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Understanding World Affairs: Some Basic Concepts

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Life today is fraught with awesome problems and responsibilities. The imminence of global destruction confronts and confounds man while he tensely explores ways of giving life to effective international controls. He finds himself in a world in which chaotic upheavals are precipitously ushered in by revolutionary political and social change.

American education, however, has not been oblivious to these problems. Schools have taken up the challenge by recognizing that an understanding of people and ideologies of other lands has never been more imperative; consequently, in many social studies classrooms, an increasing emphasis has been given to this area of study.

A major objective of many of these studies is to foster enlightenment and a critical understanding in the interpretation of international affairs. Many teachers no longer study a country exclusively by a data-collecting, factual approach, but study it as a cultural area in which the behavior of human beings and the activities of nations are placed within their respective cultural contexts. In addition to this approach, a critical appraisal of a greater magnitude could be undertaken. Within the process of collecting and interpreting data and placing it within the framework of its own cultural context, there is no guarantee that the teacher will deal with essential concepts that lie at the core of world trends and problems.

No matter what cultural area is studied, a number of essential concepts should be given primary consideration. A few of these basic concepts were used in a

ninth grade social studies class to heighten understanding of world affairs and to promote critical thinking. What follows is an account of the procedure employed and the thinking of pupils on these concepts.

1. People in the world differ greatly. This concept was presented and illustrated by drawing diverse behavioral and cultural patterns from many areas of the world. After these differences were clearly understood by the students, they were asked, "Why do people around the world differ greatly?" Several different reasons were offered. "Different languages" was given by one pupil. Probing further, they were asked, "Why are there many different languages and dialects in certain areas of the world?" and "What effect do these different languages have on human differences?"

Several other pupils suggested that "people have different beliefs;" however, when asked why this is so, many were exceedingly perplexed. One or two finally suggested that "people are taught different things." Pupils were encouraged to think through this response. Some thought they knew why, but said they could not explain. A clear, simplified explanation was presented to them leaving some questions unanswered so as to encourage further thinking. One pupil volunteered that people are different because they have been isolated from others. Then a lively discussion ensued on the effects of geography on human differences. Later, it was pointed out that democracy is built on diversity--not uniformity--and this is one important way our system differs from totalitarian states. It was suggested that human diversity fosters human progress whenever views are sympathetically entertained and there is agreement on the means used to attain ends: i.e., belief in democratic practices as a way to attain diverse goals. After this idea was explored, pupils raised questions that tended to lead into our second concept.

2. There are basic characteristics shared by all people. After discussing human differences, pupils found it difficult to consider the characteristics all people have in common. Besides asserting that all

people are human beings, they seemed unable to specify how people are alike. After thinking through several ideas a number of pupils stated that we all have the same basic body parts and the same organic system, though some quickly exclaimed that this does not hold true for all people. At this point, the fact that we all have the same neuromuscular system through which we learn was explained; thereafter, a discussion ensued on the implications of this idea. Moving on, some suggested that all people have a religion; however, after the class considered this for a while, a few rejected this idea and substituted the notion that all people manifest some form of faith. It was also suggested that all people have some concept of "right and wrong;" others pointed out that, although most people have some conceptions, they do not necessarily agree. Then two questions were raised: "Are there certain principles that everyone should believe in?" "How do we determine if one form of conduct is 'better' than another?" These questions provoked thought, but they tended to be too philosophical for ninth grade pupils. One stated that "all people want freedom," but was unable to get his classmates to agree. After this idea was explored, the suggestion was made that all people live in groups and show similarities in regulating their group life. This led into a brief and simplified analysis and exposition of social institutions, small-group behavior, and nominative integration.

3. Two-thirds of the world's population is non-white. On presenting this concept, the pupils were led to speculate on the validity of beliefs in racial superiority, which took the form of a modified debate of the "nature vs. nurture" controversy. After concurring that ostensible racial differences should be attributed to unequal civic and educational opportunities, the class moved to an analysis of the causes and effects of prejudice. One conclusion tended to emerge: America is losing ground internationally, especially with the third-world nations, due to its inability to solve its own racial problems; thus the leading countries during the last twenty years of the twentieth century will be those that understand the problems and aspirations of non-whites.

4. There is a population decline in some parts of the world and a population explosion in other parts. Some pupils were unaware of the population explosion, while those who were informed could not differentiate among the types of population problems experienced in Asia. In order to make this differentiation clear, the class was led into a discussion of the influence of population, technology, scientific knowledge, and other factors on standards of living. This discussion went somewhat afield, but it provided an opportunity to consider economic and technological problems that affect human well-being. A sociological analysis of the roles of the members of the family in rural, agrarian societies as contrasted to families in urban, industrial societies was undertaken to elucidate the relationship of family size to social custom and the economic level of a culture. The pupils experienced little difficulty understanding ideas associated with the family, perhaps because these experiences were so much a part of their lives.

5. Revolution is a characteristic of today's world. The concept of revolution was not completely foreign to the class. From their work with current events, they were able to identify many nations where revolutions had occurred during the past few years. But they found it more difficult to assess the underlying reasons for this unrest. A few pupils pointed out that "people did not like the way they had been treated." This remark encouraged an analysis of actual conditions that led to revolts and uprisings. The role of communism and socialism in world revolutions was discussed; however, revolutions were noted in which communism and socialism did not play a significant part. Pupils were encouraged to observe the social consequences, as well as the means used by insurgents to bring about their goals, in specific revolutions. The contention that the United States is not sympathetically attuned to the aspirations of the emerging nations of the world was given careful consideration. Pupils tended to agree that America's hope of maintaining its position of strength in the world community was in no small measure contingent upon a revitalization of leadership and vision.

These were the concepts that were analyzed in class. Equally important alternative concepts could be presented. Selection was based on an evaluation of the concepts that would be of most value to the class at this stage in their development. In retrospect, this approach yielded significant results in enlarging understanding of world affairs and in promoting critical thinking.