

Kylie

Washington's youth suffer from a significant lack of knowledge of the wider world, insensitivity to cultures, and a lack of motivation to make a difference. This barrier of ignorance, fueled by the United States' overweening sense of nationalistic pride and the celebrity-obsessive media, has grown to such an extent that students with insufficient knowledge of foreign cultures pay no attention to current events outside of the United States and show no empathy toward their fellow man if he is in any manner dissimilar from them.

Self-absorption has become a major issue for students in my community, because of a significant lack of people to open their eyes to issues elsewhere. Students in our district officially spend two years learning world history, which a gap of 5 years separates. Teachers spend the remaining time educating students about the United States. Without someone teaching them about foreign affairs, many students lack motivation to pay attention to countries outside the United States, keeping general stereotypes as their only information about foreign countries. This ignorance concerns me deeply, because as a member of our school's International Relations Club (IRC) the cultural insensitivity that many of my peers show to our foreign exchange students should not be occurring. If my generation continues in its ignorance to make a mockery of the governmental systems and traditions of other countries, we will eventually garner more foreign enemies than allies. Should anyone from my school enter politics or foreign affairs our nation's future, would not bode well. Also, the criticism toward foreign exchange student's mother countries does not make for a healthy relationship between American students and visiting students. Our school's International Relations Club (IRC), hosts an annual World Friendship Day, where foreign exchange students attending Kelso High and other schools in the Kelso-Longview School District assemble at Kelso High School. Exchange students visit classrooms with IRC members, and talk to students about their country and its history. Students receiving this opportunity to learn about other nations can ask questions about some of the cultural differences and get to understand the exchange students and some of the reasoning behind the actions of their country. Although many of the subjects are sensitive and exchange students are not able to answer all of the questions, the groups leave with a better understanding of either the country they are in, or the country the foreign exchange student is from.

Embracing diversity of appearance and culture enables people to understand one another better. I was used to a culture that embraces uniformity before my church participated in a mission trip to San Francisco a few years ago that drastically changed my view on stereotypes. Working in a soup kitchen, I met people who looked and acted very differently than what I was used to. I had never knowingly been exposed to serious alcoholics, transvestites, or drug users before, but they were some of the nicest people I have had the privilege of knowing. Often we let our preconceived notions and biases get in the way of really understanding people. Despite their problems, the San Franciscans are people too. I learned not to judge by color or dress, or to be deterred by language or appearance. People's personalities really shone through in that city, and I never would have met some spectacular people if I hadn't stepped out of my comfort zone. Not everything there was pristine, and not everything there was beautiful, but I found that not everything had to be beautiful to it to be comfortable. The culture of San Francisco was more open than that of Kelso, and the people there more certain of their uniqueness, or at least more determined to express their uniqueness. I realized that the culture accounted for many of the differences in personalities of people, and by experiencing that culture, and getting to understand it, I found I better understood the people I met. When I came back to school that year, I tried to insinuate that discovery in my actions and my words, so that others at my school could realize it too. It's a gradual process, but our Diversity Club makes it all the more easier to show my peers that appearances are not everything, despite what the media implies.

Informing the community about global events aids in the increased understanding of people. My AP world history teacher, Mrs. Patten has taught in China and even visited Burma, so she takes the

problems that other countries are experiencing very seriously, since she knows how it can affect the people living in them. My history class sees that our country can experience problems that other countries experience, as history has a tendency to repeat itself. Encouraging students to make connections with previous and current global events and to actively inform the community of the impact other nations have upon the world are some of the major themes of Mrs. Patten's class. Last year, her world history class made a united effort to create a website informing people about the effects of genocide on other places in the world, to open people's eyes about the issues affecting people all over the world. It's shocking how ignorant we are of such serious issues, and it is inspiring to think that my class can make an impact on the way my generation views the world as well. The reason Mrs. Patten continues to teach is in hopes that some of her students will have an impact on the world and her class has encouraged me to make a difference in the world's perspective.

For all of these reasons, I want to pursue a career as a teacher, to enable youth to form connections between the past, understand the present, and perhaps to anticipate some of what the future brings. Maybe if everyone understood one another, we could attain relative form of peace. It seems a bit much to hope for, but the elimination of insensitivity towards other peoples based off of cultural traditions or appearances would probably help us get there.