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Do We Need Global Education in the Middle?

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Abstract

Do we need global education in the middle? This essay explores the answer to this question using various lenses. A brief overview of the history of global education within the middle school movement is presented as are the relevant goals from *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) and definitions of related terms. Using four dimensions of development—physical, intellectual, moral, and social-emotional—readers are asked to reflect as members of the middle level community and as individuals on their own understandings about the need for global education. The essay ends with recommendations for advancing global education, the author’s response to the question, and several personal anecdotes.

Introduction

Exploring the world, wrestling with big ideas, asking significant questions, understanding and encouraging communication and collaboration at local, national and international levels have long been goals of the middle level community (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). When invited to submit this opinion essay about the need for global education at the middle level, I gave little thought to my answer. Why? My answer—based on my life’s work and experiences—is at the ready. And yet, a part of me hesitates. How helpful can my answer be to the middle level community? How helpful can it be to read *my* answer? Is it not important to know what answer *we as a community* and *we as individuals* give? I prefer to be the guide-on-the-side rather than the sage-on-the-stage.

So, before I answer, I want to try a different approach. Using some of the dimensions of development (NMSA, 2010) as a frame of reference, might we try to collectively—and individually—explore this question? I wonder. Can I use this essay to interact with you, my readers, to consider the challenges and possibilities of global education? I would like to try.

Here is my plan for this essay. Let us begin with an overview of the path our middle level community took to arrive at this question about global education today. Then, I want us to consider a few terms. Next, using four dimensions of development—physical, intellectual, moral and social-emotional—I hope we can reflect as a community and as individuals on global education. I conclude with my

recommendations for global education in the middle, my answer to this question, and a few personal anecdotes. To (hopefully) make the reading easier, I use *italics* to draw attention to the questions I hope we, as a community, and you, as my reader, will consider as you ponder your answer to the question: Do we need global education in the middle?

What Has Been Our Path to Global Education? A Brief Background

In the field of social education, Anderson (1976) defines global education as a pedagogy that changes the methods, content and context of teaching in ways that help prepare students for the “global age.” From the vantage point of education in general, Fujikane (2003) argues that the concept of global education is a relatively recent one. Its roots may be found in the concept of teaching for international understanding that grew out of World War II and later movements including development education, multicultural education, and peace education.

Specifically for the middle level community, Gatewood (1974-1975) reported on the emergence of an international curricular focus in the mid-1970s. Curriculum developments in multicultural education (Hickey, 1981) and peace education (Mallea, 1985) followed. The NMSA selected Toronto for the location of the annual conference and published a special themed issue with an international perspective (Lounsbury, 1989). During the following decade attempts were made to reach an international audience but with little success.

At the turn of this century, calls for rigorous assessments and standards circulated worldwide. As these calls for higher academic performance increased, middle level researchers began to compare international and American student performance (Anfara, 2001; Anfara & Stacki, 2002). The emergence of programs such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) made such comparisons possible.

Of significance within the last 10 years is the report that compares middle level education in countries around the world (Mertens, Anfara, & Roney, 2009), the call for the use of comparative studies to promote reflection and changes in middle level education (Virtue, 2012), and opportunities for young adolescents to discover ways to contribute to world concerns (Conk, 2012).

These recent developments contribute to our consideration of global education as do six of the goals of middle level educators for middle level students (NMSA, 2010). These goals are:

- Become actively aware of the larger world, asking significant and relevant questions about that world and wrestling with big ideas and questions for which there may not be one right answer.
- Use digital tools to explore, communicate, and collaborate with the world and learn from the rich and varied resources available.
- Understand and use the major concepts, skills and tools of inquiry in the areas of health and physical education, language arts, world languages, mathematics, natural and physical sciences and the social sciences.
- Respect and value the diverse ways people look, speak, think, and act within the immediate community and around the world.
- Develop the interpersonal and social skills needed to learn, work, and play with others harmoniously and confidently.
- Understand local, national, and global civic responsibilities and demonstrate active citizenship through participation in endeavors that serve and benefit those larger communities. (NMSA, pp. 1-2)

How Do We Define Global Education?

After I conducted a brief literature review, I wonder if we have a clear definition of the term “global education.” I see terms that seem to overlap or may be more useful when we consider the broad notion of global middle level teaching and learning.

Within the general education context, let us consider Hanvey’s (1975) notion of “global perspective.” He identified skills, knowledge, and talents that can be attained, not by individuals, but by a collective of individuals who each bring skills, knowledge and talents that represent a global perspective, “things we will need to know and understand, if we are to cope with the challenges of an increasingly inter-dependent world” (p. 1).

Do we want our middle school community to have a global perspective? Do we have a global perspective? Do we believe that the world is becoming inter-dependent? Do each of us as individuals assume such a perspective? If we do, what does it look like? If we do not, why not?

Yoon (2020) offers the term global literacy. She defines this as a practice that draws upon the notion of global perspective. Global literacy is a literacy practice that promotes “a way to understand ‘self’ and ‘others’ around the world” (Yoon, 2020, p. 2).

Is this a concept we promote as a community—as individuals? Do we integrate this concept in our work as middle level teachers, researchers, and teacher educators? What do we read? What is the setting? Do we assign texts and read research from around the world?

Patel and Toledo (2016) use the term global awareness. Students learn about the geography, politics, economies, cultures, societal structures, and social justice issues of different countries through interdisciplinary projects. They use what they learn and try to take actions that may promote changes within their immediate environments and/or around the world.

Might this be a useful term for us to integrate into the notion of global education?

Global competence (Conk, 2012) is another term that I suggest we consider. This term is framed within the notions that the world is rapidly

changing, information is expanding exponentially, and students and teachers need to learn how to adapt and perform in settings and contexts and with individuals and technologies that may not yet even be developed or conceptualized (Leu & Kinzer, 2000). An outgrowth of this concept is the need for metacognitive insights—for us and for our students—into the ways we as individuals and as a community learn.

What do we, as a collective need to learn? What skills and talents do we need to have? What do I as an individual need to learn? What supports do I need that will help me learn?

At the heart of these terms are the notions of teaching and learning about, from, and with others worldwide, the concept of approaching big ideas and asking relevant questions that are interdisciplinary and interwoven with the local, national and international. For the remainder of this essay, I will use the term “global education” and define it to include this broad notion and this collection of terms—global perspective, global literacy, global awareness, and global competence.

Do we as a community accept these notions? Do we as individuals value and believe in them? Do our teaching, research and learning include them?

How I answer these questions will be different from how you, my readers, answer them. Our answers, as we certainly know, are based on our personal and professional beliefs, experiences, understandings and interpretations of information and knowledge.

Let us now consider four dimensions of development (NMSA, 2010) as a framework for our reflections on the question: Do we need global education?

What are the Physical Issues with Regard to Global Education?

When I think about physical, I think of this in terms of moving our bodies. Transporting and displacing them. Maybe I need to reframe this question.

What are the physical challenges and possibilities when we consider global education—for us as a collective and for us as

individuals? How can—or did we, or will we—physically engage in global education?

Another way I think about this question is to wonder about the number of us who had or will have international experiences.

Did we participate in “junior years abroad” or were we “exchange students” at some point in our lives? Did we—or do we—teach or conduct research abroad? Does our middle level community support and encourage international teaching and learning? What opportunities do we provide to support such efforts—for our students, ourselves, our professional community?

I wonder about the challenges and possibilities for seeking out and participating in international experiences.

What makes it easy—or difficult—for us to travel, work and/or study abroad? What opportunities are available for us to do this? What can our professional organizations do to support our efforts?

Time is also a factor. We know it may be impossible to find the time that it takes to create, build, and maintain relationships with individuals around the world.

How can we find the time? What might we need to change in our lives so we have time to create, build and maintain such relationships?

What are the Intellectual Issues with Regard to Global Education?

When we consider this question as an academic exercise, it may not challenge us. Many of us may think global education is necessary. Certainly, there is evidence that global education is necessary. Even as I write, the first COVID vaccines are being transported across the country holding with them the hope for an end to this global virus nightmare. Based on this pandemic, we already have numerous middle level research studies that are examples of our intellectual, global approach. Also noteworthy is the fact that these authors reference scholars, journalists, students, teachers and scientists from around the world (e.g., Burgess & Anderson, 2020; Schaefer et al., 2020; Smith & Falbe, 2020).

How might we bolster our intellectual approach to global education? How might we demonstrate our commitment to our continued intellectual development—for us as a community, as individuals, and for our students—young adolescents, prospective teachers, and middle level educators?

In terms of expanding our knowledge about global issues—or issues that relate to one particular country, or a continent, or a global theme—do we want to learn more, to explore something new and different? Or, are we certain that our approach to middle level education is the right or best way? Are we convinced that American middle level best practices are superior to those in other countries? How open are we to consider other approaches, philosophies, research, understandings of adolescent development and their needs? How sensitive are we to considering different perspectives, asking different questions about the teaching and learning of young adolescents?

What are the Moral Issues with Regard To Global Education?

As a middle level community, we are concerned with issues of right and wrong, social justice, equity. And yet, we are pressed for time. We rush through our lives and worry about “covering” the curriculum, helping our students complete tasks for accreditation, and learn knowledge to succeed on standardized tests.

When we are pressed for time, do we “drop” out aspects of global education from our curriculum—or more basically, do we even address global education in our curriculum? Or, do we put global education “on hold” or rush to cover it—in a superficial manner? Do we feel—as a community and/or as individuals—that we have a moral obligation to consider global education as part of our curriculum, as part of our professional development?

What are the challenges and possibilities when we focus on notions of morality and global education? Where do social justice and global education intersect for us as researchers, educators, and learners? What is our moral responsibility to include themes that focus on climate change, racial injustice, economic disparities, the school-to-prison pipeline, homelessness, access to quality health care,

food, and shelter, and local student-centered concerns?

What are the Social-Emotional Issues with Regard to Global Education?

From my point of view, these may be the most difficult issues for us to face. I include here the issues of cross-cultural communications, respect for the dignity of “the other” in the many, many facets that contribute to making us who we are. I think about the challenges and possibilities when we try to create meaningful relationships with others, those who may be different from us not only in physical appearance or language, but also in terms of culture, behaviors, religion, sexual orientation, or beliefs. Social-emotional issues require much from us.

How much self-knowledge and understanding do we have as individuals and as a community? Are we socially and emotionally prepared to engage in relationships that promote global education? Are there burdens we may have to carry when we engage in global education? Do we have a support network that we can turn to? Do we have cultural informants who can guide us, explain and unpack unsettling cross-cultural experiences?

What Recommendations Do I Have for Global Education in the Middle?

If I were asked to make just one recommendation it would be this: Travel, leave the US, and venture out into the world—live and work abroad for as long as possible. Join the Peace Corps or become a United Nations Volunteer. Volunteer for an international, non-governmental agency.

Explore the many Fulbright Programs. As academics, we can apply to be Fulbright Scholars. We can encourage our students to apply to the Fulbright Student program or for a Doctoral Dissertation Research Award. Recent graduates can apply for an English Language Fellowship. Middle level teachers can apply for a Distinguished Award in Teaching. Communities, institutions, and/or families can apply to sponsor an international exchange scholar. For more opportunities go to: <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/fulbright-programs>

My next best recommendation is for us to broaden our circles of colleagues, professional

friends, and community members. Let us find ways to make contact, genuine contact, with those who are different from us.

I also recommend that our professional organizations (AMLE and the Middle Level Research SIG of AERA) create awards and other types of recognitions for students (at the middle level through graduate students), educators, and researchers who engage in teaching or research that has an international focus.

For those of us who have colleagues abroad, recognize their contributions to our professional growth and development. Let us not hesitate to exchange stories and perspectives that may be different. May we find ways to work through differences and conflicts. Then, share these experiences with the academic community so that we can learn from each other.

Yes, of Course!

By now there should be little doubt about where I stand on the need for global education, global competence, global literacy, and global awareness. My colleagues who know some of my professional/personal stories do not doubt my commitment. And for those who may not know much about me, let me humbly explain. Briefly. Professional and personal experiences inform my “Yes.” These experiences include more than six years of teaching and conducting research in various countries across Africa, twice as a Peace Corps volunteer, once as a Fulbright Scholar, and numerous times as an English Language Specialist. I had a second Fulbright Scholarship to the United Kingdom and a Fulbright Specialist Award to Turkey. I taught for 20 years as an English as a Second Language teacher including many at the United Nations International School in New York City. I was married for more than two decades to one of the Congolese Peace Corps trainers. Now I am in a wonderful relationship with a British, Anglo-Burmese retired ship captain and maritime educator. Most importantly for four decades, I have been the mother of two African American children, one who I gave birth to in Rwanda.

It is not easy for me to admit—I am in the twilight of my career—but with this acknowledgement comes a touch of insight and a bit (I hope) of wisdom. I may not have worked, lived, nor loved, were it not for the “global” experiences I had in middle school.

It was not too long ago that I attended my 50th high school reunion. Most of us also attended middle school together. A few of our stories may offer insights—even now.

During world geography lessons as we labeled (black ink for names of capitals and towns) and colored in stenciled maps (green for mountains and forests, blue for rivers, yellow for deserts), our sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Molter, captivated us with stories about her life as a military wife. She and her husband were stationed in the Soviet Union, Poland, West Germany, and elsewhere after the war (WWII).

My classmates reminded me about the “big box” and my Aunt Martha. She offered to send each of my classmates a souvenir from Formosa (Taiwan) where she was living with my uncle Bill, stationed there as a Colonel in the U.S. Army. Aunt Martha sent me 10 different souvenirs and told me to ask my classmates which ones they wanted. Mrs. Molter helped me tally my classmates’ choices and we sent the order back to Aunt Martha. Some of my classmates told me that they still have the mementos from that “far away place.”

We recalled the 16mm films we saw in seventh grade with Mrs. Emerson. Her husband worked for an oil company that made short promotional films about the countries where they drilled for oil. We recalled how we looked forward to Friday afternoons and the films about “strange and different” places—and Mrs. Emerson usually caught a bit of shut-eye.

Our conversations turned to foreign languages. Most of us were in Mme. DeNeufville’s French class. (My fluency in French helped send me to the Congo with the Peace Corps.)

In eighth grade we had a school exchange that helped me question one of my father’s directives. Every Friday after Thanksgiving (now known as Black Friday), we drove from my small hometown in Pennsylvania and spent the day shopping and eating in New York City. As we approached the Lincoln Tunnel my father always said, “Lock the doors. We’ll be in New York City soon.” The message was clear—New York City was a dangerous place. Only okay for a day-long visit.

Back to the eighth-grade school exchange—my small-town school paired with a small school in New York City. Families with eighth graders

were paired—one New York City family with one Pennsylvania family. My class lived with New York families and went to the City school for a week. Several weeks later we did the reverse. The New York eighth graders came to live with our families and attended our school for a week.

By the end of my week-long stay I did not see any dangers in New York. In fact, I have lived in the City for 40 years—so much for my father’s directive!

Conclusion

What do we need to do as middle level educators, researchers and teacher educators to accept and promote global education? How can we integrate and incorporate this perspective into our teaching, learning, research and collegial relationships?

As I write today, the COVID pandemic ravages the US. When we compare America’s performance in combatting this virus to the performance of nations around the world, we find ourselves at the bottom of the list. As members of the middle level community we recognize the need to reach beyond our shores—to ask unsettling, difficult questions, consult and work in collaboration with others, and learn with colleagues from around the world. We recognize the need for global education—let us rise to the challenge.

Why? Because ... this we believe.

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