

Chapter 2

What Is Global Education and Why Does It Matter?



Global education are both practices guided by a set of purposes and approaches intentionally created to provide opportunities for students to develop global competencies, and the theories that explain and inform those practices and their effects. Global competencies encompass the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that help students develop, understand, and function in communities which are increasingly interdependent with other communities around the world, and that provide a foundation for lifelong learning of what they need to participate, at high levels of functioning, in environments in continuous flux because of increasing global change.

A competence encompasses more than knowledge and skills “It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual’s knowledge of language, practical IT skills, and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating” (OECD 2005, p. 4).

A quintessentially global topic is climate change. Global competency should enable people to understand climate change, to adapt to mitigate its impact, and hopefully to revert it. Climate Change Education, a subdomain of Education for Sustainable Development, is a modality of Global Education focused on preparing people to achieve more sustainable ways to relate to our habitat. It encompasses preparation to adopt practices that are known to be sustainable, for example slowing down population growth, consuming a diet with a smaller carbon footprint, or using renewable energies. These practices may be individual in the choices we make about our own consumption and lifestyle, or they may be collective, the result of choices we make as citizens when we participate in the democratic process in various levels of government or when we influence the behavior of corporations. Government policies are essential to slowing global warming, and they are subject to influence and preferences by citizens, educated to understand the scientific consensus on climate change and with the capacity to exercise influence as citizens.

But Climate Change Education encompasses also the development of the innovation skills necessary to slow down climate change, which requires advancing knowledge and inventing technologies that can help us transform our interactions with the

environment, in a way reinvent our way of life. As a result, educating to mitigate climate change and for sustainability involves equipping people with the necessary skills for such advancement of knowledge and invention.

An example from the field of sanitation will illustrate the role of inventive skills in addressing climate change. In his efforts to improve sanitation in the developing world, Bill Gates concluded that the toilets and water treatment systems developed and in use in the early industrialized world were poor fits to developing countries because they were resource-intensive and generated excessive waste. This caused him to undertake projects to stimulate innovation in the design of next-generation toilets that could operate without sewer systems (Brueck 2019; D'Agostino 2018).

The competencies gained from global education should help students understand how the communities in which they live relate to other communities around the world, how they are affected from that interaction and affect others, how their lives are shaped by topics which are global in nature, such as climate change, or trade, or scientific cooperation, and to participate in forms of global action and cooperation within their spheres of influence in ways which contribute effectively to the various communities they are a part of, and in this way improving the world.

There are different intellectual traditions that influence how global education is defined and conceptualized. These perspectives draw on various intellectual traditions: globalism, nationalism, internationalism, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, post-colonialism, and indigeneity. They are anchored in diverse core concepts: justice, equity, diversity, identity and belonging, and sustainable development. They include perspectives that accept the existing international social and economic order, along with others that are more critical (Davies et al. 2018).

Following a cosmopolitanist and critical perspective, in my own work developing global citizenship curriculum, I have adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a guiding framework because they articulate a capacious vision of sustainability and because they tie global education as a theoretical field and practice to a set of concepts that are widely shared across many fields of human endeavor, including education, but extending also into public health, work and industry, poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, poverty reduction. These seventeen goals are deeply rooted in multiple disciplines focused on human and social development. The Sustainable Development Goals pose also a challenge to the very notions of development and social progress, emphasizing the interdependence of inclusion, social justice, peace and environmental sustainability (Reimers et al. 2016, 2017).

Global education encompasses the traditional disciplines in service of helping students understand the world in which they live: sciences, social sciences, and humanities. For example, to understand climate change it is necessary to understand the processes that explain how climate works, a subject of scientific study. A global education includes also opportunities for students to imagine and enact strategies to advance human well-being, which draws on the capacities of invention and ethical reasoning. This might include helping students to develop the curiosity to advance scientific understanding in a particular domain, or the desire to create products or services that advance well-being or solve problems, as with the previous example of reinventing toilets to address sanitation and advancing health.

Global education is not necessarily an additional curriculum domain, rather, it is a set of clear purposes which can help align the entire curriculum with real world questions, challenges, and opportunities. As such, global education is a way to help teachers as well as students understand the relationship between what is learned in school and the world outside the school. Global education encompasses also a series of approaches, pedagogies, curricula, and structures to support such instruction that is explicitly designed to help build the breadth of skills that can help students function in a deeply interdependent and increasingly globally integrated world. The Australian Curriculum Corporation defines it as follows:

Global education is defined as an approach to education which seeks to enable young people to participate in shaping a better shared future for the world through: Emphasising the unity and interdependence of human society, Developing a sense of self and an appreciation of cultural diversity, Affirming social justice and human rights, peace building and actions for a sustainable future, Emphasising developing relationships with our global neighbours, Promoting open-mindedness and a predisposition to take action for change. (Curriculum Corporation 2008, p. 2)

Global education includes multiple specific domains, such as environmental education and education for sustainability, understanding global affairs, understanding the process of globalization and of global interdependence, developing intercultural competency, fostering civic engagement, human rights, and peace education. Sciences and humanities are the disciplinary foundations of global education, for there is no way to understand the world without the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that result from learning to think as scientists do or reason as humanists can do.

For example, in order to understand climate change, students need to know not just the scientific consensus on the causes of climate change, but the underlying processes that are the major drivers of climate change producing significant release of carbon dioxide and other bases into the atmosphere which trap heat. Scientists have identified boundaries for ten systems within which humans and other species can live: freshwater use, land use, phosphorous pollution, ocean acidification, climate change, ozone depletion, nitrogen pollution, biodiversity loss, aerosol air, and chemical pollution. These systems are: ocean acidification, climate change, ozone depletion, nitrogen pollution, and biodiversity loss. Only after they understand those systems will students be able to comprehend the metrics which demonstrate the nature and causes of climate change. For eight of those system metrics for which we have data to compare pre-industrial revolution levels to current levels, five of them exceed the boundaries representing high risk that life is not sustainable. Furthermore, the remaining three metrics: freshwater use, land use, and phosphorous pollution, have changed significantly, in the direction of the increasing risk boundary. Only two of the eight metrics (ocean acidification and ozone depletion) have current values that are lower than the values before the industrial revolution (UNESCO 2017, p. 20). Only once they can understand those systems and metrics, will students be able to understand the scientific consensus which is that the main causes of those changes are human–environmental interactions, resulting from overpopulation, modern lifestyles and individual behavior (NASA 2020). But, as explained earlier, in order to contribute to the mitigation of climate change, students will need more than

the scientific understanding of how climate works. They will need the capacity for systemic thinking, and the capacity to identify various criteria, value-based systems, to choose among alternatives and weigh tradeoffs among alternatives, so they can evaluate the costs and benefits involved in reducing population growth, or consumption, or in building circular economies with industries located closer to cities as a way to reduce transportation costs.

An effective program of global education is not the additive result of a series of isolated experiences in various curriculum silos, but the result of coherent and integrated learning opportunities that can help students understand the relationship between what they learn in various grades and subjects in service of understanding the world and of being able to act to improve it. As such, a global education helps students think about complexity and understand the systems which undergird global issues and global interdependence.

The Asia Society and the OECD define global competence as follows:

Both OECD and the Center for Global Education have identified four key aspects of global competence. Globally competent youth: (1) investigate the world beyond their immediate environment by examining issues of local, global, and cultural significance; (2) recognize, understand, and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others; (3) communicate ideas effectively with diverse audiences by engaging in open, appropriate, and effective interactions across cultures; and (4) take action for collective well-being and sustainable development both locally and globally. (OECD and Asia Society 2018, p. 12)

A global education, in short, helps prepare students to live so that “nothing human is foreign to them” to quote the playwright Terence who expressed this cosmopolitan aspiration two thousand years ago, a quote that so captivated the sixteenth-century philosopher and humanist Michel de Montaigne that he engraved it in one of the beams of his study. Montaigne’s focus on understanding human nature influenced many subsequent philosophers and scientists, including Rousseau, Bacon, Pascal, Descartes, and Emerson. He translated his humanist and cosmopolitan vision into ideas about how children should be educated. He argued that the goal of education was to prepare students for life and that this required experiential learning and personalization (Montaigne 1575).

In the chapters that follow, I explain each of these five perspectives in greater detail, illustrating how they can help approach the design and implementation of a program of global education.

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