# Looking beyond the single story

Challenging stereotypes, prejudices and cultural misunderstanding in everyday reading (7–14 years)

# Introduction

Many interwoven stories make up the life and identities of each one of us. These include those from our personal family histories; our cultural backgrounds; the countries, towns and villages in which we live; and other influences that have shaped who we are. However, all too often, we only hear single narratives about other people and places, leading to the creation of stereotypes, prejudices and cultural misunderstanding.

In her widely viewed TED talk, ‘The danger of a single story’,[[1]](#footnote-1) the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses personal life stories to warn of the risk of cultural misunderstanding when we only hear a single story about another person or country.

With strong links to the English, Geography and PSHE curricula, the following activity ideas encourage learners to think critically and widen the scope of the stories they know about other people and cultures. Learners are supported to become more aware of ‘what they don’t know’ and to recognise that everyone has multiple stories about themselves to share. The activities can easily be adapted to suit the needs of younger and older learners and be applied to the stories children read for pleasure.

Useful resources and web links, as well as a suggested book list, are also provided below to further support learners to explore diverse identities and cultures.

**Activity ideas**

# I never knew that!

*Aim: to recognise that our first impressions of others are not always correct; to develop empathy for others.*

# Ask learners to write down and share anonymous facts about themselves. Encourage learners to think of surprising facts that others in the class may not be aware of. Depending on the sensitivities of individuals in the class, learners could be invited to try to match each fact with the person it relates to before the correct answers are revealed.

* Alternatively, ask learners to think of three statements about themselves: two true and one false. Allow time for learners to circulate and share their statements with others, without revealing which of the statements are true or false. Then come together as a class and ask learners to suggest which of the statements they think were true or false and why, before inviting learners to reveal the correct answers.
* Use this activity to stimulate discussion about the importance of going beyond our surface impressions of people. As a follow-up, learners’ true statements or facts could be displayed in the classroom as a visual reminder of the diversity and value of their experiences, achievements and interests.

# Multiple labels

*Aim: to recognise ways in which we are all unique and to understand that there has never been and will never be another ‘me’; to value what contributes to our identity.*

# Ask learners to come up with a list of labels which could be used to describe themselves to others. For example, someone could be a daughter, sister, cousin, granddaughter, niece, friend, classmate, teammate or Mancunian, as well as an English, British or global citizen.

# Discuss learners’ ideas about their labels. Invite learners to share which labels they like best or least about themselves and why. Emphasise that we are all made up of many stories, and each one of us might take on very different roles and be seen in very different ways by different people.

* As a follow-on activity, ask learners to fill in a personal outline (a template is provided in *Who am I?* – Activity sheet 1) with all the qualities, interests, activities, experiences and relationships that make them who they are.

# My single story

*Aim: to recognise prejudice and stereotypes, understand their impacts and start to challenge them.*

* Use a circle time session to encourage learners to share their experiences of being reduced to a single story, for example when other people have made assumptions about them based on aspects such as their appearance, past behaviour, gender, age or disability. Alternatively, invite learners to share examples of when they have witnessed people making assumptions about others or when such assumptions might be made.
* Allow time for learners to reflect on and discuss these experiences.
* *Why do you think people make assumptions about other people and places?*
* *Do you think it is fair to make these assumptions?*
* *How can we try to avoid making assumptions or stereotypes about other people and places?*

# An alternative news?

*Aim: to critically examine what is presented to us in the media and understand why it is important to do so; to consider and evaluate different viewpoints; to distinguish between statements of fact and opinion.*

# Compare news reporting about the same event written in different countries. Alternatively, compare coverage over time for a particular event. For example, explore how global disasters such as floods or earthquakes are reported in the country in which they take place, compared to ‘onlooker’ countries.

# Collect and read a range of news reports from different sources. Use these to identify facts, opinions, stereotyping and bias in news reporting and consider how choices are made about which stories are covered or given prominence.

# As a follow-on activity, learners could use the internet to research and write a report about an issue that has, or has had, little coverage in the UK media. This could be a local, national or global issue.

# Which country am I?

*Aim: to interpret images as a source of geographical information; to recognise prejudice and stereotypes, understand their impacts and start to challenge them.*

# Organise learners into pairs or groups of three. Print off copies of the photographs in the *Looking beyond the single story* slideshow and give an image to each pair or group. Ask learners to look at and discuss their image, before deciding as a group which country (or continent) they think it is from. Possible questions to stimulate their group discussions include:

* *In which country do you think this photograph was taken?*
* *Why do you think this photograph is from that country? What geographical features or evidence are you basing this decision on?*
* *What ideas or assumptions do you have about this country, and what evidence are you basing these on?*
* *Do you have any questions you would like to ask about any of the photographs? If so, what are they? How could you find out the answers?*
* Ask learners to share their ideas with other groups before revealing the correct answers. Discuss learners’ responses:
* *Did any of the country locations of the photographs surprise you? Which ones and why?*
* *Do you think it is possible to show what a country is like in just one or two photographs?*
* *What images would you choose to represent the country or the locality where you live?* Learners’ understanding could be developed further by asking them to choose two or three images (from the internet or printed sources) to represent the UK. Alternatively, provide a selection of photographs from the UK and ask learners to choose a couple to represent the whole country. Allow time for learners to reflect on and discuss the challenges of doing this.
* Invite learners to share examples of where they (or others) have based their ideas about a country on one or two images or another limited source of information, from the media or elsewhere. Draw out the issues in doing this and therefore the importance of not assuming too much about a country from just a few photographs.

# Useful resources

* **‘The danger of a single story’ by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

In her TED talk, ‘*The danger of a single story*’, the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses personal life stories to warn of the risk of cultural misunderstanding when we only hear a single story about another person or country. You might like to share and discuss this talk with older learners before carrying out any of the activities.

[www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\_adichie\_the\_danger\_of\_a\_single\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)

* **English and Global Citizenship guide (includes a recommended book list with stories of people from around the world)**

Use this free guide to help teach English through a global citizenship lens. With ideas for learning about the world whilst improving speaking and listening, reading, writing and media literacy skills, this guide also provides suggestions of books to help widen learners' imaginations.

[www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/english-and-global-citizenship](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/english-and-global-citizenship)

* **Radi-Aid**

Radi-Aid is an annual campaign created by the Norwegian Students’ & Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH). Its aim is to challenge the stereotypes and assumptions people often make in relation to poverty and development issues. From 2013 to 2017, the campaign organised the Radi-Aid Awards to recognise the best and worst of development fundraising videos. The selected video clips could be used with older learners to stimulate discussion.

[www.radiaid.com/](http://www.radiaid.com/)

* **Your Life, My Life**

Alongside appreciating the multiple stories that make up each one of us, it is important for learners to recognise how much we all have in common. Use the film clips and activity ideas in this resource to provide an engaging snapshot of other children’s lives and support younger learners to identify our similarities, as well as respect our diversity.

[www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/your-life-my-life](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/your-life-my-life)

* **Images and Artefacts**

Use these continuous professional development activities to explore the effective use of images and artefacts in the classroom.

[www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/images-and-artefacts](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/images-and-artefacts)

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***Who am I?* template Activity sheet 1**

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1. [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\_adichie\_the\_danger\_of\_a\_single\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)