

**PEDAGOGIES OF PAIN: *USELESS SUFFERING* AND *EDUCATIONAL SUFFERING*
IN THE IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME AND STUDENTS' IDENTITY CREATION**

by

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**Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes... Yo no sé!
Golpes como del odio de Dios; como si ante ellos,
la resaca de todo lo sufrido
se empozara en el alma... Yo no sé!**

—César Vallejo, *Los Heraldos Negros*, 1919

**You don't take Vicodin because you're scared. You take it so you won't feel
pain... Pain happens when you care. You can't love someone without opening
up to their problems, their fears.**

—David Shore, *House*, 2011

**And if ever, by some unlucky chance, anything unpleasant should somehow
happen, why, there's always soma to give you a holiday from the facts. And
there's always soma to calm your anger, to reconcile you to your enemies, to
make you patient and long-suffering. In the past you could only accomplish
these things by making a great effort and after years of hard moral training.
Now, you swallow two or three half-gramme tablets, and there you are.
Anybody can be virtuous now.**

—Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, 1931

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Pedagogies of Pain: *Useless Suffering* and *Educational Suffering* in the IB Diploma Programme and Students' Identity Creation

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to prompt teachers and educational leaders to reflect about the role of suffering in education. However, I not only seek an abstract reflection, even though that is a great starting point. I seek a reflection about suffering grounded in actual issues that construct daily practices in our professional lives as teachers and administrators. My purpose is to claim suffering as an inherent part of education, not only schooling, but any formal or informal education. However, if we will embrace suffering as an integral aspect of education, it is necessary, first, to accept that it is part of the gray area over which educators have less conscious control, what I will identify later with the hidden curriculum. Second, to claim suffering as an educational tool, it is necessary to reframe the concept by considering where the suffering is located, what is making the students suffer. In other words, we need to reframe it by looking for it in those places where we do have control over education, and I am talking particularly about curriculum and policy.

This is indeed a great task, and in this paper I only want to open some windows of reflection by analysing the specific case of the International Baccalaureate policy statement under the lens of a neoliberal culture of suffering in education. I will focus on the IB Diploma Programme that comprises the last two years of secondary education and that, after a successful assessment of the students, awards a certificate that grants access to many universities around the globe. My argument is that, even though the language used in the IB policy statement promotes free critical thinking and intercultural democratic values, the program focuses on assessment

which is the main generator of suffering. The students come to understand this culture of suffering by transforming it into a tool to measure success and a way to legitimate their academic status. Thus, students learn that the value of education resides in getting good marks and certification, a logic that is grounded in the pain of being assessed in standardized ways.

To present my argument I have chosen a written form that mixes two different genres: the formal academic essay and autobiographical writing. Thus, I present philosophical and analytical reflections that can be contrasted or applied to actual experiences. I start with a theoretical framework that intends to identify and delimit the problem, and then I jump to an actual discourse analysis of policies, to finally present recommendations on how to deal with the issue of suffering over the IB's assessment. The problem for me is not that the students suffer, or that they suffer too much. The real issue is that the suffering is concentrated into a very specific aspect of education: examination. Thus, suffering, a tool that should serve to give meaning to life experiences that create identity, is generated by standardized assessment, closely relating the educational experience with the neoliberal value of accountability.

The form of this paper is intended to deal with the duality of the problem: a complex, immeasurable, almost indefinable feeling or experience; that is actually present in formal, institutional, and educational practices. As I see it, suffering creates meaning, a meaning that supports the construction of an identity narrative. The problem is that in models like the IB, these meaningful experiences (suffering) reproduce neoliberal values (accountability in the technical or managerial sense of the term) by focussing on standardised assessment. I do not criticize, however, neoliberal values for the sake of criticising the status quo; I criticize the fact that in order to gain the benefits these programs offer, it is mandatory to compromise your own values. I believe there should be options to access the privilege while keeping your own set of principles.

This paper is organized in 8 sections. In section 2, I present my theoretical framework including a discussion about educational suffering from a philosophical perspective. Section 3 presents the first autobiographical reflection. There, I narrate an experience of suffering that I witnessed as a teacher. It serves as a preamble to the next section, because in both sections 3 and 4, I present institutional perspectives of the problem (assuming the position of the teacher and the organization). In section 4, I analyse the IB policy in order to discover the explicit and implicit discourses it recreates. This section works as an analysis of the formal institutional perspective of the program and its values condensed in policy text. In section 5, the autobiographical reflection focuses on one incident of suffering that I experienced myself as an IB student. In section 6, I present a media analysis of the IB memes that online communities spread on several social media platforms in order to analyse what the students project as their educational experience. I do not pretend to analyse what they actually feel about the IB; my intention is to reflect on the identity that students construct as part of the IB, an identity based on suffering and recreated by memes, a new form of collective creation based on language and images. Thus, sections 5 and 6 represent the other side, the informal representation of what students experience within the IB, serving as a counterpoint to sections 3 and 4. Section 7, the last autobiographical reflection, presents two accounts, one as a student and one as a teacher, of the post-IB experience that can be summarized as liberation and depression. Finally, in section 8 I make recommendations to apply the IB programme without compromising the schools' values, focusing on a constructive educational suffering as an ideological framework. Considering that international programs like the IB bring benefits to students, especially to those from developing countries like mine (Peru), in this concluding section I discuss how to keep accessing the benefits of such international education without compromising one's own educational values.

2. Theoretical Framework

When I started my research on suffering, I found an enormous volume of literature that addresses it from a psychological point of view. In general, and specifically when talking about the IB, there is great interest in how students cope with stress (e.g., Shaunessy & Suldo 2009; Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, & Shaffer 2006; and Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty 2008). Even though I find really important the idea of students' wellbeing, I realized quickly that the psychological approach did not help me to understand the problem in the way I was framing it. In this paper I am not looking for ways to alleviate the pain or improve students' coping capabilities. My starting question is: what is educational suffering?

Because suffering can occur for many reasons, I focus in this paper on the suffering experienced because of educational activities that imply learning and discovering, self-knowledge and inter-subjective development. I use the term *suffering* in this paper to refer to any of these experiences of pain¹ related to formal or informal education. Certainly, suffering is a personal experience, especially in an academic context, and I will not generalize any particular event as universally painful. However, there is a close relationship between what is perceived as “good education” and suffering. It is not rare to find parents and students who expect that good teachers mark harder and assign more homework. Thus, pulling an all-nighter to study for a test or working an entire weekend on an assignment is commonly accepted as "good educational practices". These experiences may represent milestones in our life because of the suffering implicit in them, a suffering based on emotional distress, physical pain, stress, fear, and so on.

Levinas (2009) describes suffering as an experience of pain that is "a given in consciousness" (p. 156) and, at the same time, "unassumable" (p. 156). In other words, suffering

¹ Here, I should make a distinction between physical and psychic pain. Even though the suffering I talk about in most of the cases implies the latter, I find there is an overlap: psychic pain can indeed manifest as physical pain. Because of this ambiguity, I will use the broader word *pain* to refer to the result of educational suffering.

is an oxymoronic sensation, being expected and unpredictable at the same time. According to Levinas, it also has a big component of passivity: "The passivity of suffering is more profoundly passive than the receptivity of our senses [...] Pain would limit such freedom to the point of compromising self-consciousness" (p. 157). Thus, suffering exceeds our capacity to understand it and explain it. In this sense, the author claims that suffering is useless. However, if we understand the two complementary facets of suffering (the *suffering in me* and the *suffering in the other*), we find that there is a moral responsibility in suffering:

a radical difference develops between *suffering in the Other*, which for *me* is unpardonable and solicits me and calls me, and suffering in *me*, my uselessness can take on a meaning, the only meaning to which suffering is susceptible, in becoming a suffering for the suffering [...] of someone else. (p. 159)

Suffering finds a use in a moral perspective on humanity: "It is this attention to the Other which [...] can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity" (p. 159). Any other kind of response to the other's suffering is unacceptable: "the justification of the neighbour's pain is certainly the source of all immorality" (p. 163).

Even though Levinas is thinking about suffering from a universal and absolute perspective, it is possible (and necessary) to relate this approach to educational suffering. As teachers and administrators we have a responsibility to respond to the suffering of our students, especially if we know that suffering is an implicit part of education. As Levinas says, to passively assume that suffering is an essential component of education is immoral, because we negate the inter-human bond we establish with the other: student-teacher-administrator.

The next question automatically arises: does education necessarily involves suffering? How essential is suffering in an educational experience? I am not considering the practice of punishment in the answer to this question, because that is a technique used in a very specific

educational context: schooling. I am referring to the pain derived from any formal or informal educational process, the pain that involves curiosity and discovery, the notion of lacking and the subsequent satisfaction of finding out, a process that implies reconstructing your own self and that starts with self-awareness and leads to knowing yourself. I start from an assumption acquired by my own experience as a student (school, undergraduate, and graduate experiences) and by witnessing the educational experiences of my students: every educational moment implies a wandering from suffering to joy, not in an eschatological sense, rather a going back and forth. My intention is not to identify the origin of this suffering; that may come from fear, frustration, exhaustion, helplessness, doubt, disorientation, and so on. My intention is to perform a policy analysis starting with the assumption that suffering is always present in education, and that it may be positive or negative for the construction of educational experiences.

Even though we tend to assume that suffering is negative by essence, some educational theorists assume suffering as a natural part of the process of education (Mintz, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2013; Jonas, 2010; Hillesheim, 1986; Cheng, 2011; Biesta, 2005; Noddings, 2003; Todd, 2001, 2002). Traditionally, progressive education looks for ways to avoid students' pain: "It is a theme in progressive educational thought that has given rise to the widely held belief that frustration, confusion, distress, and other painful moments in education inhibit learning" (Mintz, 2012, p. 249). However, as Mintz (2012) states: "progressive educational thought is overly concerned with ensuring that students feel good about themselves and enjoy learning. The net effect of these beliefs is that educators shield students from distress that might arise from engaging in meaningful challenges and encountering valuable criticism" (p. 251). In other words, **educational suffering** is what Mintz calls "potentially valuable educational distress" (2012, p. 252). In the same article, the author states that progressive educators ground their assumptions in

Rousseau's ideas of education. However, after an analysis of *Emile*, Mintz comes to the conclusion that "Pain is instrumentally valuable in learning for Rousseau because, among other things, it is a by-product of confronting one's inadequacies and coming to understand when and why one has erred or failed" (2012, p. 261). Hence, suffering is an essential part of education because "learning occurs by confronting the limits of what is understood and familiar" (Mintz, 2012, p. 261).

Going back to Levinas' position, Mintz (2012) makes an important distinction about educational suffering (useful suffering) and harmful suffering: Rousseau's *Emile* supports the idea that "Useful suffering is that which enables students to appreciate and endure the limits and vagaries of the human condition" (p. 264). On the other hand, "Useless or dangerous suffering is the artificial and arbitrary domination, punishment, and coercion foisted upon children, suffering that neither facilitates learning nor cultivates just social relations" (p. 265). Even though Levinas' moral approach is not explicit on this distinction, it is clear that for Mintz **educational suffering** is constructive, hence it is a positive force, while **useless suffering** is one that **is imposed** on students. Thus, the suffering that is inherent to education is the one encountered by a personal exploration that involves learning by confronting oneself with the strange or the other (the not-learned).

The presence of suffering in education is also well explained by Gert Biesta in his article "Against learning" (2005). Here, the author claims a language for education as a reaction against the language of learning that is currently monopolizing the field. As a response to the four trends that construct the language of learning (the new theories of learning, Postmodernism, the "silent explosion" of learning, and the rise of neoliberalism), Biesta states that "a language for education, centres around three interlocking concepts: *trust*, *violence* and *responsibility*" (p. 60).

The idea of *trust without ground* implies that to begin the process of education, a blind trust is necessary because it is possible that learning may lead to unexpected transformations (Biesta, 2005). In other words, "education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk" (p. 61). It is in the concept of *transcendental violence* where we can find the importance of suffering for Biesta. According to the author, "Rather than seeing learning as the attempt to acquire, to master, to internalise, and what other possessive metaphors we can think of, we can also see learning as a reaction to a disturbance, as an attempt to reorganise or integrate as a result of disintegration" (p. 62). Again, education is depicted as a desirable lack that is not necessarily pleasant. Biesta thinks of education as an opportunity for the students to come into presence, that is "to show who they are and where they stand" (p. 62). However, this process of coming into presence (that implies self-discovery and confrontation with oneself) is not always pleasurable, because "it is about challenging students, confronting them with otherness and difference and asking them difficult questions. This suggests that, in a sense, there is a violent dimension to education" (p. 63). Biesta's violence reflects the conflict always inherent in learning, an essential part of education. Finally, there is also an implicit moral aspect in this proposal, like the one present in Mintz' and Levinas'. Teachers have a *responsibility without knowledge* precisely because, without being capable of predicting the result of this complex process, teachers are the ones who initiate and accompany this process. Even though it is a personal discovery for the student, the responsibility of the teacher "is a responsibility for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique, singular being" (p. 63).

It is clear that suffering is an essential aspect of education, and thanks to the perspectives of these authors, it is possible to realize that it is a component that carries with it a moral responsibility for those who take charge of the educational process. This process is extremely

complex because, according to the authors I have discussed, teachers and educational leaders have an antithetic role: they are supposed to promote experiences and opportunities that will confront the students, but at the same time, while taking responsibility for the students' suffering, they cannot control neither the process, nor the outcomes. Thus, for example, according to this perspective of education as a personal process based on suffering, standardized tests are not reliable tools to measure the accomplishment of educational goals because the results of education are individual, not universal or standardized.

In sum, in **formal education**, teachers provide opportunities that will confront students, sometimes initiating a violent internal conflict that will allow them to discover something about themselves in relation to the world. The teachers' role after initiating this process is to take responsibility for the subjectivity of the student, thus acknowledging their moral obligation as educators. In **informal education**, there is the same internal conflict; however, the initiation is not planned or structured and the responsibility resides in the students themselves². Recognizing that education (formal or informal) has an essential component of suffering helps us to understand the process of education in all its complexity. By acknowledging pain, it is possible to understand that suffering is a key component in the construction of meaning, because the creation of meaning is the result of this confrontation with oneself. In order to learn, it is necessary to construct, in order to construct it is necessary first to destroy so that later the students can discover more about themselves. Thus, the creation of meaning that suffering implies is also the creation (and recreation) of identity. As Mintz and Biesta say, suffering is a required aspect of education; without suffering, it is impossible to conceive the confrontation that, in the final analysis, will produce identity. The responsibility of educators deals with the

² This statement requires more consideration. Because in this paper I am dealing specifically with the IB, a formal education programme, I will leave the reflection on informal education for a future work.

question of how much suffering is necessary. The answer to that question resides in every particular experience of suffering; that is why teachers need to know their students, in order to intervene at the right time and in order to avoid imposing further pain on them. Suffering only should be accepted in those personal moments of discovery, where the students are confronted with their own selves. Any other kind of suffering, imposed by a system or by another person, is inherently immoral (Levinas, 2009).

By addressing the problem of suffering from an organizational perspective, it is necessary to ask: where is suffering in education? Is it implicit in a curriculum, or is it part of a policy? In our daily practices, suffering is generated by conscious institutional practices, but also by the hidden curriculum.

As Halstead and Xiao (2010) state, "The hidden curriculum is a form of social interaction whose outcome can normally not be specified, and the messages can be positive or negative, because there is no quality control, no evaluation and no accountability" (p. 307). It definitely has to do, as Jackson (1990) originally proposed in 1968, with those daily non-academic practices that construct the informal and unspoken norms that allow students to navigate the system. According to Jackson's observations, the hidden curriculum involves the crowds, the praise, and the power system always implicit in educational institutions (Jackson, 1990, p. 33). However, subsequent approaches to the hidden curriculum tend to agree with the idea that "the learning that goes on in the hidden curriculum is a more complicated mix of the pupils' own values and those that they pick up from peers, teachers, parents, the school environment and other sources" (Halstead & Xiao, 2010, p. 305).

I bring the hidden curriculum into this reflection on suffering, because the hidden curriculum also values the educational process that occurs in the students as a personal quest of

discovery and learning. As Halstead and Xiao (2010) explain, "Because there is no systematic planning, pedagogy or agenda for the hidden curriculum, it tends to be 'caught rather than taught' and may involve picking up hidden messages, scraps of knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, ideas about relationships and so on" (p. 307). Hence, suffering also exists in the gray area of education, where teachers and administrators have less control because the agency of students is what creates learning. However, it is necessary to remember that, even without direct participation in the personal suffering of the students, teachers and administrators have a responsibility regarding their students' wellbeing.

The idea that the hidden curriculum also contains part of the students' suffering does not imply that educational suffering is not promoted by formal institutional practices. Actually, these practices are the ones that should concern us the most, because following Levinas', Mintz's, and Biesta's logic, any kind of (conscious) imposition of suffering is immoral. Assessment, management of time, pressure, expectations, rankings, and many other institutional practices potentially increase suffering in any formal educational environment. As I will show in the analysis of the IB policies and the IB memes produced by the students, examinations can generate an enormous component of useless suffering that has nothing to do with educational suffering. So it is very necessary to ask ourselves: should suffering be explicitly mentioned, considered, or expected in educational policies?

Morwenna Griffiths (2012) argues that joy should be recognized in educational policies, because education is "part of what makes a good life good" (p. 656): "education may be valued for itself in a society, quite apart from its contribution to the overall shape of the society. It is not only that societies may need an educated public and educated rulers, or even that they may value having an educated population. What constitutes a good life is relevant for policy" (p. 658).

According to the author, this is a matter of social justice, not only an educational concern (Griffiths, 2012). However, "Current policy documents do not advocate enjoyment either in their advice on teaching, nor in their statements of the aims of education" (Griffiths, 2012, p. 668). It is clear that policies focus on organisational issues that, supposedly, will promote good in the students, but relevant matters such as joy or suffering are not directly contemplated by policy makers. Education is not a means to an end; in Griffiths' argument, education is an end by itself: "Integral reasons exist because education may be seen as good in itself, as part of what makes a good life good, not just as part of what is needed to produce a good life" (Griffiths, 2012, p. 656). Joe Dunne (2010) supports this idea in his inaugural lecture as Cregan Professor of Philosophy: "this question of the good should not only arise in debate *about* education but should also be pursued *in* the practice of education. For, in MacIntyre's words, 'the good life... is the life spent in *seeking* for the good life" (p. 15). Issues like suffering should be explicitly presented in and treated by policy because suffering is an intrinsic part of education and, thus, a necessary step for reaching the good life.

A final question is necessary in order to understand the policy analysis later presented: why is educational suffering (in any of its forms) officially accepted? Or, what are the benefits of educational suffering? As I said before, dealing with suffering leads to constructing meaning and creating identity; in sum, it leads to learning. However, that is only the personal benefit of suffering to the student. There is also potentially a social benefit in demonstrating pain in education: academic legitimacy³. The logic that the students present in their representation of their academic experience in the IB consists in characterizing themselves as victims of

³ My adviser, Dr. Deirdre Kelly, suggested that "this would only be true in an elite program where involvement has been rationed (it is a scarce good)". Dr. Kelly also pointed out Robertson and Dale work (2013), which states: "There need to be visible losers, if parents are to be persuaded to pay for their children to become winners". More than this, '... the losing has to be legitimated, it has to be made credible and not appear a matter of unfair discrimination or bad luck' (p. 4)." (p. 437).

oppression and suffering, constructing assessment as the main generator of their suffering. I started this section by saying that some teachers, students, and parents assume that suffering and a good education are related. However, after inspecting the concept of educational suffering, its role in the process of learning and creating meaning and identity, its moral implications for educators, its location in unconscious and conscious educational practices, and its relation with policy, I can now say that there is not a clear distinction between constructive educational suffering and useless immoral suffering when we think about the social benefits of academic pain associated with achieving a valued and scarce educational credential. Educational suffering is socially accepted, because it falls into the logic of 'no pain, no gain', a very western rationale. As I said, suffering is an essential part of education as a constructive force. Education that avoids suffering, as Mintz (2012) states, denies constructive opportunities to students, especially those opportunities that imply self-development and exploring the good life. Certainly, I root for this particular type of suffering, and, as a teacher, I assume the moral responsibility in it. Nevertheless, the logic of 'no pain, no gain' in education needs to be nuanced. First, this simple formula does not adequately distinguish between constructive educational suffering and useless suffering. Second, it does not underscore the importance for teachers to take responsibility for the students' subjectivity.

3. Autobiographical Reflection #1

During my first year as a teacher, I experienced my first informal educational moment with a student. I was not yet an IB Spanish teacher; however, I was helping a few students after class. They want to review poems, theory, and strategies to deal successfully with the oral examination. In the IB Diploma Programme, any Language A1 course has an oral assessment equivalent to 15% of their final mark. I knew pretty well the format and the challenges of this particular assessment because of my own experience as an IB student. The test itself is not hard: the student receives one random poem or prose fragment already studied in class. They have twenty minutes to read, analyse, and organize their presentation. Immediately after the prep time, the student sits down with the teacher and delivers a fifteen-minute oral presentation. The presentation is recorded, and the teacher can guide or help the student with questions. The assessment is not difficult; however, the format terrifies many students.

As I was saying, I helped a few of the IB students a few weeks prior this test. Even though they had mock tests and they had practiced quite a bit, they felt anxious as the test date was approaching.

One afternoon, while I was marking some papers in my classroom, one of those students knocked at my door. She was heading to her oral test, and she wanted me to wish her luck. I remember clearly that I said, "I can wish you success, but with all you know, you don't need luck". She left my class fully confident.

Not long after, while I was packing and ready to go home, the same student rushed into my classroom quite upset. As soon as I asked what it was, she burst into tears. Even though I was not formally her teacher, I felt responsible for her distress. I asked her what was wrong, and she mumbled and sobbed while telling me how she felt really confident about the assessment, and

how happy she was when she realized the poem she got was exactly the one that she studied and liked the most. She kept crying deeply when she told me how organized her presentation was, how she had every idea planned and justified. Suddenly, anger replaced her sadness, and she made a long pause. Then she just said: "And when I sat down in front of that mic, I just went blank". Then, she resumed her suffering.

I felt mortified. Even though this student was not in any of my classes, we had bonded through extracurricular activities. We discovered we had common interests like short stories, movies, and video games. She found in me an adult who acknowledged her interests and passions, and I connected with a student who reminded me of myself: a sensitive kid in a world that demands toughness. And even though we did not have a formalized teacher/student relation, I realized that in that moment I needed to be her teacher, not a friend or her family. I realized that by confronting me with her sadness and disappointment, she was looking to me not only for comfort; she was also trying to make sense of the world after that particular experience.

I was not sure how to handle an eighteen-year-old girl crying in my classroom at 5 pm. I only reacted when she composed herself, saying: "Sorry for the intrusion, sir. I'm so embarrassed, I never cried in front of a teacher before." I asked her: "So, where do you usually cry after an experience like this?" She explained that she always cried alone.

I told her the story of my own experience as an IB student. I was the best student in Spanish, and everybody knew I wanted to study literature the following year, so the expectation on me was high. I told her how I epically failed the same oral test, and how that led me to be obsessed about public speaking for the next few years of my life. I shared with her a personal story of failure. In retrospect, I wanted to show her that her own suffering was shared by others. Afterwards, I let her talk more about her test, and finally she stopped crying. When she was

leaving, she told me, "Sorry sir, I'm sure I can do better than that". Her words shocked me, and I just answered, "I am the one who is sorry, for not being able to help you realise that one test won't make me think less or more about you".

During the next year, I was a full-fledged IB teacher, in the same classroom with the microphone, recording one of my new students. I remember clearly how much I hated that test as a teacher. I understood how the students feared the oral exam, but I am not sure if they realized that for them, it was but one horrible experience, while for me, it was twenty terrifying experiences every year.

During my fourth year as an IB teacher, I witnessed a student shake and stutter during that test. He was a good student, intelligent, creative, and passionate about literature. However, he lacked the self-confidence and performative personality that a test like this requires. I was expecting a poor performance from him, not because of his qualities, but because of the logistics of the assessment: microphones, recording machines, lots of pressure. However, I never expected the experience to be that uncomfortable. He was clearly losing it, and there was nothing I could do because of the conditions of the test. Those were the fifteen longest minutes of my professional life. At the end he apologized and left quickly, before I could say anything. It was clear to me that he felt deeply embarrassed and humiliated. I knew he respected me a lot, and it was clear that he realized my reaction to the awkwardness of his presentation. He left without looking at my face, and I felt ashamed due to my inability to help.

Both students eventually did well in their IB examinations. Both are now studying in great and prestigious universities. Both contact me from time to time, asking for advice or simply to say hello.

During the graduation ceremony of the first student, she approached me to say farewell. She thanked me profoundly and gave me a present. She said: "I heard you hate gifts, but here". It was a beautiful book about a graphic novel that I loved and that I recommended to her. I said that it was not necessary, that I was not even one of her teachers, the ones who spent the last two years supporting her with the IB burdens. She just said, "This is a thank you gift, not because of lessons or classes, just because you let me cry in front of you without making me feel uncomfortable, and because of that I didn't feel bad about myself anymore, so thank you". I still carry the book around, because it reminds me of the importance of making myself responsible for the suffering of others.

4. Policy Analysis: IB mission statement (the institution's perspective)

The international Baccalaureate is an international educational organization that offers educational programmes for children aged 3 to 19 years old (IB, 2015a). Their three educational programmes (the Primary Years, the Middle Years, and the Diploma Programme) consist of (a) a specific curricula, (b) assessment by international evaluators, and (c) official internationally recognized certification provided by the IB Organization. The certificate offered in the Diploma Programme is definitely the most renowned and coveted⁴, because it offers direct access to and credit recognition by many universities around the world.

I have a very close relationship with the IB. I was an IB student at Pestalozzi Schule (a private international Swiss school) in Lima, Peru, from 1999 to 2000. In fact, I was part of the first cohort in my school that passed through the Diploma Programme. After school, I applied to Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, the oldest public university in my country, to study comparative literature. Unfortunately for me, public universities in Peru did not recognize the IB certification, so I had to follow the regular admission process. The year I took the entrance exam, there were other sixty four thousand applicants, and after one year of studying, I did not get accepted. However, my IB certificate allowed me to skip the entrance exam to Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, a top private university. There, as an undergrad, I discovered that all the stress suffered during those two years of IB prepared me well for the university's rigorous academic work: I was experienced at reading and writing complex texts, very competent at working under pressure and close to deadlines, and I was especially good at taking tests. Probably my biggest amazement was realizing that my classmates were suffering over tasks that I considered simple, only because the IB naturalized in me an educational suffering approach.

⁴ As I mentioned before, because my experience in the IB, both as a student and teacher, was closely related to the Diploma Programme, this paper will focus on that specific curriculum.

A few years later, my involvement with the IB developed further as a professional. In 2009 I was hired, as a full-time Spanish teacher at Markham College, an international private (very exclusive and elitist) school in Lima. Part of my responsibilities were teaching two different international programmes: the IB Diploma Programme and Cambridge's IGCSE. As an IB teacher I participated in three different regional workshops, advised on several extended essays (equivalent to a graduating paper for the Diploma), and taught Language A1 (Spanish) in both the Standard and Higher levels. The biggest surprise for me was all the paperwork and assessment speculation that is an essential aspect of the programme. As a student, I hated all the suffering the IB put me through, particularly over the final examinations. However, I also was grateful for the good preparation for university life. As a teacher, I suffered due to all the official paperwork and due to what I saw as the assessment obsession. On the other hand, I appreciated the open discussion/conversation with the students that the programme allows.

In sum, the IB Diploma programme represents for me a complex set of contradictions; I have a passionate love/hate relationship with IB. I believe the programme offers opportunities that the conventional classroom (in the public or private curricula) does not contemplate, especially regarding the deep intellectual and personal connections with the students formed during their process of discovering and developing their personal interests, their search for identity. In other words, the programme encourages a constructive educational suffering promoted by a curriculum full of challenges and a flexible approach. I also believe that the focus on assessment, a tool recognized as international accountability, is somehow nonsensical. By reflecting on my own experience with the IB, I came to inquire: is there a contradiction between the IB values and policies, and the practice of those values? According to my students' experience of the IB (in some cases similar to mine, in other cases, very different, but always

conflicted), the IB is an institution that teaches a way to learn through suffering. As I said before, this approach can be either positive or very negative.

In this section I will analyse the IB's official institutional set of values (or policies). I set out to discover the relationship between the practices of useless suffering and the discourse used. The IB organization's official website will be my main source to access the institution's representation of their policy.

To better address the policies that I am going to explore, I find it useful to set my analysis in a few theoretical concepts that will help me to understand what can we find behind the policies. The concept of *ideological frames* comes in handy here, because it helps me to understand the IB policy as a particular and intentional discursive construction of a specific phenomenon (education). As Ng and Shan explain, an ideological frame "identifies ideologies as processes that are produced and constructed through human activities" (2010, p. 171). In other words, ideological frames help us to understand that behind a practice it is possible to find a structured set of perspectives that influence that practice. However, we often ignore the ideology behind our practice, because "The ideas contained in the ideological frame become normalized" (2010, p. 172). I find this normalization the most dangerous process in policy, because it impedes us from questioning the objectives and motivations underneath our actions and encourages us to only work blindly within an ideological rationale. As Ng and Shan explain it, "The term 'ideological practice', therefore, draws attention to how ideas, once they become hegemonic, organise and shape our work and lives" (2010, p. 172). Thus, it is necessary to inquire: what is the ideological frame behind the IB policy, and what is the naturalized (hence, unconscious) set of ideas that serve as main structure of the IB model of education?

Frames also mould the way we perceive a problem. Thus, as Prentice states, frames work as interpretative schema (2009, p 689). In other words, the approach we use to confront a problem is also dictated by frames. Policy, in this sense, could be understood as the solution proposed for a specifically constructed problem. Again, Prentice draws our attention to the influence of frames over practices: "frames simplify and condense the world by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, experiences, and sequences. Frames are active and relational: they are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings [...] they encompass not just what to think but how to think about something" (2009, p. 689). In this sense, it is very important to realize that the way a policy frames the world affects directly the parameters in which the policy is applied. In the specific case of the IB, as we will see, even though there is no explicit allusion to educational suffering, there is an implicit stress on the problem of assessment, the main tool supporting their rigorous academic rationale.

Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead also reflect on the importance of seeing a *policy* as concrete actions: "We suggest that the way to unpack policy is to see it as a kind of social practice, specifically, a practice of power" (2009, p. 767). Even though in this paper I am not going to focus on practices, the analysis of the representation of that practice by the students will allow me to "unpack" the policy beyond its theoretical presentation. It is important to "look beyond the text of policy to the practice that produces, embeds, extends, contextualizes, and in some cases transforms the text" (Levinson et. al, 2009, p. 770).

Finally, I also will use the concept of *appropriation* to understand the role of the third unmentioned actor in my problem: the schools. Although I am focusing on the two extremes of the policy process (the creator and the recipient, the IBO and the students), it is important to recognize the school's role as the intermediary between the two main actors. With the concept of

appropriation, it is possible to recognize the moment in which the policy lands into the terrain of practice, and how the policy is transformed by the interpretation of administrators and teachers. Levinson et al. explain that: "Appropriation occurs when the policy that was formed within one community of practice meets the existential and institutional conditions that mark a different community of practice" (2009, p. 782). Thus, we recognize the distance between the official policy discourse and the practice. In simple terms, "Appropriation refers to the ways that creative agents interpret and take in elements of policy, thereby incorporating these discursive resources into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action, their own 'figured worlds' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998)" (2009, p. 779). There is an agency in the policy process, indeed. However, my analysis will work under one theoretical assumption: this agency is limited by (among other factors, such as the material conditions) the ideological frame that structures the policy itself.

Finally, before presenting my analysis, I think it is important to clarify the definition of policy used here. In a very literal definition, I understand *policy* as the set of rules and norms (explicit and implicit, written and spoken) that order the practice within an institution. However, I believe that policy works in more complex ways. I agree with Levinson et al.'s explanation: "Policy thus (a) defines reality, (b) orders behavior, and (sometimes) (c) allocates resources accordingly" (2009, p. 770). In this sense, we can understand policy as an exercise of power, because in its simple creation resides a definition of reality that supports a specific distribution of resources. Thus, "we call attention to policy as a verb, that is, a quality of intentional action to form normative discourse" (2009, p. 771). Thus, I looked for the values of the institution, because, in that sense, the philosophical grounds over which the policies are built constitute the ideological parameters that define and limit actions. Finally, as Levinson et al. explain, "we

understand policy as a complex, ongoing social practice of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts" (2009, p. 770). I will argue that the IB mission, learner profile, and the Diploma Programme assessment philosophy express that "normative cultural production" that determines the institution's policy practice. These three texts together serve as an ideological framework for a culture of useless educational suffering promoted by assessment and certification procedures; in sum, we can discern the neoliberal value of accountability in operation.

Even though the IB website does not present a clear official set of policies, the website presents IB policy as a philosophical stance. On the IB's *Mission and Strategy* page, the institution presents, in the first line, a statement about its objectives: "The IB is more than its educational programmes and certificates. At our heart we are motivated by a mission to create a better world through education" (2015b). The questions arising are: *Whose world*, and *Better for whom*? The first answer is obvious, because the organization presents itself as a global institution, proud of its international reach. So the IB is literally saying that their programmes and certificates will create a better global community. It is really interesting how the institution place the certification at the same level as the learning itself (represented by the word "programmes"). The process of certification implies external accountability, therefore an implicit emphasis on assessment, the IB's main accountability tool. The excellence discourse continues, this time more explicitly: "We value our hard earned reputation for quality, for high standards and for pedagogical leadership" (2015b). Again, the institution's logic implies that the only process to measure quality and high standards is through its assessment system. Next, the discourse links basic educational values (understanding and respect) with the concept of the "new learner": "We promote intercultural understanding and respect, not as an alternative to a

sense of cultural and national identity, but as an essential part of life in the 21st century" (2015b). The 21st century learner needs to be a global individual connected with their own regional culture. The assumption here is that the current generation of students is different and needs specific values to adapt to the new 21st century world.

The discourse on the IB's mission statement is clearly framed through a neoliberal ideology. The discourses of excellence, competition, and globalization are hidden behind general educational values that focus on the IB's assessment and certification. The site closes the mission section presenting a synthesis of all the previous assertions in what they called their "mission statement": "These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right" (2015b). This is by itself a unobjectionable value statement. However, if we look closely at how the programme applies those values (by analysing the previous statements, as I did), it is possible to discern a neoliberal discourse. The problem is not the values they propose; the problem and contradiction reside in how those values are deeply and implicitly linked to their own assessment/accountable system.

As a general definition of the complex concept that *neoliberalism* is, we can say that "While on one hand neo-liberalism problematizes the state and is concerned to specify its limits through the invocation of individual choice, on the other hand it involves forms of governance that encourage both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market" (Larner, 2000, p. 12). It is essential to understand that, as any other hegemonic ideology, neoliberalism naturalizes its rationale in daily social practices, such as education. As Biesta (2005) points out, "the new language of learning [...] allows for a re-description of the process of education in terms of an economic transaction" (p. 58), where the learner becomes a consumer; the teacher, a

provider; and education, a commodity (Biesta, 2005). However, this ideological frame for education implies a serious problem: "the comparison between an economic and an educational transaction falls short" (Biesta, 2005, p. 58), because "In the case of an economic transaction we can, in principle, assume that consumers know what their needs are and that they know what their want" (Biesta, 2005, p.58). Biesta himself raises the question: "Is this also a valid assumption in the case of education?" (p. 58). Framing education as I did at the beginning of this paper (as a wandering from suffering to joy, from confusion to discovery, from chaos to meaning and identity), it is obvious that my answer to that question is: education should not be reduced to a transactional relation, because then it loses the moral responsibility that the suffering framework recognizes and makes a core point of discussion.

Biesta (2005) clearly states that: "This way of thinking introduces a logic which focuses on the users or consumers of the educational provision and a very suitable name for the consumer of education is, of course, 'the learner'" (p. 57). The IB reproduces this language of learning in its IB learner profile: "The IB learner profile is the IB mission statement translated into a set of learning outcomes for the 21st century" (2015c). The IB learner profile specifies ten attributes that "help individuals and groups become responsible members of local, national and global communities" (2015d). These attributes are *inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective*. All the values presented on this site are positive educational goals. Again, they present their programmes as a way to make a positive impact in the world through education: "The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally-minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world" (2015d). It is hard to criticise such philanthropic goals. The discourse even constructs an IB

community that goes beyond the school system by referring to each attribute as a shared principle by using the pronoun "we" in every entry: "Inquirers: We nurture our curiosity, developing skills for inquiry and research. We know how to learn independently and with others" (2015d). However, there is an explicit link with the IB mission statement in which we already identified an implicit focus on assessment and certification. In this sense, all the positive values are framed through a quality and excellence perspective, invoking a neoliberal ideological framework.

Because I find that the main contradiction of this policy statement resides in the excessive but veiled focus on assessment, I think it is necessary to analyse the Diploma Programme assessment philosophy site as well. What impressed me the most was the presentation of assessment as *evidence* (hence, an objective, neutral tool of measurement) of the courses' goals: "The International Baccalaureate® (IB) assesses student work as direct evidence of achievement against the stated goals of the Diploma Programme courses" (2015e). Even though the multiplicity of courses offered by the IB may have very diverse goals, the fact that assessment is considered "direct evidence of achievement" reinforces the idea of an excessive focus on evaluation and accountability. In this sense, the IB presents itself as the ultimate judge of academic and value learning—a comfortable position that legitimates its own hegemonic place as international educational institution.

In sum, we can understand the IB policy by reading the explicit discourse presented in their policy text, to then find out the implicit discourse that includes the neoliberal premise of education as a transactional activity. Explicitly, the policy text uses a philanthropic educational language that depicts a strict program that develops universal human values: "challenging programs", "rigorous assessment", "compassionate, lifelong learners", "who help to create a

better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect" (2015b). By establishing relations between different sections of the IB's policy statements, I presented how this discourse is framed under a neoliberal rationale of transactional education where the programme delivers content and values, and the assessment proves the reception (from a transactional perspective) of said content. There is a clear focus on assessment, which implies a logic of excellence justified by values of internationalization (globalization). However, the policy never speaks about the costs behind those benefits, only the benefits themselves, ultimately represented by the IB certificate, a mark of distinction. Even though the policy talks about rigour and challenges, there is no explicit mention of suffering as a constructive educational force. Nevertheless, the suffering is there, not in the policy, but in the application of it. The suffering resides in the evaluation, in the importance given to the certificate as a representative of those universal positive values. The assessment is the only path to "objectively" prove that the students have acquired (because education is a transaction) those values that make them 21st-century people. If I identify the suffering experienced through the IB with useless suffering, it is because of that lack of discursive presence. The fact that the IB offers programmes that, with or without an explicit intention, cause educational suffering without taking any responsibility for that suffering is, from a Levinasian inter-human perspective, immoral. The IB promotes an interesting program with great future material benefits for the students. However, the IB does not make itself accountable (in the sense of answerable) for the suffering it provokes, an ironic statement for an institution that regards so highly the value of accountability (in the technical or managerial sense of the term).

5. Autobiographical Reflection #2

In 1998 I was in 9th grade, and even though the IB programme was going to officially start the next year, at school they decided to prepare us one year earlier. I studied at Pestalozzi Schule, a Swiss K to 12 private school that during the 80s and 90s served as a good educational option for families with low and middle incomes. They offered a European curriculum, German and English as additional languages, and, starting in 1999, they were going to offer the IB Diploma Programme, as some of the other rich private schools were doing in Lima.

We were the first cohort that was going to enter the programme; probably that was the reason behind the preparatory year. Pestalozzi was a small school, with two classes per grade, and no more than forty students in each year group. The 9th grade was a big change for us because, for the first time, the two classes in my grade were mixed. They picked the best students from both classes and put us all together in the new IB class. The B class was formed by the ones who historically struggled with academics. That was also a big new change: the institution made a division that actually affected our social interactions. Now we were the IB section, and that meant that we were less fun, of course.

I was a very quiet student. A good one, filled with questions and curiosity, but quiet and introverted. The change affected me a lot. I was suddenly less comfortable with the class composition. Even though the school was small enough for everybody to know each other, I suddenly felt that there was not a comfort zone there for me anymore.

I come from a family of migrants. My mother's parents came from Italy after the war, and my brother, my cousins, and I were the second generation borne in Peru. My father's family was a big mystery. They came to Lima from Trujillo, a relatively big city at the north of the country. Apparently, they suffered a financial crisis during the 1940s and they had to move. In that sense,

my brother and I were the first ones borne in Lima. Ironically, or maybe accordingly, my family kept migrating in the following years. My closest uncle got sent to prison and then had to leave the country for political reasons. My other uncle left us to work as a cameraman for National Geographic. My grandfather passed away, and finally my parents got divorced and my father worked in different countries for the next ten years. Everything happened in the last two or three years of the 1980s, at the same time as the Peruvian internal war between the State and the revolutionary groups MRTA and Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path). I was really young, but I still remember now the curfews, the weekly blackouts, the food shortage, and the car bombs that regularly struck Lima during those years. I remember clearly the tape on every window of every house (placed across every piece of glass to detain glass ricochet produced by the bombs) and the car bomb drills that became a regular occurrence at school. I was a fortunate kid, though; don't get me wrong. The real struggle happened in the rural areas of my country, where peasants and indigenous groups were decimated by the revolutionary groups and military forces that were supposed to protect them. As I said, I was a lonely quiet kid, used to being left on my own, as many Peruvians in those years.

So, yes, I was not the biggest fan of these changes at the 9th grade. However, I enjoyed the new program. I was very good in Literature and History, and I started to shine, for the first time in my academic life. In 9th grade we were already reading some of the books required by the IB in order to familiarize ourselves with the programme requirements. And to properly do that, we also had some assessments modeled in the image of the IB programme. I did my first oral presentation that year.

I remember clearly I picked Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* as my presentation's topic. I didn't feel nervous at all. I even enjoy the little research I did on the author and his

stories. I wrote down a beautiful essay, and even though the teacher suggested to us not to read our presentation, I couldn't think of any other method to prepare myself. I still remember that the panic overcame me when I stood in front of my class. It is hard enough for any teenager to be publicly exposed in front of their peers. For me it was even more uncomfortable with that new class that came to replace eight years of routines. I have clear memories of my shaky hands blurring the ink on the paper with cold sweat. I think the worst was being conscious of the awkwardness of the situation. Mumbling for fifteen minutes was hard for me, but also uncomfortable for the rest of the class.

Many friendly jokes followed that day. Jokes that became inside jokes, friendly reminders of my shame. In grade 11, the last year of the IB programme in my school, I volunteered to have an oral interview in front of the class as one of the mock examinations. I was the only one who chose that assessment option; all the others picked the more private formal presentation. My peers brought to my memory my grade-9 presentation, but they encouraged me to succeed this time. I think that was the worst, the encouragement given to the lost cause. I did well. I had improved because I had something to prove after all.

When the final IB examinations arrived, my teachers predicted great results for me, especially in Literature (Language A1) and History. I was taking both as my higher level courses, and I was sure I was going to get a seven (the maximum mark in the IB) in both.

When the official oral examination came, I knew by heart every book and poem. My options were Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, Lope's *Fuenteovejuna*, or a compilation of poems from the Spanish Generation of '27. I got what I wanted, Laurencia's monologue, the topic of the "Golden Age". Not only did I love Lope's play, but I learned everything there was to know about it. In the twenty-minute preparation, I identified literary devices and analyzed deeper than I ever did. I

was understanding the structure and the possible meanings of every nuance and subtlety. Suddenly the door opened, and my teacher was there: that was it, time out, and I didn't finish. I went too deep and never organized my ideas or made sense of the whole exercise. I mumbled around during the fifteen-minute presentation, again, thinking more about what I missed than what I was doing. My focus was on trying to understand what happened and on the disappointed look on my teacher's face. I felt exactly the same as two years before, as a quiet student in front of a class of strangers, alone and surrounded by people witnessing my suffering.

I got seven in History and six in Language A1. Thanks to the IB certificate I got into one of the most prestigious private universities in Peru, and I studied Spanish Literature and Linguistics. In the following years I always volunteered to be the first in every oral presentation and in every students' conference. I decided I had a problem with public speaking, and that I needed to do something about it. I got good. I even became a teacher. I am still a quiet lonely man. The difference is that I have a huge arsenal of skills when public speaking is called for. I am great at chitchat and at formal talks. I even enjoy them most of the times. The problem is that I thought I had a problem with public speaking. I think I always enjoyed talking about the stuff I love. However the experience in front of the class and the even scarier oral examination rooted in me the idea that there was something wrong with me and my character. I carried that scar for several years and it took me a lot of work to regain trust in my abilities. Yes, the IB pushed me to learn and master a useful skill. However I still think that I didn't need the extra pain that the experience gave me.

6. Media Analysis: IB memes (the students' perspective)

With more than 3,805 schools in 147 countries, the IB offers its programs to 1,190,000 students (IB, 2015a). Of course, I could not reach them personally. I rather chose a source that let me access the student's point of view condensed as a creative object. Through the "IB Memes" communities, actively present on several online social networks, I was able to witness how the students' experiences are represented as collective creations. However, this source does not provide a direct window onto the students' experiences or feelings. I use the IB memes as projections of how the students want to be perceived. In other words, these memes let me analyse how the students construct an image of themselves. My purpose with this analysis is to understand how the students represent suffering within the IB context, why a seemingly liberatory curriculum (represented by a policy filled with a positive educational discourse and global values) ends up being perceived as a heavy burden.

All the memes I selected utilize two rhetorical devices to express their content: the hyperbole and the simile. The hyperbole occurs, for example, when the IB is represented as a danger. Of course, it is not a real threat, but the rhetorical intention is to depict it as the enemy. The simile occurs in a more subtle way. A meme uses visuals and text to project its content, and the relation between two different concepts (simile) occurs by using a pop culture artifact such as a movie or a fictional character. Thus, the meme establishes a relation between the image (the fictional character) and the new concept, in this case, the IB. Both devices are used to create a comical effect, but it is essential to be aware of their presence in order to realize that the memes, as any other cultural creation, are not literal representations of a phenomenon. It is important to remember that the IB memes project a rhetorically constructed identity. Analysing them gives

me the opportunity to deconstruct that identity in order to understand the recurrent suffering component present in the IB memes.

First, it is necessary to define what an internet meme is. Because it is, essentially, a viral dissemination of collective creations, I will use a website that collects users' definitions, such as urbandictionary.com, in order to define the meme phenomenon. In the UrbanDictionary, the users propose the definition of a term, concept, or saying that belongs to a specific subcultural context. Then, the users also vote up or down the best definitions available in order to reflect accuracy or proper cultural usage. In that sense, this online linguistic encyclopedia uses the recollection of regular anonymous people's perspectives as its criteria of truth. Thus, I am using the same phenomenological rationale in order to define the phenomenon.

According to the site, a meme is "a pervasive thought or thought pattern that replicates itself via cultural means; a parasitic code, a virus of the mind especially contagious to children and the impressionable" (2015). The internet memes refer to popular culture's artifacts (movie scenes, actors, quotes, etc.) that express an idea or a feeling to transform its meaning maintaining a part of the original sense. Memes need to be viral constructs and are a form of collective creation. It is not important who created the meme because they are constantly recreated by new "authors". Thus the authority resides in the community. The quality of a meme is measured by its replication on the web (virality) and by its faithful appropriation of the base media used (the movie scene, fictional character, or image borrowed).

I found out about the IB memes through my IB students in 2013. In their desperation around dealing with deadlines and the heavy academic coursework, they found in the IB memes a sense of community that shares the burden of academic pressure. In the recognition and acknowledgement of their suffering, they told me that they found relief.

There are more than twenty social network sites that host IB memes (more than three Facebook communities, two Tumblr sites, around fourteen Pinterest boards, and three Twitter accounts). Most of them were created around 2012, when these memes enjoyed the peak of their popularity. The biggest community is the IB Memes Facebook site, with 128,747 members. It is possible to find IB memes on many other websites; however, I am only looking at social networks because those imply a community formation that share a way of thinking, or at least that “likes” a way of thinking. They even use the word "community" to refer to the followers or readers of their websites. I believe that collective creations such as memes are a very interesting source of data, because of their expressive capabilities and, especially, because of their collective creation essence. Without a single author, a meme can become a fleeting symbol that represents a huge community and its ideals.

I picked only five IB memes (see Appendix) out of hundreds to analyze here because of the scope of this inquiry. The ones selected represent a very good depiction of suffering as well as commonly used topics. I picked them from IB Memes Facebook community because of its vast popularity. In other words, they are consumed and reproduced by large groups of students, making them, in this sense, more representative. In my analysis, I found that these memes depict suffering in three different ways: seclusion, physical pain/distress, and emotional pain/distress.

I start with image 1 because it serves as a good example of how memes are collective creations and recreations based on popular media. The famous quote from the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)—“One does not simply walk into Mordor”—is generally used to express an impossible task, such as walking into the land of evil in Tolkien's fantasy world, the Middle Earth. Anything that supplants that last part of the quote (“walk into Mordor”) assumes the negative implication and immense danger that this fictional place

represents. This meme creates a comparison between the horrors suffered in the evil land and the sacrifices made by IB students in their effort to fulfil their academic responsibilities. The assessment focus is present in the second meme of Image 1, where we can see how the students represent the maximum grade as an epic quest, such as the one taken by Frodo Baggins in the movies and books.

This particular meme structure was created outside of the IB memes community. According to the website knowyourmeme.com (2015a), a variant of this meme was successfully used in 2004 for the first time. Even though it is not possible to date the IB variant, it is possible to assume that it publicly appeared around the same time as the IB meme communities in 2012.

The context from which the quote was taken is very revealing. The fictional character Boromir says "One does not simply walk into Mordor" (Osborne, et al, 2001) during the reunion of the council to deal with a matter that involves the survival of the entire continent (the fictional Middle Earth): the destruction of a weapon (the ring of power) that could destroy the current order. Boromir represents the human kingdom of the south, Gondor, but also symbolically portrays the corruption and weakness of men: he is the first character that succumbs to the temptation of the ring (Osborne, et al., 2001). The quest this council ordered was destroying the ring, a task that could only be done by taking the weapon to its origin place. The importance of the story behind the meme resides in the narrative genre and the impossibility of the mission: they have to bring the ring back to the most feared place in their known world, a ring that by itself has the power to corrupt and transform you. The epic story of *The Lord of the Rings*, in a very hyperbolic way, serves as a relatable story to the IB students: they have to do the impossible, what nobody else wants to do, and they have to carry a heavy burden.

Both memes in image 1 reveal two different approaches to the same topic. The first one refers to the changes that the IB provokes in the students' life. Thus, a common complaint is revealed here: lack of time to do all the work. Of course, I am not saying that there is actually a lack of time; not even I will discuss good or bad time management strategies. The point is that IB students depict their experience as an impossible quest that implies physical pain. The fact that they choose Boromir (a negative corrupt character who reaches redemption through his death) and the fact that every student finishes the IB programme (with different degrees of success) together imply that they are constructing the IB students' identity through the epic discourse, depicting themselves as heroes. The second meme in the same image utilises the topic of the impossible quest to construct their identity, thus depicting this time the IB as the final and unbeatable enemy.

In image 2, the relation is established with the *Hunger Games'* character Haymitch Abernathy (played by Woody Harrelson in the 2012 and 2013 Lionsgate movies). According to the movie (2012), Abernathy is the only living Hunger Games winner from District 12. The experience, not only the cruelty of the competition itself but the brutality of the media that surround it, had made him a cynical character, a feature reflected in the meme's text. However, Abernathy's actual words are: "Nobody ever wins this game. Period. There are survivors. There's no winners" (2013). The subtext of the meme relates the deadly competition depicted in the movies to the IB. On the other hand, there is an implicit relation between the tributes (the teenagers picked in the movies to compete to their death) and the IB students which implies sacrifice and forced selection.

There is another interesting relation between the IB and the Hunger Games. Both imply a prize, a certificate from the former and your survival from the latter, that is only achievable

through suffering. The meme, thus, emphasises the student's sense of suffering. Finally, I find very interesting the way in which the neoliberal values implicit in the IB policy discourse appear here. The sense of competition is made clear by the presence of the winning element. There is a first prize in both the IB and the Hunger Games; however, the cost is depicted as very elevated. Hence, it is possible to find the presence of emotional pain/distress as a form of suffering. The IB curriculum is again depicted in this meme as an heroic path.

Image 3 also represents the IB as a forced relationship, comparing the imprisonment of Disney's Genie in the lamp with the IB experience. This meme represents, through a series of vignettes, the last scene of *Aladdin* (1992), where the main character liberates the genie. This is used here to symbolize the feeling of the students once the programme finishes. The presence of a sense of liberation is clear, an experience felt by many students.

Again, the meme distorts the actual words of the movie in order to express a different but related content:

Genie: I'm free. I'm free. Quick. Quick. Wish for something outrageous. Say, "I, I want the Nile." Wish for the Nile. Try that!

Aladdin: Uh... I wish for the Nile.

Genie: No way!

[laughs]

Genie: Oh, does that feel good! (Clements & Musker 1992)

The phrase "Wish for something outrageous. Say "I, I want the Nile." Wish for the Nile. Try that!" (1992) is supplanted by "ask me to write an essay". It is possible to see how the meme establishes a relation between the wish for something immense and beyond reasonable limits, and a common academic task. There is also the difference between the wish from the movie and the task from the meme that is marked by the imperative form of the verb 'to ask'.

The suffering topic of seclusion is very clear here. The essay referred to by the Genie, in this case, represents the undesired mandatory sentence, again criticizing the excessive focus on the assessment. A big difference between this meme and the previous ones is that the IB is depicted here as the benevolent master (Aladdin) that at the end liberates the captured Genie. However, the most important feeling reflected in this meme is the joy of freedom. The fact that the meme ends with the genie's answer as a proclamation of its newly acquired freedom depicts the liberatory experience that finishing the IB represents. The joy of the students resides in finally refusing the IB's request.

I chose the meme shown in image 4, because it actually uses the word “suffering” in its text. This meme, Confession Bear, is used to express personally embarrassing opinions. As the site knowyourmemes.com (2025b) explains: "Confession Bear is an advice animal image macro series featuring a photo of a Malayan sun bear leaning against a log. The images are captioned with confessions about taboo behaviors and controversial opinions that are often kept secret for fear of being ostracized" (2015b). According to the site (2015b), this meme was created by Redditor *F-18Bro* on June 21, 2012, using a photo taken by photojournalist Clemens Bilan. The use of this meme always implies embarrassing moments or habits to which other readers can relate. The fact that in image 4 the bear confesses that it likes TOK (Theory of Knowledge, one IB Diploma Programme core course), represents the course as a guilty pleasure, something that is abnormal in the IB students' community.

However, the main topic of this meme is the fact that the majority of students have a hard time with TOK. It is difficult to put this particular meme in a single category, because both physical pain and emotional distress work here. This positive experience of the course gives the student a privileged perspective on the others' suffering. It is possible to infer that the enjoyment

comes from the idea of that privilege, of not suffering as it is normally expected. Thus, the student enjoys TOK for sadistic reasons, not for the actual educational experience. Besides the Levinasian immorality of this statement (not make yourself responsible of the other's suffering) reflected on the sadistic joy of witnessing other people's pain, what the meme reveals is that not suffering is a rare condition, a taboo only expressible with the anonymity of the Confession Bear.

The concepts of enduring and surviving are also present in image 5, where the poster of the movie *12 Years a Slave* (2013) is used in this meme to reflect the commitment given to the IB. The movie, based in the 1853 memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* by Salomon Northup, tells the story of a free-born African-American who is kidnapped and sold as a slave in Louisiana for twelve years. Here the use of hyperbole as a rhetorical device is obvious, sadly, reinforcing race stereotypes in order to generate a comedic effect. The slavery topic reinforces the idea of involuntary duty to the institution and its requirements. Even though the assessment problem is not explicitly present in this meme, the cause of this suffering is the pressure to demonstrate excellence, and the assessment, as the IB says, is the main way to demonstrate that superiority. The suffering topic of physical and emotional pain are present here. However, the main topic is clearly seclusion: the meme depicts the IB through the feeling of inescapable captivity that the movie depicts.

As we have seen, anguish and discomfort are recurrent topics in the IB experience, according to the students. It is important to remember that these memes reflect the suffering that the system imposes. They rarely talk about specific contexts or experiences; they represent the experience as a whole, and they call it by its institutional name, the IB. The construction of this identity based on suffering could be understood as a way to justify the elitism of the programme. Suffering legitimates the differentiation and justifies the idea of an academic elite that deserves

more. The students construct this identity of suffering in order to legitimate their experience. I am not here to judge the value of their suffering. However, the constant presence of the pain component in these multimedia representations of their academic experiences talks about the presence of a useless suffering attached to the IB experience. I would love to ask the IB students if suffering is necessary for academic success. According to what I see in the IB memes, I am sure that the answer would be a proud yes.

7. Autobiographical Reflection #3

At the end of my first year of teaching, I got a weird email from the management team. Before getting into that, you'll need a little context first. Markham College is a school with a lot of traditions, rooted in the British culture from where it came from. The school was founded in 1946 (Markham, 2015a). It was created as a British boarding school for the sons of British descendants and rich Peruvians. Over the years it maintained its reputation of hard discipline and academic excellence. Even though during the 1980s and 1990s the school lost a little of its reputation for discipline, it always excelled in national and international academic and sports rankings. Today, the institutional mission reflects clearly this tradition: "Markham College aims to provide pupils with a **rigorous academic education** in English and Spanish leading to a **high degree of success in a wide range of international public examinations**" (Markham College, 2015b, my emphasis).

Having experienced the strictness of the school myself, as a teacher, its high expectations and huge effort to keep the high rankings every year, that email really impressed me. It came from one of the management team members, a British Art teacher who had over twenty years of experience at Markham and who was known for his immense love of international rankings and quantifiable data. The email was aimed at the twelve new teachers, including me. It basically said that on Friday there was going to be a crowd of IB students running from the main hall to the other side of the school. The purpose of this procession was jumping into the swimming pool. Apparently every year, when the last IB exam is taken, as a celebratory ritual, the kids run screaming and then jump, with clothes and everything they carry, into the pool. The most impressive thing, though, was not the depiction of this strange ceremony, which is indeed quite in contrast to the rules that oblige the students to treat the teachers as Sir or Miss or the policies

that regulates the uniforms or the haircuts. The weirdest thing was the last two lines: *For the new teachers, this is a tradition at Markham College. Please, do not punish the students or give them a hard time.*

Indeed that Friday, around twenty boys and girls ran around the school and jumped into the pool. There was a crowd around them that clapped and took pictures. Suddenly, it was like a parallel reality. I was actually positively impressed that they allowed that kind of freedom to the students. When I asked one of management team members why this was formally encouraged, the answer was something like "well, after what they have been through...".

During the following years I always took time in my schedule to be in the front row for the swimming pool tradition. I was fascinated by the idea of reward and suffering that it expressed. I interpreted it as a rite of passage, as a ceremony that divided the IB time from the rest of your life. It is also a liberating ritual, where the students stripped themselves of the school itself: uniforms, norms, discipline, and many other values represented by Markham College. There is a frenetic attitude, a physical effort, and water immersion. It looks like a religious ceremony. If I consider the Catholic background of my country, this ceremony implies a sense of rebirth through Baptism, the initiation of what will become the new life. In fact, considering that Peruvian culture is deeply rooted in Catholicism, the role of suffering as a transcendental experience becomes also clear.

That time of the year, the end of October, always made me think about my own IB ending. We didn't have anything like that, though. My rite of passage was quite different. Because the IB examination ends a month earlier than the formal school year (December in the southern hemisphere), I had a really long time between the end of classes and the beginning of the next academic year. In my case it was not as long as many others, because I started a special

preparation to apply to the biggest public university in Peru, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. In those years, only the private universities accepted the IB Diploma for direct admission, and I knew my family was not financially stable, so I believed it was my responsibility to apply for the best cheapest option available. However, those three months between academic periods were the first time in many years were I literally had nothing to do. I had no homework; I didn't have to deal with unfinished coursework or extended essays. The dream of any student. However, that was a short period that felt interminable.

My rite of passage consisted of what some of my later students called the “post-IB depression”. The confrontation with the nothingness that followed my IB experience was liberating, but suffocating at the same time. Even though I was longing for the time to do whatever I wanted, to read the book I selected, to watch as many movies as I preferred, I felt completely useless. Without the stress that the IB imposed (naturalized) on me, I felt void. I must say, when a former student of mine described this same feeling and named it as "post-IB depression", I felt like I was not alone. Even though there was the opportunity to develop your own projects, the lack of suffering made everything seem pointless.

8. Conclusions and Proposal: Reframe to Reform

Retelling my personal experiences as an IB student and teacher helped me to figure out what the role of suffering was in my own education. From an autobiographical point of view, I believe that **educational suffering**, a personal experience of suffering that starts from the recognition of a lack and that constructs identity, contributes to constructing and giving meaning to personal learning experiences. However, **useless suffering**, a kind of suffering imposed on the students, is created in this case by an assessment-obsessed program that works through the neoliberal value of accountability and that teaches that educational success is achieved by personal sacrifice and competition.

In my autobiographical reflections, I gave importance to the oral assessment experience, because it was one of the tests that actually represented a traumatic mark of suffering in my relation with the IB. Both as a student and teacher, I had to deal with it from different perspectives: as recipient and as witness to suffering. Every year in my professional life, I tried to address this test differently, but I never felt that I removed the component of useless suffering from it. So, an important question emerges from these experiences: how to prepare a student for a painful assessment without imposing suffering (or teaching-for-the-test)?

On the other hand, understanding policy as an ideological set of values that influence human action is a good way to explore different approaches to value statements as policy. Here, I tried to concentrate my inquiry on the complex discourse the IB constructs around its educational goals, presented always as positive but with a clear neoliberal perspective of success and excellence. The focus on assessment and certification, not explicitly present in the statement of values, but directly connected to them, definitely creates a useless suffering experience in the students, and, in my experience, in (some) teachers as well.

My analysis is not exhaustive, and I believe that more sources that express the students' perspective are needed to understand better the policy process. However, based on my personal professional experiences and on the students' construction of the IB identity, it is clear that the appropriation of the IB policy by the schools focuses on the assessment element, putting an unnecessary and unproductive pressure on the students. Even though the policy is presented as a way to accomplish global philanthropic educational goals, the schools realize the key role of assessment in the IB Diploma Programme (no good grades, no certificate, no ranking). I think that to complete this analysis, it is necessary to analyse the schools' presentation of the IB programme on their websites and in official policies.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of the students' memes as unofficial representations of the student community's reaction to the IB programme. The infamous reputation of the IB as an exploitative programme should be enough of a symptom to rethink the values in which the institution constructed its curriculum and its assessment. However, the material benefits of the certification seem to silence any kind of internal criticism.

I came to understand better the contradictions experienced as an IB student and teacher. The programme, rich in content and a full academic experience, taught me to work under pressure, a skill considered positive inside a neoliberal ideological frame. However, now as an adult, I realize that the cost of that kind of work is not worth it. I prefer educational values that teach the student to overcome obstacles without sacrificing other aspects of their life. I support an education built on the right kind of suffering, one that promotes rich, meaningful academic and non-academic experiences. Apparently, my values do not correspond to the 21st century.

It is necessary to recognize the value and benefits that the IB program brings. As a middle-class boy from a poor country with huge social and economic differences between the

poorest and the richest, I acknowledge that the IB gave me opportunities to know about the world and to open doors that led me to a prosperous education. I truly believe that the IB needs to reform its policies to actually accomplish some of those philanthropic values it promotes. However, I also realize that as long as the programme keeps working under the hegemonic rationale of neoliberalism, it will not change easily. Thus, a practical question arises: how to keep taking advantage of a programme like this without changing its policies but without compromising your own values nor generating useless suffering?

My first suggestion is avoiding a teaching-to-the-test strategy. The problem in training the students to master the evaluation is that teaching stresses the importance of accountability. The hidden curriculum behind this approach to education teaches that results are essential, not processes, promoting a dangerous Machiavellian logic of means justified by the ends. The suffering experienced in this kind of education is useless, because it is imposed (by institutions that desire good results on paper) and because the results are only rankings and marks, not personal development. It is possible to argue that suffering because of tests builds character and that it is a positive pain. However, if we consider Mintz's ideas on "potentially valuable educational distress" (2012, p. 252), Biesta's (2005) perspective on "symbolic violence", and Levinas' (2009) focus on inter-human morality, we realize that teaching-to-the-test imposes stress on the students, negating the possibility of generating their own discomfort, negating the possibility of finding their own lack and curiosity, negating their own voice. Indeed an immoral educational practice, not only because it does not promote true educational experiences, but especially because it is a practice that does not promote any kind of responsibility over the students' pain.

To avoid teaching-to-the-test, it is necessary, instead, to focus on teaching-to-the-student, and to accomplish that pedagogic practice, it is essential to dethrone the logic of standardized testing from our schools. Even though, as educational leaders and administrators, we need to manage international policies like the ones analyzed in this paper, I find unnecessary to let the students know about the organizational process that support educational programmes, such as the details and tricks of international evaluation. To involve the students in academic speculation, test construction, and evaluation bureaucracy only contributes to reinforcing the neoliberal value of accountability. In order to let the content and the struggle for knowledge cause the suffering, instead of the test conditions, I would even suggest not letting the students know that they are being evaluated. Definitely, to accomplish this stage of an accountability-free environment, first it is necessary to completely reframe the appropriation of the IB program.

To the question of how to change the practice without changing the policy, I propose the answer: reframe to reform. As I said in Section 4, framing implies the application of ideological values. If we manage to reframe a policy, we will indeed change its practice through a different process of appropriation. First, it is necessary to reframe the administrators' perspective on academic success. Success needs to be understood as students' engagement plus students' personal constructions of meaning around their experiences at school. Thus, it is possible to abandon the logic of success as good marks. Second, we need to let the teachers appropriate the IB policies through this new logic of educational suffering. As administrators, it is important to allow this creativity in teachers' daily application of the programme. With a clear reframing of the school's educational goals, an external set of policies should not be received as the ultimate educational truth. With a clear ideological framework, it is not necessary to compromise your own values.

In order to avoid a pedagogy based on useless suffering that exchanges the concept and practice of responsibility for accountability, it is essential to stop imposing models as if they were what every student needs. As Biesta (2005) states: the neoliberal rationale "forgets that a major reason for engaging in education is precisely to find out what it is that one actually needs" (p. 59). Instead, a pedagogy of educational suffering lets each individual student find their own identity through an internal struggle that, while not always pleasant, will lead to a unique, meaningful experience. The educational processes may be painful at times, but the reasons behind such suffering should not be a test or a mark, but a personal struggle for knowledge. We, as teachers and administrators, are responsible for that.

Appendix:

Image 1:



Image 2:

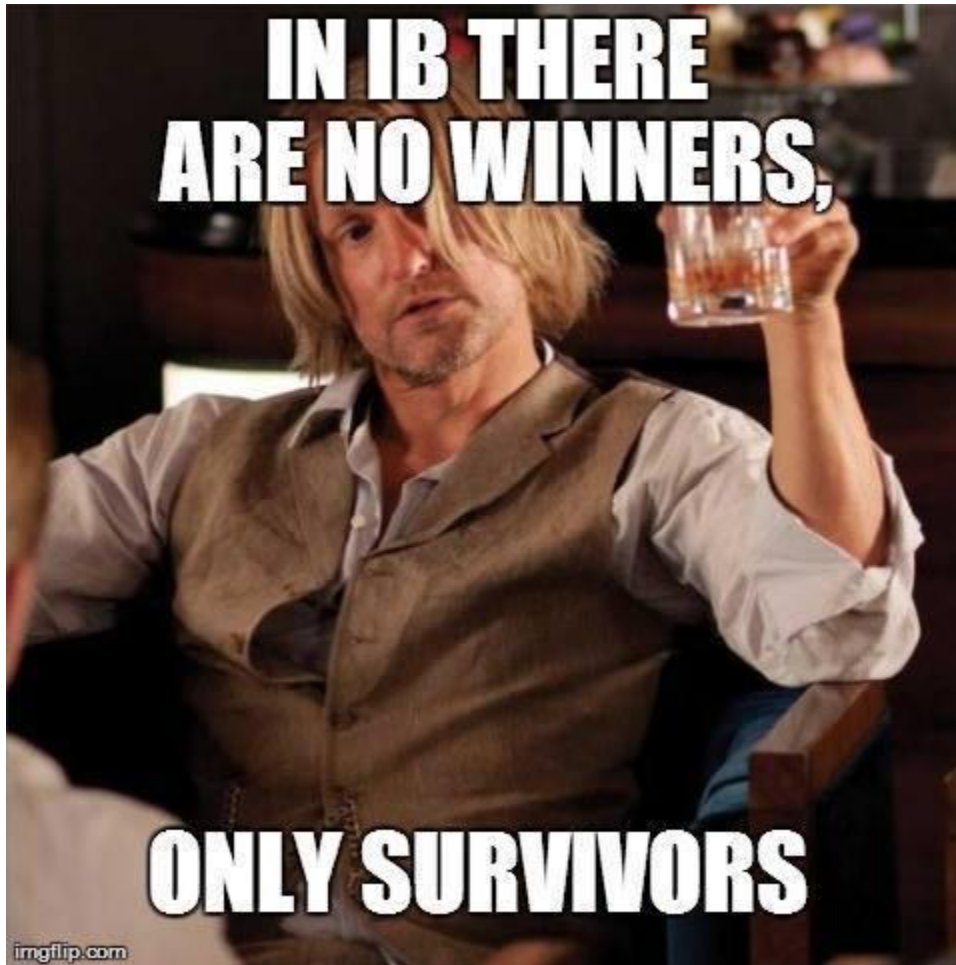


Image 3:

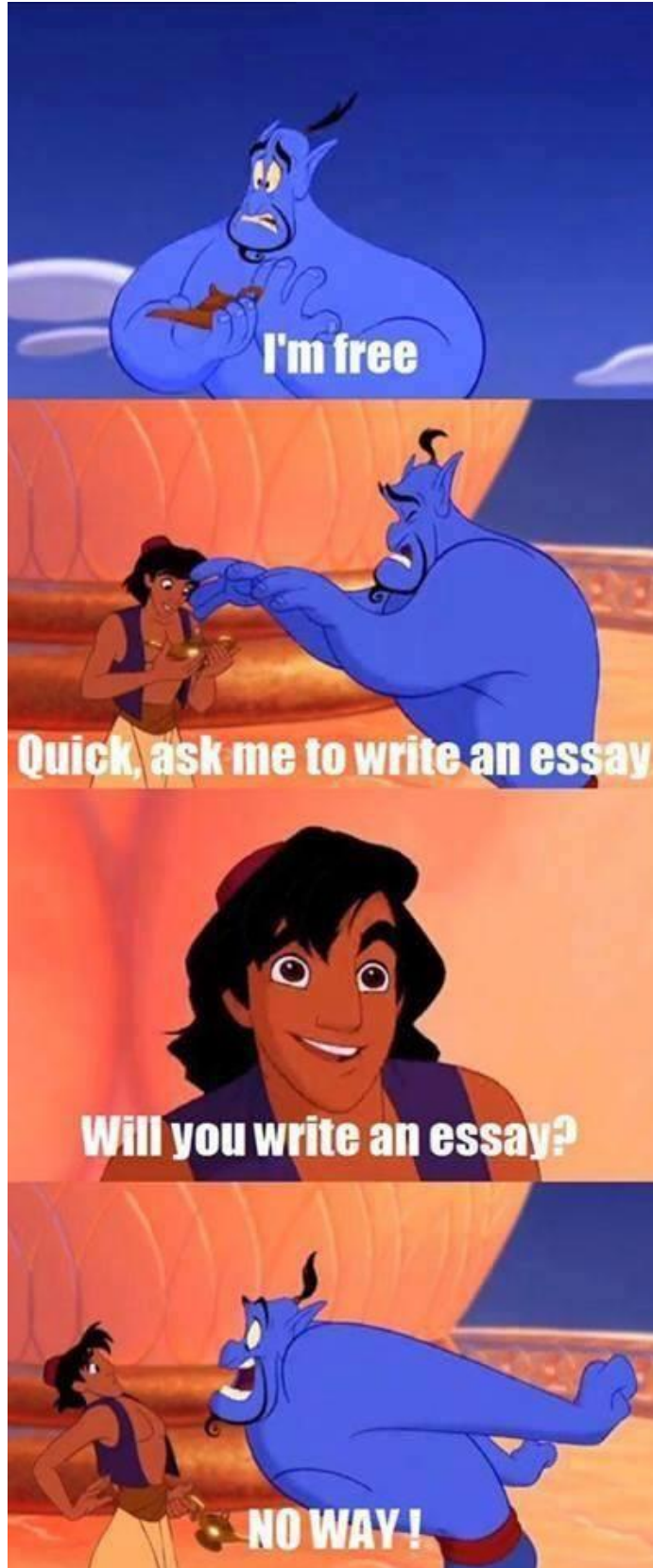


Image 4:



Image 5:



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