IB is mainly for families with more financial resources? Why or why not?
- Have you noticed any social or cultural advantages IB students have compared to students in national schools?

### **3. IB School Marketing & Admissions**

- How did the IB school present itself when you were choosing a school?

- What were the main selling points they emphasized? (e.g., international recognition, university acceptance, skills for the future)
- Do you feel IB schools in Japan/China try to be **exclusive (elite)** or **inclusive (open to many families)**?

#### 4. IB and International Mobility

- Do you see IB as a way to give your child more international opportunities?
- Have you considered moving cities or countries for your child's education?
- If IB were not available, what kind of school would you have chosen instead?

#### 5. IB and Social Status

- Do you think having an IB education gives children an advantage in society?
- Do IB families tend to belong to a certain social or economic group?
- Do you think IB is still special, or is it becoming just another school credential?

#### 6. Barriers & Challenges in IB

- What was the hardest part of enrolling your child in an IB program?
- Do you think IB's English-language requirement makes it hard for some students to join?
- What would make IB more accessible in Japan/China?
- Do you think IB should be more available in public schools?