Essential Question Essay

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Learning about global education this year has stimulated my thinking about not only how education works in other countries, but also my own education practices in my classroom. Before I left for Indonesia I was not sure how I would incorporate my experience directly into my 8th grade English classes, but upon reflection, I see many natural connections. Parallels, such as economic disparity, gender equity, religion, educational access, societal expectations, and creating a sense of nationalism are found with developing countries in any time period.

In Indonesia, I saw economic disparity between many classes of people, including teachers. Although the government states that they spend 20% of their budget on education, I found myself wondering where the money really is going. Teachers, on average, make $150/month, with no benefits. If they are civil servants their rate increases, but not by a substantial amount. There were surprising numbers of administrators and clerical staff at many of the schools. I heard about discrimination in hiring practices, and the difficulty of moving up in status. I wonder if the government corruption I heard about is effecting education, and if this is something known to the public but not spoken about to foreigners.

Gender issues are another area of comparison between developing countries. In Indonesia, I saw a visible physical separation between genders in the classroom as well as at mosques and in homes. I rode in a train car that was pink and purple for women only designed to ‘protect’ the women from the men. While women of the younger generations seem to have more modern ideas about equity between genders, many of the older women seemed to have very subservient roles to their spouses and clear societal roles. I wonder why this is perpetuated in classrooms, and how this separation is helping women move forward in positions of authority.

Issues surrounding religion in Indonesia are comparable to other developing countries. The Muslim faith is very dominant in their culture, and seems to contribute to class groupings. Because it is a dominant religion, and their veils easily identify Muslim women, it seemed that non-Muslims were cast into either a lower position or outcast in societal groups. In classrooms, I noticed that students were grouped by faith and instructed only on their religion, further isolating each other. I wonder if they ever question the dominant status of the Muslim faith, if the children ever want to convert or leave their religion, and what would happen to them if they did.

Access to higher education is challenging in Indonesia, mainly due to economic factors. I learned that only 60% of students transition from primary to junior high school, at which time they begin paying for uniforms. High school is not government funded in many cases, causing students to require scholarships or parent funding to continue their education. Selective schools, like my host school, receive over 3,000 applications and only admit 120. Students are held to very high and strict standards and face expulsion for failing a class. I worry that because 40% of Indonesian children are not able or willing to obtain more than a primary level education, the country’s development will be hindered and it will create even stronger economic class stratification.

Indonesian children face strict societal expectations, especially in regards to moral and religious beliefs. Humbleness is a key value for Indonesians, which may cause some to be held back due to lack of personal advocacy. Students told me their parents expect them to ‘improve Indonesia’ as a life goal, and feel a strong link to their traditional cultures. Character education is strongly pushed in schools, and I wonder how closely it is tied to Muslim tenets. I also observed a high value placed on holding onto traditional Indonesian culture at the detriment of accessing and embracing modern technology and customs. I wonder if this inability, or disinterest, in looking forward will lock Indonesia in the past.

Indonesians feel a strong sense of nationalism. They take pride in their ability to unify their diverse ethnic groups and their strong cultural traditions. I saw many children skilled in traditional Indonesian music and dance, apparently very proud to perform for us. I observed some subtle cracks in their claim of unity, with stereotypical remarks made about accents and behaviors of those from different islands. While they wouldn’t admit to it, I do believe that there is a divide between the youth who are more interested in more modern cultures, like access to the internet, social media and western media and dress, and those who would prefer Indonesians to stay true to their historical traditions. I also witnessed some anti-American sentiments, and wonder if this is related to our status as a leader in modern culture, or if it is a reflection of recent political issues. I found myself wondering what their real feelings were, especially with the non-Muslim Indonesians, and if they were afraid to speak out against the traditional culture for fear of ostracism.

 When I return to teaching about the development of the United States, I have more primary source evidence about what it must have been like for our first colonists as they attempted to create United States made up of people from many religions and cultures. I see how Indonesia’s development parallels many aspects of our own country’s growth over the centuries, and will use my experiences to help my students understand that it isn’t only America who experienced these challenges, but developing countries in 2012 as well.