

# Big Brother Is Teaching You

BY RICHARD A. RIES

I am considered to be an inspiring teacher. I taught in independent schools all of my life, because they champion individual attention, feature their own good values, and accept teacher creativity and academic freedom. They are usually free of the strictures of public school curricula. I came to a school in Florida to teach in an independent school, only to see the school sadly strive to become as independent as a Dunkin Donuts franchise when it “went IB.”

The International Baccalaureate Organization, headquartered in Geneva, has no school of its own, but rather sells its philosophy to buyers worldwide. Many American schools either feature an IB track, or have become entirely IB. The IB’s mission statement ends with the politically correct and hard to dispute “other people, with their differences, can also be right.” However, after this viewpoint is implemented, an ironic iron curtain falls on teachers and students alike, in which everything and *everyone* must conform to the IB way. Teachers, often fearful of losing their jobs, begin adopting the IB lingo and pretend to support it in a way that eerily resembles scenes from George Orwell’s *1984* when mid-level workers blindly accept whatever “truths” the oligarchy in Oceania tells them. Doctrinaire IB coordinators — school employees charged with overseeing curriculum to ensure a school is in fact IB — make surprise visits to the classroom, just to make sure everything is running as smoothly as a Swiss watch, and that no deviations from IB philosophies or methodologies are occurring. Welcome to the franchising of the K–12 school: the IB is the McDonaldization of human development.

In order to become certified as an IB school, a school must prepare for an IB authorization visit. During such a visit, inspectors (either IB employees or

educators from other schools doing field work for the organization) come to take tours; examine written lesson plans; observe classrooms (both the teaching and the IB décor); interview teachers, students, and personnel; and so forth. Some parents and administrations — fearful that if their school is not IB it will be somehow be “left behind” — risk great compromise of conscience in order to win the IB stamp of approval. Teachers and students might be coached by administration to speak only glowingly of IB pedagogy and lingo. Teachers may feel coerced to lie about their happiness with the IB in order to keep their jobs. The IB authorization visit is similar to a restaurant franchise’s visit by district or national managers, who are there to ensure sameness, predictability, and control of the product.

Is this the direction independent schools should go? Can independent schools really not teach students to think globally on their own? I find the success of multicultural studies, sensitivity training, overseas trips, the presence of exchange students, and the quality of enlightened teachers and administrators in independent schools has already been extremely global. In fact, the IB can seem downright provincial in comparison.

As the IB slowly takes root in the American educational landscape (about a third of schools now offer it, according to the College Board) it peddles something dangerous to democracy: suppression of free speech. The U.S. Constitution mandates that you are free to petition the government, express yourself, and air your thoughts. The IB teaches teachers and students alike that you are free to conform. Its methodologies are the “best” methods; its ideas of educational units are the “best” units; its canned (and corny) IB lingo is the “best” lingo. Teachers, school boards, parents, and students are not competent enough to create a list of good values on their own; they must post the IB language all over the school. The IB lingo creeps into a campus like a cancer. It takes over the body and chokes it — until it

alone exists.

I deliberately taught the memoir *Red Scarf Girl* about the Cultural Revolution in China to one of my classes this past school year because the book features students being inculcated into Mao’s China and being forced to write *dae-ze-bo* — propaganda posters — and plaster them all of their school. A good student in Revolutionary China was brainwashed to believe in the dogma. I wanted my students to see the dark irony. Here in 21st-century America, the same thing exists. In many classrooms of an IB school, there are canned phrases about “the ten traits of the IB learner profile” — so that they are the same adjectives in any classroom, be it Malibu or Mali. It’s no different than finding the same Outback Steakhouse or Walgreens across the country, except we are talking about human beings, not steaks or Roloids. (In the IB’s top ten list of “the best learner profile,” neither “creative” nor “individualistic” is included. I wonder why.) The once sacred classroom, if it becomes IB, might have a little bit of the teacher’s own stamp — but that “stamp” must always show how the teacher conforms and buys into IB philosophy. You are supposed to be as enthusiastic about it as someone who sells used cars, particularly when talking to parents or students. You are trained to be a believer. The whole business is all too redolent of a dogmatic ideology — if not a cult.

This past academic year, I offered to teach *The Importance of Being Ernest*, for the sheer joy of it, and to kindle a love of Oscar Wilde in my students. To know and quote Wilde is, as every English major knows, part of one’s *joie de vivre*. It is a pleasant diversion from the often tragic literature that is hurled at students. My idea was immediately shot down by the coordinator. There was no way to get it to conform to one of the four pre-slated IB “areas of interaction,” which are the “correct paradigms” of human thought. The canned areas of interaction overlook joy and fun as objectives, which is too bad, because students who have joy and fun probably go on to read more

in life.

I am hardly an isolationist or an alarmist. I considered myself to be a “citizen of the world” long before I encountered the IB. There are certainly many good intentions of the IB program, but the implementation of its ideals fosters an environment that suppresses creativity, streamlines thinking to established paradigms, creates use of an artificial language and value system among children, and rewards conformity. It downplays American exceptionalism, and gainsays some of our most cherished values as a unique civilization producing original thinkers.

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