

PROS AND CONS OF INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SCHOOL EDUCATION: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Nepal's drive to improve quality, equity, and resilience in schooling intersects with a global search for pedagogies that move beyond rote learning. The International Baccalaureate (IB) offers inquiry-focused frameworks—the Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP)—that emphasise concept-driven learning, the Learner Profile, and Approaches to Learning (ATL) skills designed to help students “learn how to learn.”

Methods: Using collaborative autoethnography (CEA), I (IB MYP Year III student), in collaboration with my parents, generated and analysed two years of diaries, onsite observation notes, and family dialogues. Reflexive thematic analysis, member checks, and an audit trail supported trustworthiness.

Results: Six themes emerged. (1) Inquiry as identity and agency—voice/choice and transdisciplinary connections became routine in PYP/MYP classrooms. (2) Assessment and feedback cultures—criterion-related rubrics clarified expectations, but task “bunching” elevated stress. (3) Community and relationships—teacher rapport and the Learner Profile reframed feedback as character-building. (4) Access, resources, and equity—rich facilities and clubs supported learning, while affordability raised concerns. (5) Transitions and curricular continuity—shared ATL vocabulary eased school moves, yet local differences in planning and calendars mattered. (6) Wellbeing and self-management—competitive chess served as a laboratory for time management, metacognition, and emotion regulation, with perceived (but context-dependent) transfer to academics. These experiences map closely to IB's published aims for inquiry, ATL, and holistic growth. Findings converge with policy priorities in Nepal's School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022/23–2031/32, suggesting low-cost, scalable levers: coordinated assessment calendars; ATL-infused feedback routines across subjects; and transition toolkits for families moving between IB schools.

Conclusion: IB's strongest contributions in this context were inquiry-driven agency, transparent criteria, and shared skills language; constraints clustered around workload peaks, uneven implementation, and affordability. Practical cross-pollination—adapting ATL routines and assessment design principles beyond IB—can extend benefits to more learners while aligning with national reform goals.

Keywords: International Baccalaureate, Teaching, Learning, Education, Ethnography, Autoethnography, Collaborative Autoethnography, IB World School, IB Continuum School, Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP), Diploma Programme (DP), Nepal

INTRODUCTION

Background

When my parents enrolled me in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) at the start of Grade 1 and reflected across time, my parents in Nepal—and most in the world—were wrestling with an uncomfortable truth: schooling and education are not the same thing (Shujaa, 1993; Aronowitz, 2015). International evidence described a “learning crisis,” with far too many children attending school but failing to gain foundational literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills (Whitted, 2011; Wolf & McCoy, 2019; Oketch, 2021; Clarke, 2022; Garg, 2024). In low- and middle-income countries, learning poverty—the share of 10-year-olds unable to read and understand a simple text—rose to more than 50 to 70 per cent in the wake of COVID-19 (Azevedo, 2021; Gandhi et al., 2021; Afkar et al., 2023), underscoring deep structural weaknesses in traditional, exam-centric systems.

In South Asia and Nepal, these global patterns intersect with local realities. Nepal’s School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022/23–2031/32 explicitly prioritises quality, equity, and resilience, acknowledging persistent gaps in foundational learning, uneven instructional quality, and resource constraints that limit opportunities for many learners (GoN, 2022). The plan argues for teaching that moves beyond rote memorisation toward active, student-centred pedagogies and better assessment practices—so that more children learn well, not just attend school.

These concerns echo long-standing critiques of “traditional education,” often described as teacher-dominated, textbook-driven, and examination-oriented (Grant et al., 2014; Harrell, 2019). In contrast, progressive education—rooted in the work of philosopher John Dewey (1938)—holds that learning is social, experiential, and reflective, and that curriculum should connect to real problems in children’s lives (Rodgers, 2002; Howlett, 2013; Kolb, 2014; Tippet & Lee, 2019). Dewey cautioned that neither “old” nor “new” models are sufficient on their own; what matters is a thoughtful design that links experience to disciplined inquiry (Rodgers, 2002; Johnston, 2006; Nelsen, 2015; Dixon, 2020). This theoretical lineage helps explain why many families, including mine, seek approaches that develop both knowledge and habits of mind.

In Nepal, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Program (PYP) was first authorised at Premier International School on 15 December 2014, followed by Genius School on 23 September 2018. Within this landscape, my parents chose the International Baccalaureate (IB) PYP in Genius School because it offered a coherent, progressive model that felt both principled and practical, as also noted by other IB PYP researchers (Drake et al., 2015; Zeng, 2024). The PYP foregrounds concept-driven inquiry, transdisciplinary learning, and a community culture shaped by the IB Learner Profile—ten attributes (for example, Inquirer, Caring, Principled, Reflective) that point beyond test scores to the kind of person a learner becomes (Shreelakshmi, 2022; Zeng, 2024). The PYP is built around three pillars—the learner, learning and teaching, and the learning community—and uses a collaboratively designed programme of inquiry to connect big ideas across subjects (Drake et al., 2015; Medwell et al., 2017; Gurkan, 2021). For my family, that meant a daily experience of voice and choice, clear purposes for tasks, and feedback that built confidence as well as competence.

As I progressed into the Middle Years Programme (MYP) at Swostishree Gurukul IB World School, the Approaches to Learning (ATL) skill framework (thinking, communication, social, self-management, research) and criterion-related assessment (Guide, 2008; Ramli et al., 2021) provided language and structure for self-regulated learning. These features aligned with the way

I was also growing as a competitive chess player (FIDE, 2025): planning, managing time, reflecting after each game, and transferring those habits back into schoolwork. My parents noticed that the IB emphasis on inquiry and feedback addressed precisely what they worried about in traditional models—limited agency, memorisation without meaning, and high-stakes exams as the only mirror for learning.

Statement of the problem and rationale

Despite policy intentions and school reforms, many learners in Nepal still experience a mismatch between the promise of education and the day-to-day realities of teaching and assessment (Andersson & Lindkvist, 2000; Valentin, 2006; Subedi, 2018; Lal, 2025). Families make schooling decisions within this tension, often with limited, experience-based evidence about how specific pedagogical models (such as the IB continuum) actually shape learning, identity, wellbeing, and family life. This creates a need for research that is both rigorous and personal—documenting lived practice rather than only policy and programme claims of the school education sector plan (GoN, 2022; MOEST, 2025).

Purpose of this study

This article uses collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016) —a qualitative approach that brings together the voice of a student (author) based on my own experience and reflections from my parents—to explore the pros and cons of the International Baccalaureate (IB) teaching and learning for school education in Nepal. Specifically, this study aims to: (a) narrate and analyze my experience moving from PYP into MYP (b) examine how inquiry, criterion-related assessment, and Approaches to Learning (ATL) operate in everyday practice, (c) consider interactions between school learning and co-curricular development (for example, competitive chess), and (d) reflect on implications for Nepal's reform priorities around quality and equity. By situating an individual story within global, regional, and national debates about the aims of education, we hope to offer evidence that is at once human, situated, and useful to educators, parents, and policymakers.

METHODS

Design

This study adopts a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang et al., 2016) —a qualitative design that is simultaneously autobiographical and ethnographic while leveraging joint meaning-making among collaborators (here, the author and parents). CAE provides practical procedures for shared data-gathering, dialogic analysis, and negotiated writing (Roe & Uekusha, 2020).

Participants and context

The focal participant is a Grade 8 (MYP Year III) student enrolled at an IB World School in Kathmandu. School contexts include: Genius School (IB authorised for PYP & MYP), Machhapuchchhre School (IB authorised for PYP), and Swostishree Gurukul (IB School offering PYP, MYP & DP).

Data collection

The researcher used three complementary sources across two academic years and retrospective memory work: (1) Personal learning diary (student): weekly entries about tasks, feedback, ATL strategies, and emotions; (2) Onsite field notes (parents): observations during exhibitions/PTMs, homework routines, assessment briefings, school visits, and correspondences; (3) Collaborative dialogues (family): records and debriefs after units/assessments and after chess tournaments, then member-checked summaries.

Scientific justification

IB's MYP emphasises concept-driven, criterion-related assessment and ATL skill development; the design foregrounds lived practice over program claims by examining how such features are enacted in daily study and family life. CAE is suitable for connecting the student's micro-experiences to broader cultural scripts of schooling in Nepal (Dahal & Luitel, 2022; 2023)

Data analysis and trustworthiness

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's six phases (familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, reporting) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), iteratively moving between student and parent vantage points and anchoring interpretations with verbatim narrative vignettes. Trustworthiness was pursued via prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation of sources, member checks, and an audit trail, guided by Lincoln & Guba's criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Carcary, 2009; Anney, 2014; Amankwaa, 2016; Amin et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2024).

Ethics

All reflections are presented with family consent. School names appear as part of contextual description; evaluative judgments are clearly framed as subjective experiences.

RESULTS

The analysis resulted in the construction of six interdependent themes (with sub-themes). Analytical commentary is accompanied by italicised, indented vignettes capturing the participant voice in situ.

Theme 1: Inquiry as identity and agency

Inquiry practices in PYP/MYP supported ownership, with student-led questioning and product choices. Connecting concepts across subjects (e.g., energy in science, sustainability in I&S) mirrored the IB's transdisciplinary and concept-based design. For me, chess functioned as a parallel "inquiry laboratory," strengthening my planning and evaluation habits akin to ATL thinking skills while coming to MYP. This resulted in voice and choice in tasks, transdisciplinary connections, and chess as an inquiry habit.

"When the unit began with a statement of inquiry, I felt I was not just receiving facts but building a map. In chess, I visualise lines; in class, I visualise concept links. That felt empowering."

Theme 2: Assessment and feedback cultures

MYP's criterion-related rubrics clarified expectations and supported self-assessment, yet cumulative deadlines sometimes spiked stress, especially during interdisciplinary tasks and personal-project style work. I learned to parse descriptors (Achievement Level 1–8) and to plan drafts accordingly. I not only got criterion clarity and feedback literacy, but also the writing workload and emotional load.

"Rubrics turned the mystery into steps. But when multiple subjects scheduled big tasks in one week, the 'criteria' felt like a mountain of tiny footholds I had to climb fast. Writing neatly and cleanly with a good pace was always a challenge for me."

Theme 3: Community and relationships

Regular conferences and unit briefings enhanced transparency; group tasks built collaboration skills but required scaffolding for equitable participation. The learner profile discourse (caring,

principled, open-minded) shaped classroom norms when consistently modelled. We fostered teacher–student rapport, parent–school communication, and peer collaboration.

“When my teacher referenced me as ‘Principled’ and ‘Communicator’ during feedback, it felt like the handwriting mattered less than the kind of person I was practising to achieve.”

Theme 4: Access, resources, and equity

Resource-rich settings in supported labs, design, and clubs; however, IB affordability remains a concern for many families in Nepal. Situating IB within national reform highlights opportunities to align ATL/inquiry practices with drives for quality and resilience post-pandemic. The dissonance and discussions around fees and facilities, money and materials, manual skills and technology, power and justice, and issues of inclusion were prominent in IB schools’ matters in the context of Nepal.

“I loved extra-curricular activities (ECA) and co-curricular activities (CCA) options and design lab. During MYP, I appreciate that both schools introduced chess after I joined, as a matter of acknowledgement, recognition and motivation. I knew not every friend outside IB schools gets this. I wondered how the schools in Nepal could make ‘learning how to learn’ available for more students as a matter of fairness, equity and justice.”

Theme 5: Transitions and curricular continuity

Shifts between schools brought subtle differences in unit planning and assessment language, despite shared IB frameworks—illustrating how local interpretation affects student experience. The common ATL vocabulary eased re-entry. While moving across IB schools, consideration of aligning task calendars and terminology drift can help in a smooth transition.

“Changing schools felt like switching openings in chess—same pieces, different plans. Knowing ATL terms helped me settle faster.”

Theme 6: Wellbeing and self-management (chess as a case)

Tournament preparation and FIDE-rated play cultivated routines for goal-setting, reflection, and emotional regulation. Evidence on chess-to-school transfer is mixed, but I experienced benefits in focus and planning and also won various tournaments under 12 years while building these habits. Time management, metacognition, and bounded transfer are crucial in learning.

“Before an under-12 event, I rehearsed tactics, then practised a ‘what if’ list for science too. I don’t know if chess raises grades, but it taught me how to breathe during pressure and to think in plans, not panic.”

Autoethnographic reflections as a student of the IB education system

Reflections on Genius IB World School

“Inquiry time felt like play with purpose—building, asking, showing. Reading became my habit as teachers sent a new book for me to read almost every day. The first time I heard ‘Inquirer’ and ‘Caring’ on the wall, I believed school could be about the kind of person I am becoming, as my teachers said my nature matched the name of the school.”

Reflections on Machhapuchchhre IB World School

“Criteria were new muscles for the body of learning. I learned to read tasks like positions in chess—evaluate, plan, review. Group work was powerful when roles were clear, but hard when effort wasn’t balanced, especially on the assignment of a chunk of written homework.”

Reflections on Swostishree Gurukul IB World School

“Teachers coached ATL explicitly. The language of feedback (‘explain, justify, evaluate’) echoed across subjects. I started keeping a feedback journal alongside my chess books and notebook. I learned to review books, articles and write review articles and published my first article in a scientific research journal.”

“I love that the school runs only five days a week. I love the warm swimming pool at the school during winter. I feel honoured that many students expressed their interest in the chess club led by me, and the school installed a big chessboard in the school premises with life-size chess pieces. We are still advocating to get a coach.”

Autoethnographic reflections as parents of the IB education system

Reflections on Genius IB World School

“The PYP exhibition culture introduced us to inquiry and agency early. Communication was frequent, individual care for the child was significant, and we valued the emphasis on dispositions. We had to change the school carefully due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the location shifting plan of the school towards a long distance and our aim to promote/skip the grade of our child.”

Reflections on Machhapuchchhre IB World School

“Transitioning into MYP brought rubric literacy for us, too. We appreciated the transparency of the criteria, but felt calendar bunching at times. The school’s effort on academic improvement was encouraging, while that for the IB journey seemed to be evolving. The support that the school offered to our child was admirable. We had to change the school due to no immediate planning for the school to get accredited to IB MYP, and our willingness to admit our child to a nearby IB MYP-accredited school.”

Reflections on Swostishree Gurukul IB World School

“ATL coaching and interdisciplinary connections stood out. The school’s established IB systems helped, though we still advocated for workload balancing around tournaments and school breaks. The school is responsive to the voices of children and parents. We are privileged to have an accredited IB continuum school in our municipality and are happy to collaborate in the school’s effort to create a child-friendly and healthy school environment.”

DISCUSSION

To orient the reader, we note that the six themes distilled in the Results—*inquiry and agency; assessment and feedback; community and relationships; access and equity; transitions and curricular continuity; and wellbeing/self-management (with chess as a case)*—are the analytic through-lines that this Discussion revisits and situates against established frameworks and policies. Each theme is grounded in the student and parent vignettes yet also maps onto core features of the International Baccalaureate design (for example, *inquiry-driven learning, criterion-related assessment, and Approaches to Learning skills*), which provides a coherent lens for interpreting gains in voice, clarity, and metacognition reported in the data. At the same time, the equity and transition tensions we surfaced resonate with Nepal’s School Education Sector Plan (2022/23–2031/32) emphasis on quality, equity, and resilience, allowing us to read family-level experiences alongside national priorities. In the pages that follow, we therefore move iteratively between the lived evidence and these reference points to explain where our findings converge with, extend, or complicate the

existing literature and policy intentions.

1. Inquiry, agency, and learning: aligning lived experience with evidence

My finding that inquiry practices cultivated ownership, voice, and transdisciplinary thinking is consistent with progressive education traditions that frame learning as experiential, social, and reflective (Dewey, 1938; Rodgers, 2002; Howlett, 2013; Kolb, 2014; Tippet & Lee, 2019). In the **International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP)** and **Middle Years Programme (MYP)**, this ethos is operationalised through concept-driven units, a collaboratively designed programme of inquiry, and explicit emphasis on learner dispositions, all of which my narratives illustrate (Drake et al., 2015; Medwell et al., 2017; Gurkan, 2021; Shreelakshmi, 2022; Zeng, 2024). The sense of “building a map” of ideas, and transferring habits from chess to classwork, coheres with the **Approaches to Learning (ATL)** framework that names thinking, research, communication, social, and self-management as core, teachable skills (Ramli et al., 2021).

2. Assessment and feedback: clarity with pressure points

I experienced **criterion-related assessment** as clarifying and growth-oriented—students can locate themselves on descriptors and plan drafts toward higher achievement levels—while also noting workload peaks when tasks cluster (Guide, 2008; Ramli et al., 2021). This dual reality fits my results: rubrics and best-fit judgements enhanced feedback literacy, yet **calendar bunching** produced stress, especially for extended writing. The handwriting challenge I describe further shows how product demands can become hidden barriers even in transparent systems; schools, therefore, need to align scheduling and modalities with the intent of fair, meaningful assessment (Guide, 2008).

3. Community, relationships, and the Learner Profile

Teacher–student rapport and the **IB Learner Profile** reframed feedback as character-forming practice—“Communicator,” “Principled,” and “Caring” were not posters but shared language enacted in conferences and comments. This mirrors research and practitioner accounts that the learner profile can humanise assessment and cultivate an ethical classroom culture when consistently modelled (Shreelakshmi, 2022; Zeng, 2024; Drake et al., 2015).

4. Access, resources, and equity in Nepal’s policy moment

My reflections on facilities (for example, design labs, clubs) and affordability resonate with **equity** concerns in Nepal’s sector plan. The **School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022/23–2031/32** urges a shift from rote learning toward active pedagogy and better assessment while targeting quality, equity, and resilience (GoN, 2022). My data suggest that ATL routines (goal-setting, reflection, peer feedback) and inquiry design principles developed in IB contexts could inform wider system improvement without requiring full programme adoption—an especially relevant point as the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology pursues quality-focused reforms (MOEST, 2025).

5. Transitions and curricular continuity across IB schools

Moving between IB schools, I encountered **local variation** in unit planning, timing, and terminology despite a shared framework. My experience supports practical alignment mechanisms—shared calendars, common rubric language workshops, and transition briefings—to smooth learner mobility within Nepal’s IB ecosystem (Guide, 2008). Importantly, the common ATL vocabulary eased re-entry, highlighting the value of a stable skills language across sites (Ramli et al., 2021).

6. Wellbeing and self-management: the chess case

The chess narrative shows how co-curricular pursuits can function as laboratories for **time management, metacognition, and emotion regulation**. My tournament preparation, reflection habits, and under-12 successes illustrate personally meaningful gains and demonstrate how ATL routines can travel between domains. While broader claims about academic transfer remain debated, chess provided a concrete context for practising planning, focus, and review—skills also central to MYP learning cycles (FIDE, 2025; Ramli et al., 2021).

7. Implications for Nepal: from classroom routines to system learning

My results point to three practical levers for the reform agenda:

1. **Assessment by design:** cross-subject scheduling protocols to prevent task clustering while preserving rigorous criteria (Guide, 2008).
2. **ATL for all:** low-cost professional learning communities to adapt ATL routines (journals, success criteria, peer conferences) beyond IB schools (GoN, 2022; MOEST, 2025; Ramli et al., 2021).
3. **Transition toolkits:** PSP-aligned checklists (shared rubrics, glossary, orientation to expectations) to reduce friction when families move across schools (Guide, 2008).

8. Methodological value and limits of collaborative autoethnography

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) enabled triangulation between a student’s voice and parents’ observations, dialogic sense-making, and negotiated text (Chang et al., 2016; Roe & Uekusha, 2020). My **reflexive thematic analysis** followed established phases (familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, reporting) and addressed **trustworthiness** through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks, and an audit trail (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Carcary, 2009; Anney, 2014; Amankwaa, 2016; Amin et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2024; Dahal & Luitel, 2022, 2023). Limitations include the **single-family** scope and potential role reactivity (student–author; parent–observer), though my procedures mitigate these risks (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Carcary, 2009; Amankwaa, 2016; Amin et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Across three International Baccalaureate (IB) settings in Nepal, this collaborative autoethnography found that the strengths of IB lie in inquiry-driven agency, transparent, criterion-related assessment, and Approaches to Learning (ATL) routines that support self-regulated learning and a values-rich classroom culture. The constraints I experienced—workload peaks from task clustering, uneven implementation across schools, and affordability—align with wider concerns in Nepal's reform agenda around quality and equity. The chess case shows how co-curricular contexts can powerfully rehearse ATL behaviours such as planning, reflection, and emotional regulation, even as broader academic transfer remains context-dependent.

For policymakers and schools, practical next steps include coordinated assessment calendars, ATL-focused professional learning for all teachers (inside and outside IB schools), and transition toolkits to reduce friction when students move between IB sites. These moves can extend the pedagogical dividends of clarity, agency, and metacognition to more learners across Nepal—regardless of programme label—while staying faithful to the human realities your narratives foreground.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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