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Inquiry Project

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Getting Some Perspective

Ignorance is bliss until you find out what you've been missing out on. It is easy to get caught up in the chaos that is our everyday life and forget about the world beyond our bubble. The same is true in our classrooms. We have so many responsibilities, requirements, and tests to administer that sometimes the textbook route looks appealing. What we don't realize is that we are robbing our students of a plethora of knowledge, not to mention sending them out into the world completely unprepared. Globalization is a hot topic in school, business, the news, and even the grocery store. Successful globalization and inter-change of ideas between different populations requires knowledge of differences and similarities across time and borders. If we continue to teach one story from the Social Studies textbook we are creating a hole in our students' future instead of making them *whole*. I spent the semester studying and testing theories that answer the question, "How can I teach fifth grade students the importance of studying history and current events from multiple perspectives?"

My interest in the topic is personal and started when I watched Chimamanda Adiche's TEDtalk, "The Danger of a Single Story." In her talk she warns us of the danger of applying one "story," opinion, or often stereotype, to an entire people. We rob ourselves of understanding and create barriers between ourselves and others when we stick to one story, but when we have multiple stories we open ourselves up to empathizing with different cultures and both appreciating and forming relationships. These qualities are key to successful globalization and the careers our students will have that require global awareness.

I soon found that I am not the only one concerned about the future of our students who have been force-fed facts and biased stories about history and current events. Research has

been done with regards to misperception about Africa as a result of misinformation in schools and the media. Walker and Rasamimanana (1993) found that media that incorrectly portrays Africa not only exists, but is sometimes still used in the classroom. It paints a picture of Africa based on one outdated story of savagery, jungles, and lost souls. This explains the findings of Hicks and Beyer (1970), which showed that students' lack of understanding about Africa is not a result of not being taught, but of being completely misinformed by single-story sources and poorly trained teachers. If we continue to misinform our students, Africa will continue to be overlooked and misunderstood.

With regards to Vietnam, an eighth grade social studies teacher and a literary specialist teamed up to teach students about the Vietnam War from multiple perspectives, including the stories of "U.S. government, soldiers, families, nurses, the anti-war movement, the media, the South Vietnamese (government, civilian, National Liberation Front), and the North Vietnamese" (Van Gigch, 2001, p. 15). The project was a success and the students were involved every step of the way. They were given multiple stories and expected to critically analyze the information and form their own opinions, something that does not result from textbook-based lessons.

Teaching History from multiple perspectives does not have to be radical or rebellious. It is actually in line with IB's mission, "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" (International Baccalaureate Organization, IB Learner Profile). By studying history and current events from multiple perspectives it is more probable that students will be able to find commonalities between themselves and other groups as opposed to dwelling on differences. The Common Core State Standards are also consistent with studying more than one story.

More than half of the Social Studies standards for grades 6-8 can be met through a multiple perspective approach (See Appendix A).

While this research is fascinating, I had to tweak it because I am currently an ESL teacher. I only meet with my six fifth grade students twice per week for thirty minutes, so I was not able to delve into the topic as much as I would have liked. The students I work with are from affluent families and are all Latino. The American School Foundation (ASF) in Mexico City is first and foremost an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, although it also adheres to the Mexican requirements (SEP) and Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Its steep private school rates produce a specific demographic; less than 20% of the students at ASF are there on scholarship, so the majority are quite privileged.

I expected a different outcome with this research project than I would in a low-income, public elementary school in the United States because of my specific demographic. My students have traveled to at least three continents by fifth grade. Their ignorance is not a lack of experience, as it would be for a less traveled youngster in the United States; instead, I would have to call it a lack of education or perhaps immaturity. I am not as concerned about the reason they are unaware of other stories; I am more concerned with teaching them the importance of multiple perspectives to change their future outlook. ASF does have multiple races represented, although it is predominantly Mexican/Latino and American.

Knowing that my time was constrained, I could only scratch the surface of the project in the eleven, thirty minute classes. I started with Chimamanda Adichie's TEDtalk, "The Danger of A Single Story." I stopped the video every few minutes to discuss what they were hearing. They also had a question sheet to keep them engaged during the video (See Appendix B). Stopping and discussing was key to make sure they were following, to elaborate, and to clarify words they did not know or understand since Adichie's accent was hard for them to process as ESL students. Then, we discussed the idea of a "single story" on

a personal level by asking if they had ever met someone with a single story about Mexico. Immediately all hands went up and facial expressions turned sour and defensive. Comments such as, “They think I ride to school on a donkey!” and “They don’t think I’m Mexican ‘cause I have white skin!” were abundant. We reflected on how it is one story and why it is “dangerous.”

The conversation then turned to Africa. With regards to the TEDtalk, we learned that many people have a misperception about Africa. The students were humble enough to admit that they too thought it was full of poor people who lived in mud huts. One girl shared that her father went to South Africa and she expected him to come home with dirt on his pants up to his knees, but instead he came back with stories about what a beautiful nation it is and how modern and developed it was, and no, no dirt. She understood that she had now added another story to her stories about South Africa. These conversations and the video lasted for five sessions.

In order to relate the “Danger of a Single Story” to their unit on government and economic structures I brought up the topic of Communism. I asked where they would start researching the concept and they mentioned sites like Wikipedia and Dictionary.com. So, we started there. Then, I told them about my trip to Cuba in 2012 and the tragedies the locals disclosed to me and showed them my personal pictures. We also looked at Yoani Sanchez’s blog, “Generation Y” about life inside Cuba from the perspective of a Cuban. The students responded positively with questions and were intrigued by the true stories. The best part was that a week later when we recapped, they remembered the details of the blog, because it was memorable! They understood Communism, but they didn’t use the Dictionary.com definition to explain it, they used Yoani’s experience, my photos, and what they had been learning in class to form a new understanding. The Communism discussions lasted for six sessions.

The only hard data I collected was at the end of the project. I had them write a short piece after orally recapping the danger of a single story in session eleven. They responded to three questions in writing: What is the danger of a single story? What is an example? How can we avoid having only one story? (See Appendix C). Using both the conversations from class and the written responses, which sadly were rushed, I am confident that the students are *beginning* to understand the importance of learning multiple perspectives. For one, they all agreed that reading Yoani's blogs was much more interesting than any textbook or Wikipedia article they had ever read! Engaging students in serious topics is half of the battle.

Their written answers varied, but they all reflected the main concerns. Single stories are dangerous because they are misled stereotypes that can lead to discrimination and incorrect assumptions. Their examples ranged from Africa to White people's misperceptions about Blacks. I was happy to see that most of them had a tone of empathy with words such as, "you can hurt people" and "make them be sad." Some of the responses strayed from the point, but as I said I only had thirty-minute, scattered blocks twice per week and in the future when I teach this lesson I plan to dedicate more time to it. Based on their writing, there are still some holes to fill and clarifications to be made that will come with maturity and exposure to differences.

My goal was similar to that of the University of Minnesota and their study *The Family Man*. Their goal was not to make children less nationalistic by sharing multiple perspectives, as some fear will happen; instead, it was to create an appreciation across cultures. It was also to understand differences and find similarities within those differences that prove one thing we all have in common- our humanity (Mitsakos, 1978). *The Family Man* project and mine had the same end goal and the same method of exposure to other stories. It is not to create rebels who are anti-American, far from it. It is to create internationally minded students,

which is also the goal of the IB program. When you strip away the technicalities we all have a common goal to create global citizens who exercise empathy.

I have yet to have my own classroom and at this point I am a Social Studies teacher at heart stuck in an ESL position, so I am quite pleased with the results of my first attempt at a Social Studies lesson. I find comfort in the words of fifteen-year university professor, Anastasia Sims (1997) because it means I am on the right track in preparing future historians. She wrote, “Historians look beneath the surface for explanations, and learn never to accept any single document or account at face value” (p. 219). If our students are doing any less, or if we are doing any less, we should not be teaching History. We need to train students to be skeptical inquirers who search for other stories and weigh them against each other because, “the study of history introduces students to a variety of perspectives. They learn about the origins of their own beliefs and to identify and evaluate their assumptions. Simultaneously, they gain an understanding of the viewpoints of others” (p. 219). History is both about the past and the future, and if we teach our students from multiple perspectives we will prepare empathetic individuals for an ever-changing global society.

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Appendix A

CCSS That Support Multiple Perspective Approach to Teaching Social Studies

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.5 Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.8 Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9 Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Appendix B
Question Sheet during TEDtalk

The Danger of a Single Story

1. Where is Chimamanda Adichie from? What is her first language? Is that what you were expecting?
2. What does Adichie mean by “stories”?
3. What is the “danger” of a single story? Give one example either from her TEDtalk or from your own experience.
4. Have you ever met someone who had a single story about your country and culture? Or do you have a single story about a specific group of people?

Appendix C
Student Responses

What is the Danger of a single story.

The Danger of Having a single story is that when you read a story or in the news or what ever. So when you get the Ideas you talk bad things about what you're seeing

What is An example
For example when I went to South Africa I was very scared that there was not going to be anything. But when I when it was better.

How can avoid having only one story
primary sources secondary sources
tercy sources

1- what is the danger of a single story is that you use it as a stereotype and apply it to every. 2 Example: you think every body in africa is poor but is not true

3- reading a blog from a african or 1, 2, 3 sources

primary secondary tertiary

I think a danger of a single story is because: when you just have one story you just want to stay with it and ~~you want~~ you can hurt people and some people can take it really bad.

An example of a danger of a single story is: My single story is everyone in Africa is black. But what if there are white people in Africa?

~~But~~ We can avoid having one single story is by not attaching to one story.

A danger is that white people of a country doesn't accept dark people because they look different and they dress differently. Examples: Years ago the American people were good with black people, the white people didn't let the black people to enter in the schools, restaurants, hotels, etc... How we can avoid having only one story? We could only have one story if the people are respectful and don't discriminate anybody and let every type of people in towns.

What is the Danger of a Single

② For example if you hear a story from Africa that people die every 3 seconds.

③ We can avoid having one story by investigating - a web side of the think you only have one story

① The danger of a single story is that you can discriminate people or make them be sad.