Leading for Global Competency

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Now more than ever, education should prepare students for global civility and peace. So what in the world are we waiting for?

Good teachers and principals, in the United States and elsewhere, know that good education begins with clarity of purpose. The purpose of schooling is to prepare students for life in the real world in their communities and societies, both in the present—while students are in school—and in the future—after they leave school behind.

Good educators know that the real world is ever more interconnected and interdependent. We all share in facing such planetary challenges as climate change, health epidemics, global poverty, global economic recessions and trade imbalances, assaults on human rights, terrorism, political instability, and international conflicts. We also share opportunities for global collaboration in such areas as scientific and artistic creation, trade, and international cooperation. These challenges and opportunities define the contours of our lives, even in their most local dimensions. Yet in spite of growing awareness of the importance of developing global skills, few students around the world have the opportunity today to become globally competent.

I define global competency as the knowledge and skills people need to understand today's flat world and to integrate across disciplines so that they can comprehend global events and create possibilities to address them. Global competencies are also the attitudinal and ethical dispositions that make it possible to interact peacefully, respectfully, and productively with fellow human beings from diverse geographies (Reimers, 2009).

Making the Case

In the United States, a number of groups have produced compelling studies and policy statements explaining the importance of developing global skills. Most recently, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills—an advocacy coalition of educators and business, community, and government leaders—has identified global awareness as one of the six core skills that all students need to acquire (along with information and communication skills; thinking and problem-solving skills; interpersonal and self-direction skills; financial, economic, and business literacy; and entrepreneurial and civic literacy). The partnership defines global awareness as the ability to understand global issues; learn from and work with people from diverse cultures; and understand the cultures of other nations, including the use of non-English languages.

In 2007, the partnership administered a survey to a group of voters, asking them to rank the importance of 14 skills and indicate the extent to which schools were doing an adequate job of developing those skills. Two-thirds of the voters ranked global awareness

as an important skill, but only 1 in 10 thought schools were doing an adequate job of teaching that skill.

Several prominent organizations—such as the National Research Council (2007), the Committee for Economic Development (2006), and the Asia Society (2008)—have also made the case for global education. Concurrently, some teachers and education entrepreneurs have developed a wide range of practices that foster global competency, such as improved foreign language curriculums, programs that promote intercultural competency, and internationally themed schools and curriculums. Unfortunately, these practices remain the exception rather than the rule.

So Why Don't Schools Promote Global Competency?

If we know that global education is important and we understand the kinds of curricular and instructional practices that support it, why are most schools *not* developing global competencies? The challenge is not simply figuring out which specific activities contribute to fostering aspects of global competency, but also finding out how to integrate those activities into the regular work of schools and how to align them with existing curriculum, assessment, and opportunities for teacher professional development. Two obstacles typically stand in the way.

Lack of Resources

Not only do schools and communities have competing priorities, but school systems overburdened by demands also often have insufficient capacity and resources. In the 2007 survey conducted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, although 66 percent of respondents considered global awareness a priority, far more respondents considered other skills more crucial, such as computer skills (87 percent); reading comprehension (85 percent)' and critical thinking and problem solving (80 percent). When resources are insufficient, these skills often take priority over developing global competency.

An Obsolete Mind-Set

Schools also have greater consensus on how to operationalize traditional competencies, such as literacy, numeracy, and scientific literacy. As a result, these are more likely to be reflected in standards and curriculum frameworks, assessment systems measuring the effectiveness of schools, and professional development initiatives.

But what accounts for this pervasive focus on traditional competencies? Part of the reason is that schools have been at these competencies longer—and schools are generally best at doing what they have already been doing for a long time. Also, these competencies are easier to tackle, particularly from a mind-set that reflects the logic of industrial production in which optimal productivity is achieved by high specialization and intensity in the use of resources.

This logic leads to the compartmentalization of the curriculum and the creation of subject specialists who are highly focused on developing a narrow set of competencies. This model is inherently at odds with interdisciplinary collaboration and leads to a zero-sum way of thinking about the use of education resources: If I do more global education, I must do less literacy or science instruction because resources—whether teaching positions, resources for professional development, or resources for instructional materials—can only be allocated to serve one of multiple competing goals.

This way of thinking makes developing traditional competencies like literacy—particularly initial literacy or numeracy—a more tractable problem than developing competencies that sit across disciplinary boundaries. It may also lead to the fallacy that educators have to choose between developing academic excellence and developing character.

The Reality in School

A survey I recently administered to a group of 150 school principals confirms the limited opportunities in schools for promoting global learning (see fig. 1).[1]

Figure 1. Survey on Principals' Perceptions of Global Competency Offerings in Their Schools

Question	To a great Extent	To some extent	Not much	Not at all
To what extent are there opportunities for students to develop global competency in your school?	12%	33%	46%	10%
Are there opportunities to develop global competency infused throughout the curriculum in your school?	12%	41%	38%	9%
Are there opportunities to learn foreign languages available in your school?	33%	25%	9%	33%
Are there opportunities for students to participate in project based learning around global topics?	11%	35%	33%	21%

Are there opportunities for students to travel abroad available to the students in your school?	15%	8%	19%	57%
Are there opportunities for teachers to travel abroad available to the teachers in your school?	7%	19%	22%	52%
Are there opportunities for teacher professional development to help teachers in your school develop skills and knowledge to develop global competency?	6%	21%	40%	32%
Are there partnerships between your school and universities or non-profits to develop global competencies?	6%	13%	16%	65%
Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In your school teachers agree on the definition of global competency…	3%	29%	50%	18%
In your school the development of global competency is a priority for teachers…	7%	17%	43%	32%
In your school there are sufficient opportunities for students to develop global competency…	10%	25%	43%	22%
In your school there is good alignment between the way in which we assess student learning and the purpose of developing of global competency…	11%	23%	40%	26%
Source: Survey administered by the author to 150 participants in the seminar "The Art of Leadership" at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on July 7, 2009.				

Fewer than one-half of respondents reported that their schools offer opportunities to develop global competencies, with similar percentages reporting opportunities to infuse global competencies throughout the curriculum or participate in project-based learning. Although a somewhat higher percentage reported that their schools provide opportunities

for foreign language learning to students and teachers, only one in four principals reported opportunities for students or teachers to travel abroad. Support in this area is also limited: Only one in four principals reported adequate opportunities for teacher professional development in global competency, and only one in five reported partnerships with universities or other organizations to support the development of global skills in their schools.

The survey shows that constraints to developing global competency in the respondents' schools include a lack of agreement on the definition of global competency among teachers (68 percent reported insufficient agreement); the fact that this purpose is not a priority for teachers (75 percent); and insufficient opportunities for students to develop global competency (65 percent).

Since Wars Begin in the Minds of Men

To break free from the mental trap that sees the development of global competency as competing with other educational purposes, we need to think anew about the relationships among the different goals of education, understanding that schools were created to achieve ambitious civic purposes and that reconnecting with those purposes can make education more relevant, engaging the imagination and energy of both students and teachers.

Public schools were, after all, created to contribute to peace, not to teach students a limited set of skills. Nothing so undermines teacher and student engagement as a dull curriculum reflecting low expectations. The perception that a curriculum is irrelevant or boring leads some students to see education as irrelevant to their lives and to check out of school, psychologically and often physically as well.

Educating for Peace

Seventeenth-century Czech educator John Amos Comenius, who survived 30 years of civil violence that took the lives of his wife and two children, was the first to make the case for universal education. In 1636, in his *Didactica Magna*, he argued that political and social violence resulted from ignorance among large segments of the population. In the early 1800s, Swiss educator Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi proposed that the goal of education was the full development of the human personality (Biber, 1831). A hundred years later, American educator Isaac Kandel (1925) insisted on the importance of promoting international understanding in school—not by adding a new subject to the curriculum, but by infusing this purpose into the existing curriculum, teaching comparative history, geography, and current events.

After World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt and other drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights included education as a basic human right in hopes this would contribute to creating the conditions for a lasting and sustainable peace. This purpose was also reflected in the preamble of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational,

Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "Since wars begin in the minds of men," it reads, "it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be built."

Needed: A New Mind-Set

How, then, do we think anew about an old idea, that education should prepare students for global civility and peace—or, in today's parlance, for global competency? By moving away from the mind-set that considers schools factories and education a linear process in which the manager's task is to maximize efficiency to achieve a limited set of competing objectives. And by thinking about schools as systems of interdependent actors and processes, in which the most important outcomes, as in a symphony, are in the synergies that result from their interaction and collaboration.

A curriculum that makes intercultural competency an asset, rather than a deficit, can powerfully motivate immigrant students who navigate cultural borders daily to engage, not just in further developing their global competency, but in all disciplines as well. Schools that find a way to tap the resources that culturally diverse communities of parents and teachers offer to the education of all students will engage these communities in positive ways, both in and out of school.

From the Bottom Up

Abandoning the industrial approach to education also leads us to abandon the traditional command-and-control, hierarchical view of leadership. A synergistic conception of competencies leads to a different approach entirely. Here, leadership is distributive, collaborative, and participatory, and the central task is identifying and nurturing innovation.

First Steps for Leaders

Begin where people are. The main opportunity for leadership interested in identifying and nurturing innovation to advance global education is in establishing cross-disciplinary design teams that integrate teachers, district personnel, and scholars in defining global competency.

By engaging in this collaborative work, participants will be able to identify existing practices in their schools that promote global competency—likely the work of individual pioneers—and decide not only how to integrate these practices within the existing curriculum but also how to deepen and widen them, scale them up, and support them. For example, school personnel might network with similar groups in other schools or districts working to include this purpose in policies, standards, and curriculums or secure resources in support of global education initiatives.

After developing a shared definition and purpose and identifying and supporting ongoing good practice, these innovation teams will be in a position to further develop their knowledge and capacity in global education. They could study the subject further and

identify practices in other schools, ultimately designing plans to adopt those practices in their own schools. Scaling up this approach is about organizing a social movement of teachers and school leaders who are already interested in working in global education and empowering this movement to enlist other colleagues in the task of providing school opportunities to develop global competency.

Listening to Those in the Know

An organized, bottom-up, teacher-led movement can advance global education in ways that advocates have been unable to do so far. Rather than trying to dictate new practices using the education bureaucracy's traditional instruments of control, the most effective role for district leadership, government, or other policy actors is to support the organization and scaling-up of ongoing grassroots efforts.

Parents, teachers, and those working in the frontlines of change know that good education is not about academic excellence or about character, but about both—which makes these groups the best suited to lead this social movement. They understand that competency in the 21st century is not about global awareness, or problem-solving ability, or technological proficiency, or civic competency—but about *all* of them—and they know this better than legislators or those involved in the industry of educational testing.

Let us follow, recognize, and support teachers and students as they discover together how best to prepare the next generation for global civility and international understanding. Their shared work in the classroom is the most powerful driver we have in achieving these ambitious education goals.

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Endnote

[1] The principals surveyed were part of an advanced executive training program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This sample is not representative of the general population of U.S. principals because all principals involved were self-selected to participate. This group included principals of both independent and public schools.

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