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The Global Pandemic as Learning Opportunities about the World: Extending School Curriculum

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to offer middle grades educators with suggestions on promoting students' global perspectives by using the international pandemic as a main topic during and after the COVID-19 crisis. The outbreak of the coronavirus has affected individuals' lives and education around the world including the United States. This phenomenon invites educators to work with students for deepening their understanding about the interconnected world as global citizens. Yet, education about the world is severely lacking. There is little in-depth discussion on how educators can help young adolescents to learn this interconnected world concept by using the current reality in the middle grades field. Grounded in broader constructs of global, critical, and multicultural literacy, this essay provides specific instructional suggestions on how the global pandemic can be used as learning opportunities about the world as a way to extend school curriculum. The essay contributes to the middle grades field by offering new insights to educators who seek ways to engage young adolescents about the world through meaningful literacy activities across content areas.

Introduction

Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, more attention is currently being paid to world issues than ever before. As our global community suffers through this novel virus, we are realizing as never before just how interconnected our world is. In the field of middle grades education, this pandemic may offer educators a perfect real world scenario that invites students to critically examine how our global community's actions impact one another. For our young adolescents' present and future lives, the idea that individuals belong to a world community beyond the local needs to be promoted in the field of middle grades education in this globalized era. However, learning about the world and global issues has been lacking in our schools (Kirkwood-Tucker, 2009; Merryfield, 2000; Rizvi, 2009; Zhao, 2010).

The main purpose of this essay is to offer middle grades educators with suggestions on how to use the global pandemic for young adolescents' learning opportunities to critically analyze the complexities of living in an interconnected world. The suggested ideas that follow are grounded in broader constructs of literacies (e.g., defined as reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking), which are fundamental to any content areas. Through the practice of global, critical, and multicultural literacies, educators will support students'

learning by linking the current realities to the school curriculum across content areas.

Background

The need for this essay is situated in our current world reality. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forcefully interrupted schooling globally. Many schools in the US were suddenly closed with little notice as an attempt to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Teachers were confused and unprepared to cope with this sudden reality. In upstate New York where I teach, teachers were expected to begin offering online instructions via various tools such as Zoom and Google Classroom until schools could reopen, which was an uncertain reality. My college education students, who were currently teaching in local districts, found that they were at a loss for what instruction was to look like in this new online arena. They felt like they were having to learn how to fly the plane while in midair as they searched for best methods of online instruction while also dealing with their students' and their own anxieties around a scary pandemic situation.

The teachers prompted me to think about how I might restructure my own classes (which also had to move to all online teaching) and how together we might begin to develop a curricular focus where they might use the pandemic crisis as an authentic world learning opportunity. As Kesson (2020) points out in her recent essay in *Middle Grades Review*, the current enforced

“unschooling” situation might provide students with different learning opportunities. Perhaps middle grades educators could use this phenomenon to invite young adolescent learners to first study, compare, and contrast how global communities have reacted to the pandemic. They can invite students to use such a study to reflect on their own responsibilities and actions as global citizens.

Although scholars emphasize the importance of providing a global education for students (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Merryfield, 2009; Noddings, 2005; Nussbaum, 2002), global awareness has been rather absent in public school curriculum in the US. When discussed at all, global awareness has been slotted into the social studies curriculum, rather than taken across content areas. Furthermore, there has been little in-depth discussion on how educators can help students to develop global perspectives by using the current global events in the middle grades.

In this essay, I provide some specific instructional suggestions on promoting students’ understanding about the world through such events as the global pandemic. I aim to offer new insights to educators who seek ways to engage young adolescents about world issues through meaningful literacy activities. Teachers might use suggestions both during this outbreak and after this pandemic crisis comes to an end. Although this essay is aimed at our middle grade audience, it is being adapted and applicable to many levels since they are grounded in broader perspectives of literacies.

The instructional suggestions below are drawn from my own professional experiences as a literacy teacher educator who has worked with both pre-service and in-service teachers over two decades. However, the suggestions are also taken from my personal experiences and conversations with my family members in South Korea and Europe, along with many international colleagues who have shared their countries’ reactions and strategies in coping with this crisis. The educational suggestions will accompany examples as a way to extend school curriculum, but they are not exhaustive. I also remind the reader that the procedures to implement the activities are not linear.

How to Transform the Pandemic Topic into Learning Opportunities

How can this pandemic crisis be transformed into student learning opportunities about the world? I will address it by first discussing global literacy, followed by critical literacy and multicultural literacy. Each area of literacy will start with the definition and purpose, followed by specific examples. Through diverse literacy practices, middle grade educators can see alternative ways of engaging students about the world.

Engaging in Global Literacy Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic can be used as an important topic to engage young adolescents in global literacy. For this essay, global literacy is defined as the literacy practice that focuses on promoting global perspectives as a way to understand “self” and “others” around the world. This idea is drawn from Hanvey’s (1976) perspective on global education that stresses an awareness of the present world. One of the key purposes of global literacy is to promote students’ awareness that the world is interconnected through literacy activities (Yoon, 2016; Yoon et al., 2018). Teachers can promote this concept of interconnectedness by helping students compare their own local and national context with that of other countries.

To begin, middle grades educators might invite students to obtain basic information through an Internet search on what the coronavirus is and why it is called a pandemic. This first step can lead young adolescents to conduct critical research on the issue by visiting a variety of news sources such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and the Johns Hopkins University’s Coronavirus Resource Center (JHU). In addition to building a working definition of the virus, students can find out other fundamental information such as the origin of the virus and infected countries. They can review data on which countries began to see the spread of infections. Through the world map and U.S. map on the website of JHU that provides real-time coronavirus updates and statistics, young adolescents will see that the US is known as the country with the most confirmed cases (835, 316 as of April 22, 2020), along with the leading death rates (46,079 as of April 22, 2020).

These beginning activities focusing on gathering basic information of the pandemic can be coupled with other extended activities for global literacy. For instance, through reviewing the diverse sources such as the WHO and the CDC, students will explore which groups (e.g., based on age, race, and socioeconomic status) are more infected than other groups and implications from the findings. Young adolescents can also examine whether there are any differences in the identified cases among countries. With this information, educators might promote conversations surrounding the political aspects such as when the public was informed about this virus and how each country's government worked to prevent the spread of the virus.

More specifically, students can compare the first date of the confirmed case in the US (e.g., January 20, 2020) with that of the other countries' cases such as South Korea (e.g., January 20, 2020). Although South Korea was one of the most infected countries at the beginning of the outbreak, by February, it was considered as a country that flattened the curve faster than most of other countries around the world. The outbreak in South Korea was effectively contained (Thompson, 2020). Students can explore what elements influenced this country's success to effectively cope with the virus. They can then compare the coping strategies by South Korea with those of other countries including the US, Italy, and Spain that struggle to find solutions. As countries grapple with best strategies to fight the disease, one topic of study might be to begin to gather information on how countries reacted to testing. Students can explore the current supply status of testing kits and masks that are essential to diagnose people and to protect lives from the virus.

Building knowledge around the topic through using a global lens provides not only an authentic context to use a global literacy framework, but it also affords a natural topic to take across content areas. As can be seen, these activities could naturally tie into several content areas: English language arts (e.g., reading about the virus and discussing it), science (e.g., the nature of the coronavirus and its impact for individuals' health), social studies (e.g., virus impact to different ethnic and SES groups), and mathematics (e.g., comparing death rates with other countries), to name a few. The topic of the novel disease provides an excellent opportunity to recognize the global issue, extend school curriculum, and examine the role of world

community for the good of humanity. Through the process of learning about the world, students can better understand their own identities, ideologies, and situations.

Engaging in Critical Literacy Practice

COVID-19 can be also used as a way to engage in critical literacy practice. While global literacy contributes to raising awareness of the present world through the relevant data, critical literacy focuses more on the analysis of the text and the world with a critical lens. Critical literacy can be defined in many different ways according to different focuses of instruction (Janks, 2014; Luke, 2014; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, & Felderman, 2013). For this essay, critical literacy refers to the practice that focuses on promoting students' critical consciousness about the world. One of the main purposes of critical literacy is to read the world as active agents, not as passive readers. This idea is grounded in Freire's (1998) constructs of "reading the *world* by reading the word" (p. xi) and critical consciousness (*conscientization*). These constructs imply that text reading is equivalent to world reading and critical consciousness is vital to explore existing knowledge about the world (Yoon et al., 2018). The premise of critical literacy practice is that the world is political, and not neutral.

Middle grades educators who situate their instruction in critical literacy may invite young adolescents to pose questions about the world to act as active agents, rather than simply accepting it as passive learners. For instance, they can invite students to critique the media news with relation to the pandemic. Based on the stay-at-home policy, young adolescents might have more time to watch TV and internet media sites about the pandemic. Middle grades educators could encourage students to watch different TV channels and compare their coverage of the topic. Although the different TV channels such as CNN and FOX News cover the same topic, each channel might choose different headlines to entice the audience and to deliver their intended political message. By having students explore each channel's different approach in reporting the same topic, middle grades educators offer students with opportunities to understand how certain media sources may share differing political biases when reporting on events.

Another example of practicing critical literacy is with relation to regulations and bans that each

state and city has applied to individuals' lives during the pandemic. For instance, social-distancing, stay-at-home, and curfew policies restrict individuals' rights and freedoms. Middle grades educators can lead discussions on whether these policies are reasonable to limit individuals' social and economic activities. Educators can further discuss with students the complexities surrounding such implemented policies and to what degree the individuals' rights and freedoms can be limited under this coronavirus situation.

Another key component of practicing critical literacy involves educators' use of discussion formats that promote dialog around events that happened dealing with real world challenges around the pandemic. Middle grades educators can mediate in Zoom or other online groupings where students are able to reflect on current individuals' behaviors when the coronavirus was first reported. For instance, educators might offer opportunities for students to critique the fight over toilet paper that emerged in the US when people began to hoard supplies. Students may find that an intriguing phenomenon. The US dealt with securing enough toilet paper while other countries such as South Korea reported the struggle for citizens to purchase masks to protect themselves and others from the virus. Students can discuss the rationale behind people stockpiling toilet paper, how it related to coping strategies in the midst of the virus, and how one individual's actions impact other people's essential needs. Middle grades educators could also encourage students to review the U.S. statistics on the shortage of other goods, compare them to those other countries such as Iran and Ecuador, and explore the possible factors of the shortage.

These suggested activities are all related to raising students' critical consciousness about the world and the local areas where they live. As suggested in the section of global literacy, the activities in this section also include many components of school curriculum. For example, the activities that focus on reading and critiquing news media content on the coronavirus are linked to the school curriculum of English language arts. Through reviewing the statistics on the shortage of essential goods in a given country and comparing them with other countries through graphs, students are engaged in the school curriculum of mathematics. In addition, the activities that focus on critiquing the restriction of individuals' rights and

freedoms under a ban are related to social studies curriculum.

These activities are to help young adolescents to analyze individuals' actions to cope with the global pandemic and to critique them as responsible global citizens. Indeed, students' critical consciousness about the world is fundamental in practicing critical literacy.

Engaging in Multicultural Literacy Practice

Finally, the pandemic topic can be utilized as a practice to promote students' multicultural literacy. In this essay, multicultural literacy is defined as the practice that promotes students' understanding about cultural diversity. The idea of multicultural literacy in this essay is grounded in Grant and Sleeter's (2009) multicultural approaches that emphasize cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is an ideology that promotes diverse cultural values and norms. Within this frame, individuals are encouraged to sustain their own cultural identities in the dominant culture (Yoon et al., 2010). One of the major purposes of practicing multicultural literacy is to achieve social justice and equity for all people. Promoting individuals' diverse cultural values and norms is a way to achieve social justice and equity.

To engage in multicultural literacy practice, it is important to help students understand that all countries' cultural practices are different. One of the issues that educators could bring to the discussion with students is the use of facial coverings to prevent the spread of the virus. Middle grades educators could initiate a discussion on how each country reacts to the novel virus when it started and how a community's actions are grounded in its cultural and social norms. A discussion of these differences could lead to examining one's own cultural assumptions, ideologies, and situations.

For instance, middle grades educators could invite students to compare the issue of wearing masks in public places between the US and South Korea. They will find the information on the CDC website that the first case in the US and South Korea was informed in January, almost the same time. Yet, individuals' reactions to wearing masks were different from the two countries. At that time, masks were not mandated in the US. The CDC recommended face coverings in public places on April 6 (CDC,

2020). It was early to mid-April that people started wearing masks in the US. However, in East Asian countries such as South Korea, almost everyone wore them when the virus emerged (Feng et al., 2020; Joseph, 2020).

With this information, middle grades educators could guide students to discuss these different practices, the connotation of wearing masks in each country's context (e.g., presumed criminality in the US and other European contexts), and the origin of its connotation (e.g., Ku Klux Klan). The purpose of doing this activity is to help students understand that cultural practice (e.g., wearing masks) is different according to different countries and contexts. Through this practice, students will learn that one rule in a given country might not simply apply to other countries. As facial coverings are interpreted from cultural and social norms, the strategy of coping with the virus could be understood from this context. Through the multicultural literacy practice, middle grades educators could afford opportunities to young adolescents to understand that no cultural practices are more superior or inferior than others; cultural practices must be considered within each country's contexts.

Another approach using a multicultural literacy lens relates to analyzing and reflecting on issues of discrimination in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. For example, due to the potential origin of the virus in China, news sources and social media such as YouTube and Twitter reported that Asians in the US were being placed in vulnerable situations due to this reporting and stigma. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) also shared a concern about anti-Asian discrimination in a statement on April 23 (AERA, 2020). Increasingly, individuals of Asian ancestry have been reported being verbally and physically attacked by non-Asian ethnic groups (Timberg & Chiu, 2020). This news report has come very close to home for me personally through my own students' and my own son's experiences. Some of my Asian students share that they have felt unsafe in current bullying situations and have been afraid of going outside. I also heard from my adult son (Asian ancestry) that a take-out clerk refused to serve him for not wearing a mask, but the clerk served other patrons who were non-Asians though they also were not wearing masks.

This anti-Asian treatment could afford for interesting discussions about how people are currently discriminated against. For practicing multicultural literacy, middle grades educators might invite students to discuss what issues are involved in discriminating against certain groups of people and how Asians, a very diverse group, are treated in some countries as a single group. Through these critical conversations, students have opportunities to reflect on their own identities, ideologies, and underlying perceptions about other ethnic groups.

These activities with a multicultural lens also could be linked to several content areas: the school curriculum of English language arts (e.g., reading and discussing the connotation of wearing masks in each country), science (e.g., discussing the impact of masks for their own and others' health), and social studies (e.g., discussing how to stand against racism and what actions they can do as responsible global citizens). Through these authentic activities with relation to multicultural literacy, middle grades educators are able to assist students to deepen their understanding of who they are and how they can situate themselves in this global society *in relation to* others, not *versus* others (Yoon, 2016; Yoon, 2018).

As suggested in this section, multicultural literacy can be practiced across all content areas beyond social studies and across the year, not on a certain date as a single festival event. Along with global literacy and critical literacy, multicultural literacy is vital to students' successful learning about themselves and about the world. Possibilities are open for our students' learning across content areas when cultural pluralism is the center of the learning activities.

Concluding Thoughts

In sum, I hope that I have provided several suggestions to help middle grades educators in their work with young adolescents to promote their global perspectives by using the pandemic. Although I discussed global, critical, and multicultural literacy separately to show the key characteristics of each area, middle grades educators can implement them through the interdisciplinary approach. This interdisciplinary approach is called *critical global literacies*, critical practices integrating global and multicultural dimensions into literacy teaching and learning (Yoon, 2016; Yoon et al., 2018).

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging; yet it can provide authentic learning opportunities that take students beyond their own communities into building global perspectives that reflect on the interconnectedness of the world communities. We as educators can help young adolescents support a more global community as they reflect on how their perspectives and actions impact one another's lives. In this pandemic crisis, middle grade educators' roles can be expanded into helping students not only learn content, but learn this interdependent world community for justice and equity for all people.

I echo Nussbaum's (2002) point that global citizens view their own ways of life from the perspectives of justice and the good. Inviting students to situate themselves to become an integral part of a global society is middle grade educators' important role for achieving diversity, justice, and equity. The discussion of the global pandemic as learning opportunities about the world is only the beginning of the approach. I hope this essay serves educators who constantly seek new ways to support our students to become responsible global citizens.

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