

Essential Question Essay

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Before I left for Indonesia, I reflected quite a bit about what I wanted to know. Much of my curriculum, particularly in my World Literature course, revolves around women's rights and human rights issues, so I knew I wanted to head in that direction. After visiting the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. during our pre-symposium in February, I learned there was a massive Holocaust in Indonesia during the 1960's. I was shocked at my own lack of knowledge considering how much time I spend teaching about the Holocaust and numerous other genocides from around the world. I decided to research more and soon discovered that the Indonesian genocide has been relatively silent, both within the country and around the world, for forty years. This lack of acknowledgement and education eventually led to the heart of my essential question – How do students advocate for and contribute to change locally, regionally, and globally?

It was not surprising to me that I experienced some serious culture shock from the moment I arrived in Indonesia. It was clear there were *a lot* of people (far more than I am accustomed to), which resulted in *a lot* of traffic, pollution, and trash. I marveled at the discrepancy of a beautiful building or high end stores when right next door was a mountain of trash. I slowly observed and concluded a parallel within the education system. Families who were educated and had the money would often pay to have their children attend boarding schools like my host school. Those who did not have the money would attend public schools, which still had some sort of fee (even if it was simply for a uniform). We learned that 60% of Indonesian students move on to secondary school and money could certainly be a major factor. It seemed the gap between the have's and have not's would only continue to grow in this vicious cycle.

The discussions with students and teachers were very enlightening. A number of teachers and an administrator at my host school wanted to meet after hearing that my colleague and I had “green” schools (not abnormal in California). The Indonesian educators recognize that trash is a major problem in their country, but I was shocked at their lack of knowledge and know-how to take steps to start solving the problem. As we described even basic steps of a recycling program, they were impressed but obviously overwhelmed. When meeting with a group of students, they too recognize the trash issue, but without adult leadership, lack the knowledge of how to begin.

The Indonesian students we spoke with certainly feel the pressure to succeed and contribute to their society. They will speak of their local/regional problems – pollution, trash, overpopulation, government corruption, etc. and understand that the change weighs on their shoulders. However, I worry that solutions are not explored nearly enough in school.

When I finally felt comfortable enough to inquire about the teaching of human rights, most teachers told me that it was certainly covered in some courses, but I never saw evidence of this nor was able to get specifics of how human rights were discussed or taught. When I asked about the Indonesian genocide of 1965, teachers quickly assured me that it must be covered in social studies classes. It did not sound convincing and judging from my conversations with students, it does not necessarily happen everywhere. This certainly supports the research I found. It wasn't until just recently that the atrocities in Indonesia during 1965-1966 have been seriously investigated and a call to teach this crucial part of Indonesian history has been insisted on. Ironically, the movement began by students. As Tyron Edwards, American theologian stated, “Some of the best lessons we ever learn, we learn from our mistakes and failures. The error of the past is the success and wisdom of the future.”

During my time in Indonesia and in my reflection at home, I concluded the youth of Indonesia must become the serious change agents. There are, of course, many difficulties in this. For one, religion and tradition dictates much of what most Indonesians can and cannot do. While Indonesia is heavily influenced by social media, it is not overly embraced and misconceptions often cloud how Indonesians see the world around them. Indonesia is a very young country; the average age is 27 years old. This means it is critical for the mass of young people to not only identify local, regional, and global problems, but find the means to advocate for the necessary change. After research, observations, and discussions, I am hopeful for the enthusiastic youth of Indonesia. They will have to be the pioneers, with or without guidance, to bring about change.