

The Twofold Capital Requirement of Educational Success: Social Closure in the International Baccalaureate Diploma in Australia

Quentin Thomas Maire

Affiliation: University of Adelaide, Australia

Abstract

While the universalisation of educational provision in a given country generally leads to an internal diversification of its educational system, the neoliberal policies that have spread across Australia since the 1980s have resulted in the concentration of particular social groups at specific educational sites. Moreover, by encouraging a freer interplay of educational supply and demand, neoliberal reforms have grounded this process of educational segregation in the socio-economic properties of students and their families. Predictably, two specific types of resources have been able to function as capital in the educational system: these are cultural capital and economic capital. I propound that the most profitable educational sites have been encircled by boundaries through admitting quasi-exclusively holders of combined economic and cultural capitals. The twofold endowment in economic and cultural capitals has come to function as a social closure mechanism in Australian education. In order to illustrate my argument, I take the example of the International Baccalaureate Diploma and show how economic capital and cultural capital are twin requirements for accessing this valuable educational site.

Keywords: neoliberal, social closure, economic capital, cultural capital, educational sites

Educational neoliberalisation: the capital determinants of educational closure

The progressive development of academic qualifications as a quasi-necessity for accessing most segments of the job market has made the possession of academic titles a precondition for an ongoing acquisition of economic capital. Simultaneously, neoliberal alterations to the education system have, since the 1980s, ensured the increasing importance of holding economic capital for obtaining valuable credentials in Australia. In this paper, I will use the case of the International Baccalaureate Diploma to support that claim and explain how access to valuable educational locations in the school system has been restricted based on the students' endowment in economic and cultural capitals.

Neoliberal reforms in Australian education have modified the structure of the school system by engineering its marketisation. Through successive de-zoning policies and market-driven funding

arrangements (Connell, 2015, p. 183), the freer interplay of educational supply and educational demand has been encouraged at the school level, labelled as 'school competition' for the production side and 'school choice' for the consumer side. This has not only fed an instrumental approach of education, where what matters most is being awarded valuable credentials; it has also worked towards turning credentials into commodities to be sold by schools competing against one another and bought by students (and their families) also competing against one another. A major feature of the neoliberal transformation of the school market has been a mutation in *the structure of prices for credentials*: both cultural capital and economic capital have now become important currencies for accessing specific educational locations where the acquisition of the most valuable credentials is facilitated. The deregulation brought about by neoliberal restructurings prompted an increase in the cultural and economic price of success-related educational sites (schools, degrees, streams, or subjects), which in turn cast these sites as social closure loci.

The advent of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma in Australian schools in the 1980s can be read as a diversification of available educational offerings at the senior high school level. The regime of choice advocated by neoliberal policies has encouraged choice at the curricular level, where different programs can be offered, in parallel, within a given school. The IB proposes a two-year pre-university curriculum named the 'Diploma Programme' (DP) that self-selected schools can implement in exchange for an annual fee. While the diffusion of this alternative curriculum could have taken various routes in Australia, neoliberal reforms have turned the program into a locus of closure permitting the insulated reproduction of educational advantage. Using what Stephen Gould called "the power of treating generalities by particulars" (1996 [1981]: 20), I will use the DP to exemplify the sharpening association of cultural and economic capitals in Australian education.

Previous research on the DP in Australia has established (a) that DP students obtain superior academic results than non-DP students (Cole et al., 2014: 42)¹, (b) the greater university success of DP students (Edwards and Underwood, 2012: 2)², (c) their association with prestigious and elite universities (IGI Services, 2011: 14)³, and (d) their occupationally profitable university choices (IGI Services, 2011: 16)⁴. Taken together, these findings make it clear that the DP effectively is one of these success-related locations in the Australian school system, a site statistically promising a fairly safe road to a sustained acquisition of economic capital. But what else is participation in the DP related to? Two sociological studies found that, on average, the socio-economic background of DP students notably exceeds the background of non-DP students (Doherty et al., 2012: 311; Edwards and Underwood, 2012: 2). In Australia, the DP thus seems to be used as a road to occupational success which is unequally accessible to different social groups. In this

1 A research group from the University of Western Sydney found that in Australia, DP graduates have significantly higher Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATAR) than non-DP graduates (Cole et al., 2014: 42).

2 A case study of 135 DP graduates at a Group of Eight (Go8) university found that DP graduates (a) are more successful in university applications than non-DP graduates, (b) have a higher progression rate through the academic years, and (c) tend to complete their degree faster (Edwards and Underwood, 2012: 2).

3 Almost half of the 202 respondents in an Australian study of DP graduates wished to enrol at one of three universities: University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, or University of Sydney (IGI Services, 2011: 14). Unsurprisingly, these are three of the most elite universities in Australia, as they are members of the Go8, a small group of Ivy-league-type Australian universities which have, historically, materially, and symbolically, dominated the landscape of Australian higher education.

4 The same study found that more than 28 per cent of DP graduates responding aimed at studying courses giving access to the *professions*, with an additional 15 per cent wanting to study economically-oriented degrees with potentially high economic rewards (e.g. business) (IGI Services, 2011: 16).

paper, I intend to show that the economic and cultural resources necessary to access this enclosed educational site are the instruments through which social closure is realised.

Some clarifications on capitals and the methods of analysis

Given that different properties can function as capital, it is possible to identify several species of capital, where “the different forms of capital are specific forms of power” (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]: 265). The value of a given amount of cultural capital exists only in relation to (a) the total distribution of cultural capital and (b) markets for cultural capital. The same applies to economic properties: they can function as capital only in a relative manner and only on markets for economic capital, where “the determining factor is the individual’s position in the distribution of purchasing power” (Hirsch, 2005 [1976]: 6).

The school system has the potential to function as a market for various species of capital. While species of capital are not limited to the economic and cultural ones, the primacy of these two kinds in a neoliberally-shaped education system makes the twofold analysis of economic and cultural capitals a good theoretical instrument for grasping educational production and consumption in the Australian context.

In order to identify the capital prerequisites of participation in the DP in Australia, I adopted the method of collecting publicly-available data on each school offering the DP as well as on the DP curriculum. School websites now give researchers access to a wide range of precious information worth analysing. Regarding the economic requirements for DP participation, I systematically identified the school sector and the school tuition fees. Apropos the cultural requirements for DP participation, I analysed the structure of the DP curriculum in the context of the other curriculum offerings available to students.

The economic prerequisite of DP enrolment

The search engine provided by the IB website shows that there were 63 schools offering the DP in Australia as of March 2015 (International Baccalaureate, 2015a). Out of these, 83 per cent (52 schools) were categorised as private schools. Acknowledging the solid correlation between school sector and socio-economic profile of students in Australia (OECD, 2012: 30), it is likely that schools offering the DP tend to be economically selective. However, doubters might respond that the non-government sector is divided in Australia, and that Catholic schools are often more affordable than corporate schools⁵.

Out of the 61 schools that offered the DP in 2014, 98 per cent of the 50 non-government schools were corporate schools. If corporate schools are effectively associated with higher socio-economic backgrounds, then it is likely that entering the DP generally requires a heavy dose of economic capital. But the sceptics could then retort that even within the corporate sector, the variability in tuition fees is such that one cannot assume economic capital to be a requirement for accessing the DP in Australia. That is a fair point.

To verify, I examined the tuition fees of all 61 DP schools, excluding one because the school closed during the year. This leaves us with a total of 60 schools: 11 government, 1 Catholic, and 48 corporate. While it is expected that the 11 DP schools in the government sector are less economically selective than their non-government counterparts, they remain a peripheral reality in the Australian education landscape. Given that over 80 per cent of the total DP population is

5 Often referred to as ‘independent schools’ in the Australian literature, Campbell and Proctor (2014: xv) explain how misleading it is to call them ‘independent’ given the large amount of government funding these schools receive. Based on their corporate governance structure, the ‘corporate school’ label is more appropriate.

made of corporate schools, I conducted further analysis of tuition fees in this sector⁶.

The range of tuition fees is, indeed, very broad: while the 'cheapest' corporate school cost \$7,803 for the 2015 academic year, no less than \$35,721 was requested by the most expensive one⁷. Nonetheless, even the most 'affordable' corporate schools proposing the DP remain largely out of reach for most families. To gain a better understanding of the economic capital generally needed to access the DP, we studied measures of central tendency of tuition fees. Based on the 48 usable cases, the mean annual tuition was \$20,909 and the median stood at \$23,576. Including government schools, where tuition fees are considered null⁸, the mean tuition fee for all schools offering the DP stood at \$17,022 for a 2015 enrolment.

With 72 per cent (43 cases) of all DP schools demanding more than \$10,000 in tuition fees per student in 2015, it is a fact that the DP is, in the majority of cases, a luxury product in Australia. Furthermore, the slope actually gets sharp very quickly as one goes up the tuition scale: 57 per cent of all DP schools expected more than \$15,000 per senior school student in 2015, and 47 per cent asked for more than \$20,000. At the other end of the scale, it leaves Australia with only 18 per cent of its DP schools with tuition fees under \$7,800, all of which are in the government sector.

These figures provide solid evidence that possessing considerable economic capital tends to be a factual requirement for accessing the DP in Australia. If we add the request made by certain schools for a premium DP fee, as well as the DP examination costs that students generally have to pay for, the economic burden of enrolling in the DP is out of reach for most Australians. The DP stands as an educational site enclosed by economic barriers.

The cultural prerequisite of DP enrolment

Cultural capital can be described as the possession of cultural properties considered valuable in a given field. Educationally-relevant cultural capital not only involves proficiency in using the dominant language of the educational system and substantive knowledge in the curriculum subjects; it also encompasses the expectations parents place on the student's schooling, the importance of educational achievement in the ambitions parents have for their child, or the extent to which they are willing to allocate resources (economic, cultural, or temporal) to help their child obtain the desired educational outcomes.

From a strategic point of view, "one of the most valuable sorts of information constituting inherited cultural capital is practical or theoretical knowledge of the fluctuations of the market in academic qualifications" (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]: 138), which gives students a sense of the hierarchy of credentials and can then guide their investments. Doherty suggests that the implementation of the DP in parallel to the regular senior high school curriculum reinforces the use families make of strategies for optimising their children's academic results (Doherty, 2012: 192). Using the same dataset as for the investigation on economic determinants of DP participation, I was able to determine that 82 per cent of DP schools in Australia did implement it alongside the state high school curriculum in 2014. Accordingly, by adding, within the school, a new dimension to the panel of strategies available to students and their families, the social groups most acquainted with the subtle costs and benefits associated with the various positions

6 Data were collected for the enrolment of an Australian student at the senior secondary level in 2015, excluding registration and application fees.

7 2015 tuition fee information were unavailable for this most expensive school. As a result, I estimated the 2015 fees based on the 2014 rate (\$34,020), to which I applied the tuition fee increase that took place between 2013 and 2014 at that school (five per cent). The 2015 estimate is thus \$35,721.

8 The exceptions were three selective government schools offering exclusively the DP and asking for \$600 in tuition for 2015.

in the hierarchy of educational investments—that is, the groups richest in educationally-relevant cultural capital—hold a decisive advantage in making occupational profits out of the educational system. When one curriculum is objectively associated with greater educational outcomes, such as the DP in Australia, families grasping this implicit hierarchy possess a specific advantage in advantageously choosing the DP.

Yet, it would be insufficient to stop here and ignore the cultural constraints imposed by the DP curriculum itself in relation to the other curricular offerings available. The curriculum contributes to turning families' economic and cultural properties into educationally-relevant capital, as the curriculum itself embodies specific demands (Teese, 2000: 3-4). If it takes some grasp of the structure of educational hierarchies to choose a good private school for one's daughter, it takes an even finer perception of the costs and benefits associated with each credential available to the student to choose the best strategy, for a student's positional success, between the DP and the local high school curriculum. This perception is not only quantitatively different to the capital needed to choose a school: it adds a whole new dimension to educational strategies and requires a cultural capital that is socially very selective.

One can understand the cultural requirements of the DP curriculum only if one studies the other credentials supplied on the senior high school curriculum market in Australia. One possibility for analysing curricular demands is to inspect the subject requirements to qualify for an ATAR for (selective) university entrance. Given that New South Wales and Victoria cover approximately 50 per cent of all schools offering the DP in Australia (30 out of 61 in 2014), I will focus on the local curriculum in these two states: the High School Certificate (HSC) and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

The curriculum structure is similar for the HSC and the VCE: the minimal number of subjects that a student must take to qualify for an ATAR is four, and the only compulsory subject is English. On the other hand, the curriculum structure of the Diploma Programme requires students to select six subjects. Unlike in the VCE and the HSC, mathematics is a compulsory subject in the DP, on top of which the study of two languages (including English) is also mandatory. If these requirements were not sufficient to prove the stricter cultural selectivity of the DP curriculum, DP students also have to study three additional 'core components' which enter into the ATAR calculation as potential bonus points or, if the student obtains two unsatisfactory grades for the Theory of Knowledge and Extended Essay subjects, as a fail for the Diploma Programme overall. This brings DP students to a total of nine compulsory subjects for obtaining an ATAR, against four for their HSC and VCE counterparts. The consequence for the cultural selectivity of the DP is clear: it is predominantly students possessing a large palette of cultural resources who are likely to feel capable of successfully studying the DP. The DP, by the mere structure of its curriculum, tends to select broad-spectrum cultural capital possessors, all-rounder students in command of a diversified educationally-relevant cultural capital.

The twofold dimensions of educational closure in a neoliberal context

This brief analysis explains how a 'double capital endowment' is likely to be required for students to enrol in the DP in Australia. It also provides part of the answer to the question of the socio-economically advantaged profile of DP students. For certain educational choices to be possible, cultural and economic capitals are required (Ball, 2003: 199): in the case of the DP, it is because economic and cultural capitals statistically function as *objective selection criteria* for enrolment that DP students tend to come from families possessing both cultural and economic capitals. This alternative curriculum functions in the manner of a chemical bond contributing to transmuting inherited cultural and economic capitals into (eventual) cultural and economic profits. More broadly, economic and cultural powers have conjointly become crucial for reproducing material advantage over generations through the educational system. While the reproduction of

economic capital has, in most cases, come to require the acquisition of certified cultural capital, simultaneously, the power of economic capital for obtaining sought-after credentials has increased through the neoliberalisation of education systems.

Statistically, this twofold capital requirement for DP access de facto excludes those who possess one species of capital but not the other, not to mention those who lack both. As Ball puts it (2003: 108), the “inter-relationship of different forms of capital is crucial” to understand the structure of the educational system and the protected, privileged, and enclosed sites it hosts. The weight of economic capital needed for accessing the DP is a true specificity of Australia among the big players in DP implementations⁹. Unlike the US, where it is predominantly cultural capital that conditions access to the DP¹⁰, in Australia, cultural capital tends to be inoperative for harvesting ‘DP capital’ without economic inputs. In a situation where both economic and cultural capitals are necessary, the DP is turned into a doubly exclusive educational site.

9 Even the United Kingdom, which Australian policymakers so often turn to for inspiration, has a lower non-government to government DP schools ratio than Australia: with 81 private schools and 57 public schools, ‘only’ 59 per cent of its DP schools are private, more than 20 points below the Australian share (International Baccalaureate, 2015b).

10 In the United States, barely 12 per cent of schools offering the DP are private schools (108 out of 872) (International Baccalaureate, 2015b).

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