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## The International Baccalaureate Learner Profile: A Social Justice Framework in the English Language Arts Classroom

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## Critical Pedagogy

# The International Baccalaureate Profile: A Social Justice Framework in the English Language Arts Classroom

KRISTIN SOVIS AND SARAH PANCOST

It's no secret that in the days following the 2016 presidential election, violence erupted in urban centers, suburban cities, and rural towns that make up this country we call 'home.' In fact, just six days out from the election, The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate incidents, recorded over 300 hate such acts (Kennedy, 2016). It's also no secret that many violent acts took place in and on the grounds of our nation's schools. You may recall, for instance, documented reports of middle school students chanting "build a wall" at Latino classmates right here in Michigan (Kennedy, 2016). This violence was and is, literally, in our backyards. As a secondary English Language Arts teacher and an English Educator, reports of such violence targeting the most marginalized in our society, along with the tenuous post-election political climate, has hailed us to act more purposefully as facilitators, mentors--as teachers--of civic engagement.

### The Challenges

However, in addressing this pull towards openly discussing politics and real world happenings in the classroom, we were confronted with challenges and trepidations that we realize are not unique to us--many of our colleagues experience similar concerns in planning and facilitating classroom instruction involving political content aimed to engage students in civic discourse. So why is classroom discussion of politics difficult for us to maneuver as classroom teachers? Many of us fear that our own biases may monopolize or negatively influence authentic engagement in a topic; for instance, students may elect to parrot our beliefs in keeping attune with a traditional, teacher-centered classroom archetype. Others of us fear not knowing enough about politics or particular issues, and therefore, shy away from teaching political content and political discourse all together. Still others of us recognize that political content in the classroom can--if not critically

and carefully taught--alienate students who may have a fear of having (or not having) a strong or particular opinion, students who recede into the margins when peers monopolize discussions, and students who dislike a debate format.

### Frameworks for Addressing Challenges

While each of these concerns and challenges--along with many others--is real and valid, we echo CEE's "Beliefs about Social Justice in English Education," which states that "in schools and university classrooms, we educators must teach about injustice and discrimination in all its forms with regard to differences in: race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, national origin, language, spiritual belief, size [height and/or weight], sexual orientation, social class, economic circumstance, environment, ecology, culture, and the treatment of animals" (CEE Position Statements, Belief 1). Moreover, we draw on this Belief Statement in advocating that critical frameworks be the vehicles for achieving such teaching: Belief 1 encourages English educators to provide students with "a framework for supporting individuals through developmental stages in becoming multiculturally sensitive: (1) tolerance [critical reflection], (2) acceptance, (3) respect, and, (4), affirmation, solidarity, and critique" (CEE Position Statements, Belief 1). In this piece, we offer the story of one Michigan secondary ELA teacher, Sarah, in the wake of the presidential election. Through narrative, classroom anecdote, and pedagogical reflection, Sarah's story illustrates how the implementation of a critical framework--in this case, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Learner Profile--engages both students and teachers in authentic inquiry. This inquiry develops socially just ways of thinking.

### Sarah's Story: Responding to the Current Election

The November election was a pivotal moment in my career; many of my colleagues felt the same way. I teach in a

suburban school district where 55% of local voters supported Trump. Immediately following the election my Facebook and Twitter feeds were flooded with reminders of the importance of teachers providing a safe space for children of all backgrounds. I also enjoyed seeing all of the “pro-equality” signs that teachers had painstakingly crafted for their classroom doors, and while heartily agreeing with all of these examples of publicized activism, I didn’t know how to effectively do this in my classroom. My students and community voted for this new political leadership; the tenor of the campaign resonated with them. I have children of elected officials in my classes. I found myself struggling with how to create safety and civic involvement without increasing racial, socio-economic, and nationalistic tension and resentment.

### Sarah’s Story: Navigating the Need for Engagement

Post-election, the racial issues in our curriculum’s approved books struck me as particularly glaring. I had a difficult time imagining how to effectively navigate *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* so I scrapped the text in favor of a nice unit on “What it Means To Be An American.” I filled the time with poems and short stories and carefully dipped into a few selections that talked about the importance of neighborliness and being kind. I stayed away from shocking headlines and troubling issues (such as the immigration ban); I stayed away and felt horrible about this. I believe in the CEE Position Statements about Social Justice. I believe that we “must teach about injustice and discrimination in all its forms” (CEE Position Statement, Belief 1). As a former government teacher I understand the power of utilizing current events to foster civic engagement and involvement. While believing in the power and importance of engagement, I was hesitant to navigate the classroom in this new climate.

I know there were school districts that responded to the election with statements of inclusivity. My administration did not issue any statements or guidance. I knew that I was trusted to develop my own path in response to the public discourse. I was thankful that I had 17 years of experience, numerous teaching awards, and a union to support me because I was unsure of how to proceed. However, it was clear to me that good teaching connects the classroom to the “real world” and my post-election avoidance of controversy would have to end. I spent a few weeks reflecting on how to foster acceptance, awareness and harmony in distinctly unharmonious times. I knew I had to follow a few rules.

### Sarah’s Story: Developing Criteria for Navigating Current Issues in the Classroom

Drawing on my experience as a government teacher, I was well aware of the dominance of students who loved to debate when presented current issues. However, I also knew it was imperative to create a culture of safety and neutrality, and that debate was about winning, and therefore, had to be avoided. Therefore, when navigating current issues I needed to avoid any hint of debate mentality.

Another troubling part of teaching in the current climate is that any articulation of different perspectives is oftentimes seen as opposition and disagreement. As a teacher, I wanted students to be able to identify other perspectives, but I needed them to skip the refuting portion in efforts to avoid a debate mentality; while I naturally wanted to refute evil and prejudice, I couldn’t obstruct discourse by establishing a win/lose mentality in the classroom. Conversations of race and identity- which are really conversations about power- are not “debate” topics in my class. They are dialogues to help our classroom community illuminate multiple perspectives. As an instructor I find the debate mentality particularly problematic because it assumes a structure of winners/losers when most issues and problems are more nuanced than this- in fact, one of the greatest strengths of the language arts classroom, and storytelling in general, is the ability to portray the complexity of life.

I realized the absence of a debate structure would pose a challenge to many of our students who have been inundated with standardized test preparation and writing, which values and even requires refutation. Again, such a template for thinking and writing would establish a debate mentality, which I knew had to be avoided. So while I didn’t know how I would do it, I knew I must create a culture of dialogue with no hints of debate.

In creating this culture, I decided my classroom must honor all experience. However, the issue with honoring all experience is that some students might say things that hurt others. What I realized, therefore, is that I didn’t want to

#### *Criteria for Classroom Discourse:*

- avoid debate mentality; avoid teaching methods, classroom structures, and classroom procedures that support debate
- honor all experiences, but not all views; know the difference between experiences and views
- establish a common vocabulary, common goals, and common expectations

#### **Figure One: Sarah’s Criteria for Classroom Discourse**

honor all views, but I did want to honor student experience. Once I determined that views and experience were not the same, it allowed me to think about methods to allow for

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student reaction to texts in a way that honored individual experience and interests but did not allow for hateful speculations. I was unsure of exactly how to navigate that, but I kept returning to the idea of a common vocabulary and a clear set of goals and expectations. For a summary of my personal guidelines in creating safe, purposeful spaces for engaging in political discourse in the classroom, see Figure One: Sarah's Criteria for Classroom Discourse.

### Sarah's Story: Connecting Current Events to Classroom Texts

In order to avoid the trap of being perceived as a teacher who was forcing her beliefs on students, I wanted the common vocabulary, goals and expectations to be designed by somebody other than me. Currently it seems all the rage to have students develop these expectations and essential agreements themselves; I did not have time for this and I didn't trust students to have the tools necessary to effectively develop vocabulary that allowed for the sensitive exploration of texts. Luckily, I work in an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School. IB has two documents that were useful in providing vocabulary and goals for classroom discourse: the IB Mission Statement and the IB Learner Profile. Both of these documents echo the values outlined in the CEE Position Statements on Social Justice.

### Sarah's Story: The IB Mission Statement in Grounding Practice

The IB mission statement was developed by educators around the world and is meant to provide a framework philosophy for all IB World Schools. When my district decided to adopt IB, I took that as a mandate to embody the Mission Statement in my practice; this was a great relief, as the Mission Statement is my pedagogical backbone and serves as my personal call to connect the classroom to issues that are relevant to national and international concerns. The IB Mission Statement concludes with the claim that students are "lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right." Specifically, this statement provides me two supports in implementing real, controversial, political discourse and content in my classroom. First, it gives me backing to pursue greater integration of current news stories and events into my classroom, as the IB curriculum is our district-adopted curriculum. Second, this statement anchors my teaching practice: the IB mission statement is the theoretical frame from which I work as a teacher. If I am considering a new approach in my classroom, I first consider how it aligns with the Mission Statement.



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.

IB learners strive to be:

<b>Inquirers</b>	They develop their natural curiosity. They acquire the skills necessary to conduct inquiry and research and show independence in learning. They actively enjoy learning and this love of learning will be sustained throughout their lives.
<b>Knowledgeable</b>	They explore concepts, ideas and issues that have local and global significance. In so doing, they acquire in-depth knowledge and develop understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines.
<b>Thinkers</b>	They exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognize and approach complex problems, and make reasoned, ethical decisions.
<b>Communicators</b>	They understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication. They work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others.
<b>Principled</b>	They act with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness, justice and respect for the dignity of the individual, groups and communities. They take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences that accompany them.
<b>Open-minded</b>	They understand and appreciate their own cultures and personal histories, and are open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities. They are accustomed to seeking and evaluating a range of points of view, and are willing to grow from the experience.
<b>Caring</b>	They show empathy, compassion and respect towards the needs and feelings of others. They have a personal commitment to service, and act to make a positive difference to the lives of others and to the environment.
<b>Risk-takers</b>	They approach unfamiliar situations and uncertainty with courage and forethought, and have the independence of spirit to explore new roles, ideas and strategies. They are brave and articulate in defending their beliefs.
<b>Balanced</b>	They understand the importance of intellectual, physical and emotional balance to achieve personal well-being for themselves and others.
<b>Reflective</b>	They give thoughtful consideration to their own learning and experience. They are able to assess and understand their strengths and limitations in order to support their learning and personal development.

Figure 2: The IB Learner Profile

### Sarah's Story: The IB Learner profile in Guiding Practice

While the IB Mission Statement serves as the guide for what I should do, the IB Learner Profile is the tool I use to do it. The Learner Profile presents a set of attributes with corresponding descriptions illustrating what "good learners" strive to do, and includes these attributes: inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective. (See **Figure 2: The IB Learner Profile**). This is not simply a *student* profile, but a *learner* profile.

As an adult learner, I reference the IB Learner Profile and give examples of my own successes and failures by modeling thinking that is framed by the attributes. For example, in response to controversial issues I regularly enact think-alouds, such as "This is hard for me to be open-minded about because the knowledgeable part of me takes issues with how this author is framing the argument." The Learner Profile provides a common vocabulary for my classroom to develop ways of thinking, understanding, and knowing, all of which allow students to bring authentic insight to texts. Although students are not allowed to debate, the format pro-

vided through directed use of the Learner Profile gives both introverts and extroverts, alike, a framework for expressing individual thoughts. The following classroom anecdote highlights a specific learning activity in my 10th grade American Literature course, and exemplifies how the IB Learner Profile is both a teaching and learning tool in engaging with texts in a critical, socially responsible manner.

### Sarah’s Story: The IB Learner Profile As A Classroom Tool

Before the adoption of the International Baccalaureate I provided my students with a list of themes found in *The Great Gatsby* and asked students to trace one of the themes through each chapter of the text. The themes were items like “Fitzgerald’s use of the weather to create mood” and “Dreams versus reality.” I thought this lesson was quality because it allowed students to select quotes that spoke to them, it emphasized the important themes in the text, and it required students to draw their own conclusions about their topics. Students would typically produce conclusions such as “Fitzgerald’s vivid descriptions of weather reflected the mood of his characters” or “Chasing dreams can lead to frustration.” Students were dutiful, and adequately applied their insight to the text; however, upon reflection, I realized that students did not care about the themes I provided. Although the assignment allowed students some flexibility and perhaps some investment, their “choice” was a guise because I wanted them to engage with the textual ideas I deemed worthy. I decided that using the IB Learner Profile would allow students more flexibility to extract themes of importance that mattered to them and related to their actual lives.

This semester, before reading the book, I explained that students would be using a Learner Profile trait to explore themes in *The Great Gatsby*. I then had students rank their favorite learner profile traits, and told them they would each get to trace one of their top-three traits in the book. After walking around the room, approving trait selection and ensuring a good representation of all traits, I told students that they would be sticky-noting passages in each chapter that spoke to their chosen trait. Throughout the reading of the book, students reflected in small groups on their trait tracing and worked from these discussions to develop thesis claims and conclusions about the text. The assignment allowed for authentic student engagement and a rich variety of responses. After tracing their traits students produced statements such as, “Being principled is difficult when you’re a deeply car-

ing person” and “Inquirers are often frustrated when others are deceitful.” The variety of student responses, and the clear value of the life realizations students came to after reading the novel, was refreshing. After working with the Learner Profile to explore, extract, and support thematic development in *The Great Gatsby*, students had comfort and familiarity with the Learner Profile as a frame, so I decided to engage students in connecting the ideas surrounding The American Dream to *Gatsby*.

Utilizing the Learner Profile, I had the class analyze a current article showing the dissolution of the American Dream. Students were required to develop questions in response to the article with the Learner Profile Traits embedded within them. They were also asked to list 3-5 observations about the text utilizing the traits. After individually reflecting, they gathered in groups to unpack the article using the questions and observations they developed. (See **Figure 3: American Lit, Using the LP Traits** for the handout that guided students through this activity).

The dialogue that ensued was student created and lively. It was free of debate and veered more toward deeper inquiry and engagement. I believe this was due, in part, to the fact that students’ had previously applied the Learner Profile to the novel. Particularly lively was student response to how “The American Dream” was portrayed in *The Great Gatsby*. Their responses reflected a sensitivity to the issues of race present in the article and novel. Tying the nonfiction article to the novel as a concluding activity allowed students to see the real-world relevance of the book’s timeless themes.

American Lit—LP Traits	Name:
Read the article. Consider the Learner Profile. Include references to the LP in your responses.	
List 3-5 <b>observations</b> you have about this article. Use the LP language with each observation. <u>Underline</u> the LP Trait you refer to in each statement.	
<i>Example: I wonder how balanced this report is because it seemed to primarily quote educators instead of parents.</i>	
List 3-5 <b>questions</b> you have about this issue. (Be sure to use LP language and <u>underline</u> it.)	
Do you have strong feelings about this issue? How does this issue apply to <i>The Great Gatsby</i> ?	

**Figure 3: American Lit, Using the LP Traits**

In building off the connection-making work that students did using the Learner Profile, I pushed students to engage with increasingly controversial articles. We applied the Learner Profile to an article covering the Black Lives Matter movement and I ended their reflection sheet with “What did you notice about the portrayal of people of color in *The*

*Great Gatsby*?” Students produced insightful comments ranging from the lack of representation of people of color, to the racist depiction of Jews. In past years students may have nodded when I highlighted these passages, but the use of current news coupled with Learner Profile allowed students to articulate issues of race themselves.

### Sarah’s Story: Pedagogical Reflection

In reflecting on Sarah’s use of the IB Mission Statement and the Learner Profile as a framework for critical inquiry in the classroom, it is clear that this framework is a vehicle for student-centered teaching. In Sarah’s time as an IB Coordinator, she realized that many teachers try inquiry-based learning by asking longer lists of questions about texts, but do not know how to encourage authentic or sustainable student inquiry. As an English Educator, I observe that sometimes teachers encourage students to ask self-directed questions but are unsure of how to tie such questioning exercises into a larger mission; sometimes these lessons exist as solitary inquiry experiences but lack larger connection and context. The IB Learner Profile is a vehicle for addressing these concerns. By using the Learner Profile, Sarah is able to give students the space to question by providing them with a vocabulary and a mission statement to guide their work. Moreover, she is able to tie this to the Common Core and content-specific goals through the frequent use of the more malleable vocabulary of the Learner Profile.

Per its Mission Statement, the aim of IB is to “develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect” and this is being achieved in Sarah’s classroom by using the Learner Profile as a pedagogical framework and a teaching tool. In studying teachers who were “very effective” at helping students “really understand materials as it connects to the rest of their studies and their lives,” Harvard’s Project Zero realized none of these teachers taught lessons on thinking. Instead, Project Zero researcher Ritchhart notes that these teachers “had routines and structures that scaffolded and supported student thinking” and increased “visibility of thinking” (as cited in Schwartz, 2016). Noteworthy about Sarah’s choice of the IB framework to both guide her thinking about teaching practice and her students’ thinking about course content is that it supports routines and structures that scaffold critical thinking--the critical thinking and inquiry necessary for development of socially just engagement in civic and political life.

#### *The politically engaged classroom:*

- Provides a climate of safety, neutrality, and non-debate in valuing all experiences (but not all views)
- Utilizes a framework that guides and supports common expectations, common procedures, and common language
  - Engages students in authentic inquiry
  - Increases visibility of thinking
  - Encourages student choice within this framework
  - Engages in diverse literature and real-world texts about real-world issues within this framework |

**Figure 4: Features of Sarah’s politically engaged classroom**

In reflecting on Sarah’s work, it is also clear that the IB Mission Statement and Learner Profile provide safe scaffolding to both Sarah and her students. Sarah knows that if somebody questions her use of any current text, she can explain that she is allowing students to draw their own conclusions because she doesn’t direct their reflections on the content by asking leading questions; instead, students engage in inquiry-based learning using the Learner Profile. This, in turn, contributes to a safe classroom environment of neutrality and non-debate, tenants of a productive and politically engaged classroom that Sarah discovered in reflecting on her own teaching context and practice (See **Figure 4: Features of Sarah’s Politically Engaged Classroom**). Moreover, in assessing student engagement and response, Sarah is certain that students are more engaged in working with current, real-world texts that address authentic issues in combination with district-mandated, often canonical texts than with canonical texts in isolation.

This observation is echoed by Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy in their 2015 book, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, in which they conclude that “Schools are and ought to be political places — but not partisan ones” (as cited in Drummond, 2015). Based on studying 21 teachers and their 1,001 students in 35 schools from 2005 to 2009, Hess and McAvoy conclude that engaging students in real issues that are both current and relevant to students’ lives, especially when multiple views are elicited in their peers, is most interesting to students (as cited in Drummond, 2015). As an expert teacher, Sarah scaffolds students’ use of the Learner Profile as students interact with texts increasingly political in nature, consistently providing both structure and focus for students to engage and make meaning.

### Conclusion

Just as we turned to the research-based frameworks that support our work as ELA teachers in the wake of the 2016 election, and namely, the CEE Position Statements on Social

Justice, we advocate that classroom teachers consider examining their own practice through frameworks, as well, in developing practices that engage students in real-world texts that authentically connect to students' lives and the politics of our time. In Sarah's case, the IB Mission statement and Learner Profile serve as both a frame for her own thinking and pedagogical decision-making, as well as a frame for her students' thinking and learning. While not all schools are IB schools, all schools and teachers have access to this framework and others that value and "develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect" (IB Mission Statement). May we all be the agents and mentors of critical inquiry that is socially just in supporting our students' civic development and engagement; as we look to the future, such development in our youth is crucial to the preservation of democracy.

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