

My Struggle Against The IBO

In 2006 I started to attend IBO world school # 001528 in Kraków. I moved to Poland, from Germany, due to adverse family circumstances. I don't know the Polish language and as such I was forced to look for a private school that had its curriculum presented in a language I am familiar with. Due to the limited selection of schools that had its instruction in English, and a complete lack of such in German, I took a leap of faith and registered with an IB school.

At first, I did not know what to expect from my new school, but everything I have read about the program it offered made me feel I was about to embark on an extremely demanding and difficult journey towards a Diploma, guided there by excellent teachers with a word class curriculum. I was not sure if I would be capable of passing this program. Back home in Germany, I had trouble comprehending subjects such as Biology and Mathematics, now I would have to face them in English instead of my native tongue.

I was horrified at the beginning of my 3 year ordeal with the IB, the task placed before me seemed daunting. I have spent countless hours sitting over a dictionary and my assignments, trying to translate everything into German, so I could get a grasp at what I was learning. What made me feel better was that I was not the only one feeling overburdened. Most other students were not native English speakers, either, because of this our collective work was not graded based on grammar but rather on its content.

The more time I spent at this school, the more I realized that it wasn't only the students with a heavy burden on their shoulders, the teachers themselves had quite a load to bear. They were overworked, had questionable English proficiency, lacked training and familiarity with the IBO syllabus. By the teacher's own admission, their work environment was hostile, and the administration offered them little guidance or help. Many of the teachers became careless in their work, and the students took advantage of this.

The attitude held by these teachers made it easier for the other students and me to pass, as many of our grades were undeserved. However, I don't blame these teachers, as they were never provided with the proper training by the school to handle the IB program. The school's owner did not care about them or us, the students, we were nothing more than wallets to be drained. All that was important was the profit margin.

I don't want to leave the impression that there were no good teachers in my school. There were, in fact, many who had superb qualifications and a passion for teaching, unfortunately for both them and the students they saw problems with how the school was run. The owners took in all their complaints about how the school is not up to standard, according to IB regulations, and decided the best course of action is to fire them and pretend everything is fine.

The teacher turnover was so rapid I often didn't have time to learn an instructor's name before they were let go. The quality of teaching kept slipping further down, as the replacement teachers proved to be more and more under qualified, and receiving progressively less guidance from the school's administration. Many of the teachers quit before they got a chance to be fired, some as quickly as after one day on the job.

Due to the school's revolving door policy and constant vacancies in the teachers' position, classes were often cancelled, sometimes for weeks if not months at a time. In 2009, the year of our final examination, History class was cancelled for a month. Math classes were also few and far between, since the school could not find anyone suitable to teach it. As for English and Physics, one could easily start taking bets on whether we would have class on any given week, because it was any one's guess.

The school even went so far as to corrupt the IB accreditation process. The Natural Science laboratories lacked the necessary equipment to cover the curriculum of the Diploma Programme. Even though several teachers addressed this issue with the principal and the Department of Education in Kraków, the school failed to provide the missing equipment. They did, however, manage to borrow the equipment in question from different school, for just long enough to pass the IBO inspections.

I was just a student, in no position to fix any of these problems, so I accepted the status quo. I was not even able to change schools, because the other IB school in Kraków was priced out of my range. We, the students, wrote a petition to the school's management, asking them to address our concerns. All of this fell on deaf ears. The school's headmaster knew most of us were a captive clientele, as we could not afford to switch schools.

Up to that point, I took all these bad circumstances and tried to work through them. I started in Pre IB, moved to IB 1 and in 2009 finally managed to accrue enough credits and complete all other obligations, to be allowed to register for the final examination session.

I studied like crazy for my final exam, as did most of my classmates. Our teachers showed us previous exams given by the IBO, so I was quite familiar with them and knew what to expect, this did not stop me from being nervous about the real thing. After seeing the real exam for 2009, I must say that little was changed from the previous tests, even though they were not “easy” by any stretch of the imagination, they were quite predictable. It seems the IBO doesn’t really care about “promoting the dynamic combination of independent, creative and critical thinking” as their brochures would have you believe. Aside from that, I was quite satisfied with my performance during the examination session, aside from one incident that happened outside of my control. With the help of the school administration the incident turned from a funny story I could’ve been telling my friends over beer, to what felt like the Bataan Death March that lasted for close to two years.

On the 7th of May, 2009 I was feeling a bit under the weather, so I visited my general practitioner. I described to him my symptoms. These included but were not limited to, nausea, upset stomach, and general discomfort. After examining me he diagnosed me with a case of food poisoning, and provided me a note stating as such.

On the 8th of May, 2009 I came to school to write my Math Paper 2, in the hopes that despite my illness i would have enough strength to complete the examination. This turned out not to be the case. By 9 a.m, when the examination began, I was forced to inform one of the invigilators, that I feel sick. I told her that I feel nauseous and would likely vomit, as such I am unable to write the examination and would like to leave the exam early. The Invigilator left the examination room to find the IB - coordinator, and inform her of the situation. The coordinator came into the examination room and asked me what is wrong, at which point i repeated what I told to the invigilator. The coordinator subsequently informed me that due to the IB regulations I would need to stay in the examination room a certain amount of time (between 30 to 60 minutes, I do not recall exactly how long) before I was allowed to leave. While the coordinator left, I stayed in the examination room as instructed, all the while feeling sicker. Some time after, another invigilator relieved the other invigilator present in the examination room. She asked me why I am not writing the exam and was just sitting there, so I told her about my sickness and that I needed to stay in the examination room until I am allowed to leave. When my wait was finally over, one of the Invigilators checked my exam paper, which i filled out with only my name and candidate number, and I was allowed to leave.

After I left the examination room, I headed home where I got better acquainted with my toilet, as I was down on my knees vomiting. When my body decided that the contents of my stomach were sufficiently empty, and the vomiting subsided, I took some medication to ease my stomach and drank some tea. I felt much better after this.

By 1 pm I was feeling well enough to go back to school and write my German Paper 1 HL examination. Since I lived about 5 minutes away from the school I had plenty of time to recuperate and go back. As far as I know there is no regulation forbidding a student from attending an exam, if he missed an earlier one due to illness. I completed my German Paper 1 HL, this time with no problems, and went back home.

On July 19th 2009 the final results for the IB Diploma Exams were published. I was surprised when I saw that for my Math Paper 2 I was not awarded a grade, but rather the code "N". I have never seen or heard of the code so I found my coordinator and asked her to explain what this means and why I received this instead of a grade. The coordinator did not know either, so she contacted the IBO and requested clarification. When she got back to me with the IBO's answer she told me that my Math Paper 2 was classified as an incomplete assessment. This was because I failed to solve even one exercise on the exam.

The coordinator was not very helpful when I tried to look further into the situation, and suggested I drop the matter and move on. Up until that point I thought I would be awarded with at least a grade of 1, which at the time I thought corresponded with receiving 0% on the exam. This grade, taken in aggregate with my other results would have granted me the IB Diploma. If not that, then I at least thought that some special consideration would be taken given that I was sick during the exam. Unbeknownst to me my coordinator never filed the proper documentation to the IBO stating that I was sick during the examination, and as such never asked me for a doctor's note. No effort was taken on her part to inform me that I would receive the code "N" and that I would need to provide documentation confirming my sickness throughout all of this, even though plenty of opportunities were available. I did not take any steps in trying to provide this documentation before the IB diploma final scores were posted because I was under the impression I would pass regardless, albeit with a lower overall score (as stated above) and as such I felt it was an unnecessary hassle. Mrs Pillans never bothered to correct me on this matter.

I ended up receiving an IB certificate instead of a Diploma. Before this news fell on

me like a brick, I planned on studying in Maastricht University in the Netherlands. I had to withdraw my application because the university does not accept students with IB certificates, no German university accepts it either, as a result I lost one academic year because of this mistake. All of a sudden, with most of my friends were gone and my education grinding to a halt I stood there, hopeless, staring into the abyss that was to become of my life. Without aim and without purpose i felt like a lost child, looking for answers and not being able to find them. Feeling like my soul had been broken, I left Poland and went back to Germany.

Fortunately I did not let this matter go, I knew I deserved a Diploma. My student learning advisor informed me that since I wrote the bare minimum, my name and candidate number, there should be no reason to give me the same grade as someone who didn't even show up to the exam. I, once again, brought this matter up with the Coordinator. She said she will not contact the IBO for me, and tried to convince me the whole situation is my fault since I didn't follow the IB regulations.

I contacted the IBO myself, and was faced with a catch-22. The IBO informed me that they cannot look into my situation and correct the mistake made by my coordinator unless the coordinator contacts them on my behalf. I spoke with many of my teachers regarding my situation, and they were as confused about the situation as me.

It fell on my shoulders to sift through the IBO's regulations. I encountered this gem proving, without question, I am correct.

Article 7.6 of the "handbook of procedures" : "A candidate should be given zero marks (0) if one of the following applies: – the paper has been genuinely attempted but no marks have been scored – totally irrelevant material has been produced and no genuine attempt has been made to answer the questions set – nothing has been written or spoken other than the candidate's name and/or session number. You should give a brief explanation for why zero has been given."

What boggles the mind, however, is why I as a student, having paid an astronomical amount of money for my education, had to do this. Both the school and the IBO had the manpower to help me out, as I was their student and their customer. It is also puzzling, that the people who wrote these regulations were not aware of them. My school's coordinator was also,

either ignorant of these regulations, or too proud or stubborn to let me know that they exist.

The IBO's Ombudsman, Mr. Flatley, asked me to provide proof of my version of events, although I suspect that he did so just to humor me and make me believe something is being done to help. This did not stop me from spending endless hours writing long winded emails to the IBO, these were usually met with a dismissive response so long it would fit on a bar napkin. It was always the same spiel, unless the school supports my version of events, nothing can be done.

Finally I decided to use the magic word "lawyer" in my correspondence. At this point Mr. Donnan, the head of the assessment department with whom I've also exchanged emails, said that he and his colleagues will take another look at my case. Exactly three days later I received an email stating that I will, after all be awarded my diploma. It took blood, sweat and tears and 18 months of my life to fix a minor problem,. I exchanged around 60 emails with the IBO and I told them the same story each time. It was torture. I am still waiting for an apology from either the IBO or my old school. As of writing this, my lawyer is putting in motion the last procedural steps needed to take IBO world school # 001528 to court. Finally, justice will be served.

IB program supposedly aims to "develop internationally minded people who [...] strive to be: inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced and reflective." The IBO also implies that respect towards each other and fairness are important aspects of becoming an open-minded person and to take their rightful place in society after their studies. I felt neither the respect nor the fairness when dealing with this organization. Those words are empty shells, serving as nothing more than a advertising slogan. This whole experience led me to find truth in a different set of words.

"In view of the fact that God limited the intelligence of man, it seems unfair that He did not also limit his stupidity." ~ Konrad Adenauer

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