

Our Students Deserve to Know Their History

We do our students a disservice if we don't teach them how to disagree with others. All of our students are not the same: they do not have the same backgrounds, life experiences, and they come into the classroom with various opinions. How can we imagine that they should or would think the same about the world they live in or that the same things will excite them to learn? While teaching at Uncommon High School in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, I had students who lived in public housing projects and they understood theirs was an underserved community. They had experience criticizing those in authority who they believed were creating a toxic environment in which they lived. I also had students who commuted to the school from suburban areas who truly did not understand the pressures or thought processes of classmates who grew up in some of the city's rougher neighborhoods.

In my current school district I have some students who hail from inner-city Baltimore and others who live in \$2 million homes. Despite their differences, perhaps because of them, they yearn to learn about each other and our incredibly diverse world. "Ms. Hinson, can we have another debate about whose method was better, MLK or Malcolm?" "Ms. Hinson, can we discuss who was better for the AA community, Booker T. or Dubois?" It is impossible to think that our kids will always agree. We are tasked with seeking the truth, teaching the truth, by exposing students to primary source documents and encouraging them to analyze, compare, contrast, evaluate, and discuss. Our hope is that when they get out into the "real" world, they will understand how important it is to formulate their opinions supported by evidence so they can become contributing citizens in this society!

Our students deserve to know the full story about a people's history and why some people's histories are censored. There is not a single story to history. I get this question from my students a lot. "Ms. Hinson I have never heard of this in any of my history classes before. Why not?" "OMG Ms. Hinson, my mom taught me this and told me I would never learn it in school." Why is it that some of our student's history is censored? Is it because we as teachers are afraid to face the truth? Is it because we are okay with the stereotypes and one-sided stories that students learn in school? Why is it that in most U.S. history classes student don't learn about the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot or

the murder of Emmett Till? In World History, why don't students learn about the Swahili City-States or trans-Saharan trade or the wonders of Asian or Native American civilizations? Why do schools spend so much time trying to drill information into the heads of students without helping them connect the dots to their own history?

Each year I start out by playing a TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story." Adichie explains how during the course of her life she has had to question and challenge the stereotypes and single stories that got in her way of truly knowing someone or a group of people. She talks about how these stereotypes, the single story view, affected how she was perceived of as an African woman in America. I tell my students to think about the moral of her story, of its message. What is she trying to say? Students get it every year. There is not a single story! Our history is not singular, we must include everyone's history. Why is it that in most U.S. history classes you don't learn about Tulsa? You don't learn about Emmitt Till? Or in World History why don't students learn about the Swahili City-States or Trans-Saharan or the wonders of Asian or Native history? Why is it? Our kids get it they know there is not a singular history and for them this is what makes history boring. When we spend so much time trying to drill information into students' heads without helping them connect the dots to their own history.¹

As teachers we sometimes feel that we must steer students in the right direction, but is that what we should be doing? Or do we want students to discover history for themselves? Let them talk history together. Sometimes I just provide students with an image, a photograph, cartoon, drawing, or painting, so they can make their own discoveries. When material is difficult to decipher, I will ask questions and maybe give them clues. They do the hard work and by the end of class they feel so accomplished because they have been able to tell the story for themselves. Their stories may not be the same, they may even contradict each other, but that is part of the process of figuring things out together, hearing other views, arguing, and sometimes reaching agreement. They learn to constructively disagree with their peers using the evidence they obtained. It is a beautiful sight to see when students are putting their all into truly understanding history for themselves.

Many of the topics today's censors want to keep out of school curriculum are not really controversial. There is a difference between difficult topics and controversial topics. Difficult topics are topics that may be hard to discuss because they bring up emotions and feelings that may be hard to process. Controversial topics are topics that can be argued about in various ways. The European Holocaust is a difficult topic, but it is not a controversial topic. Genocide happened. It is a historical fact. The trans-Atlantic slave trade is a difficult topic, but it is not controversial. Enslavement of Africans happened. It is a historical fact. Teachers need to know the difference between difficult and controversial when discussing what they are going to teach. Just because someone may be uncomfortable talking about a subject does not mean that it is a controversial

topic and it does not mean they or their parents have the right to prevent all of the other students from learning about it.

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Notes

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TEDGlobal*, 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/comments.