Finding the Path to

**Meaningful Global Learning**

in American Schools

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**Abstract**

Clarity and an approachable process for planning and implementation are needed before global learning in American schools can move forward. As long as education leaders mandate that school resources are funneled toward increasing standardized test scores of reading, writing, and mathematics only, global learning will be unable to take hold. By exploring valuable literature of perspectives on global learning, important points can be found and discussed. Opening these to critique will allow teachers and school leaders to genuinely consider what form and function global learning programs will follow in the future.

**Introduction**

In examining a small portion of the literature, theories, research, and perspectives on this *thing* we have come to call “global learning,” three essential questions arise:

1. What is global learning and why is it important for American schools?
2. At what point in the process of accepting, implementing, and achieving global learning are American educational institutions and communities?
3. What framework or process is needed to progress the implementation of global learning in American schools and what is the timeline we can expect to follow?

There is much work to be done in the realm of developing and clarifying the scope of global education and its progress thus far. The three questions above may guide a conversation wherein many answers are yet unclear. In fact, many other questions are provoked by these original three and the information necessary to answer them may be unavailable or insufficient. Utilizing the resources available, educators and educational leaders must continue the process of determining the validity, necessity, and form that global learning should take in American schools, and consider the commitment and changes required by its mission.

**Social Studies**

The goal of this review is not to answer the above questions, but instead to connect the academic literature to the in-progress needs of school leaders and teachers. The purpose is to be soundly provocative and challenging, while also realistically sensitive to the variety of needs among diverse school communities.

**Clarifying Global Learning**

**Figure 1: How do we cut through all the jargon to the real meaning of “global learning”?**

**global learning**

**global education**

**global awareness**

**global competence**

**global citizenship**

global perspective

**global programs**

cultural competency

**cross-cultural skills**

**intercultural skills**

global skills

**21st century skills**

**multicultural education**

**multiculturalism**

cosmopolitanism

internationalism

**international mindedness**

international education

**international awareness**

intercultural awareness

**International**

**Baccalaureate**

global studies

**world studies**

The jargon is a linguistic nightmare for practitioners – overwhelming, confusing, and deterring (figure 1). The vast array of definitions and ideas about global learning in schools is enough to tie any busy educator in knots. How are schools to know and understand (much less invest their efforts and resources in) the mission of global learning without some sense of clarity in terminology and language? While the academic study of global learning may have begun as long ago as 1928 (Reimers, 2011), for many teachers and school leaders, it is just now creeping into mainstream school-level conversations. Caught up in the ambiguity of terms, intentions, and scope, schools or individual teachers are left to themselves in deciding exactly what global learning entails, and what it means for their students and their instructional practices. Thus, schools have developed what Fernando Reimers, speaking as a part of the Harvard Dialogues on Global Education, refers to as “misconceptions” that limit school-based global programs and inhibit graduates from gaining “the expert level of skills they will need.” Reimers explains the two misconceptions:

The first is the conflation of global competency with teaching core subjects at global levels. …[T]he global competency necessary to understand and act on global challenges will not emerge simply from teaching math and science at the highest levels. … The second misconception… is the widespread belief that we can produce deep global competency with ‘global education light.’ … Infusion starts with the premise that it is not possible to gain important spaces in the curriculum for global education… [This assumption is] insufficient to promote the kind of expertise students gain in a focused course, with a clear scope and sequence (Reimers 2011).

While this statement provides a starting point for what global learning is not, the misconceptions therein demonstrate why schools are in need of a more thorough explanation and clarification. It is necessary for the academic community and educational leaders at local, district, state, national, and international levels to create some consensus on what exactly global learning is and is not (Parker, Ninomiya, & Cogan, 1999). Teachers and leaders must be empowered to design and implement authentic global learning programs in schools and communities that lead students to “global competency” rather than the insufficient, piecemeal global “infusion” Reimers warns against.

From where should this needed clarification come? How broad or specific must it be in order to provide the encompassing scope as well as the necessary boundaries for attainability and adequacy? Robert Hanvey, writing for the New York-based Center for War/Peace Studies in 1975, responded to the many voices on the subject and attempted to bring a comprehensive answer with his definition of an “attainable global perspective” (Hanvey, 1975; Burnouf, 2004). Hanvey outlines five dimensions of a global perspective (perspective consciousness, state of the planet awareness, cross-cultural awareness, knowledge of global dynamics, and awareness of human choices) in an attempt to bring approachability to the realm of global learning and what it should entail (p. 2).

In a 2004 republication of Hanvey’s pioneering work, the American Forum on Global Education offers a precise definition to accompany Hanvey’s explanation:

*Education for a global perspective is that learning which enhances the individual’s ability to understand his or her condition in the community and the world and improves the ability to make effective judgments.* It includes the study of nations, cultures, and civilizations…with a focus on how these are all interconnected and how they change… It provides the individual with a realistic perspective on world issues, problems and prospects, and an awareness of the…concerns of people elsewhere in the world. (American Forum for Global Education, 2004)

This definition is helpful, however more explanation is needed in order to transform definitions into authentic school programs. Teachers are in search of a set of central standards or main ideas around which their leaders coalesce and support before they can begin applying them directly into their classrooms. There have been many attempts to offer such a framework (Zhao, 2009, pp. 145-151; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), and Hanvey still serves as a starting place.

In Hanvey’s framework, special attention is paid to the practicality of achieving such programs. Hanvey defines this attainability not in terms of ease of implementation for schools, but instead in terms of appropriateness for students: “This is an attempt to describe certain modes of thought, sensitivities, intellectual skills, and explanatory capacities…*which young people in the U.S. might actually be able to acquire in the course of their formal and informal education*” (Hanvey, 1976). This distinction is important for understanding the application of the five dimensions in the contemporary climate of American schools, much changed since Hanvey’s original writing by the No Child Left Behind Act, standardized testing and re-emphasis on the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics (Zhao, 2009, pp. 1-40), and most recently by the Common Core Standards movement (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) and the increasing adoption of the Framework for 21st Century Skills (Partnerships for 21st Century Skills, 2007). While Hanvey’s dimensions remain a valuable resource and framework for structuring global learning programs in K-12 schools today, it is necessary to consider them in the proper – and possibly outdated – context (Lamy, 1991, p. 53; American Forum, 2004; Burnouf, 2004, pp. 2-4, 9).

In addition to the five dimensions Hanvey outlines and explains, *An Attainable Global Perspective* (Hanvey, 1975) includes four points that may provide some important insights into the context and subtext of his work. These four points will be used in the following paragraphs to examine the outstanding concerns that must be resolved before American schools can progress in the adoption of broad global learning programs.

**Four inherent points in the “attainable global perspective “**

First, Hanvey recognizes the disconnect to which this review has already drawn attention: there is a need for clarity and attainability such that school practitioners are empowered to create and lead high quality global learning programs within the realistic context of local communities and assessed standards. As the academic community and international and local education leaders continue to refine the breadth that global programs must encompass across grade-levels and at varying levels of student achievement and rigor, it is necessary that special attention be paid to the realities of the contemporary classrooms in which these programs will be implemented. It is no hidden reality that American public schools today are stressed to the breaking point: by the financial slash-and-burn of government budgets; by the abuse of professional educators by conservative movements to eliminate union influences and public employee benefits; by the pressure and inflexibility of standardized assessments and score-based growth data (Zhao, 2007, pp. 3-5; 2009, pp. 1-40; Jacobs, 2010, pp. 9-11); and by the overwhelming pile of terminology, programs, and expectations placed on classrooms by the addition of and transition to Common Core Standards, math and literacy achievement goals, technology skills integration, and 21st Century Skills and each of the intentions, definitions, and categories therein (McREL, 2001; 2009). Amid the battle through the immense list of requirements and stakeholders in American education, schools have a specific set of needs. Schools must be given (or provided the authority to establish on their own) a clear definition of global learning, as well as a distinct, approachable plan for its development and implementation. Schools need leadership, support, and a commitment on the part administrators and district leaders who have prioritized global learning as a hallmark of local school programs. Along with that commitment, teachers need relief from the myriad programs schools divide their resources among, and a full-force movement to centrally focus on this main idea – authentic, explicit global learning – as the foundation of school planning and instructional practices. When American schools have finally cut away all of the excess baggage and refocused themselves on a single goal, global learning will have the chance to take hold.

The second aspect of Hanvey’s writing that requires further discussion is his lack of urgency toward implementing global programs in American schools. Hanvey does not explicitly outline the necessity of the global perspective for the future or readiness of American society. He certainly reveals an opinion that the global perspective is innately good and personally valuable in his discussion of U.S. Peace Corps workers in Filipino society and his multiple references to the values of native or aboriginal peoples in arctic and southwestern North America (pp. 11-13, 15, 22-24). Hanvey most likely personally believed that American students would benefit from, or possibly need or even desire, a global perspective in the future. However, Hanvey seems to rely on other writers to build the case that the global perspective would become a prerequisite for an increasingly globalized world. It can be interpreted that Hanvey, while valuing and personally understanding the global perspective for himself, did not see it as a necessity in the American society of 1975. Thus, the urgency shared by so many contemporary advocates of global learning (Anderson, 1991; Zhao, 2009, pp. 160-175; Stewart, 2010, pp. 97-102; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Reimers, 2011) seems to be missing from Hanvey’s “attainable” dimensions. How does this subdued perspective impact the use of Hanvey’s work in the contemporary context of American schools?

If this second aspect is to be further examined, Hanvey’s semantics exacerbate the incongruence that possibly renders his work outdated. The five dimensions of *An Attainable Global Perspective* (Hanvey, 1975) are certainly full of challenging and sometimes even provocative expectations. Yet, these dimensions form a meager “*perspective*” (Hanvey, 1975, emphasis added) on the world and its interrelated systems. In his valid search for attainability (recognized and valued by earlier statements in this review), Hanvey diminishes the expectation of American student’s ability to achieve an understanding and urge to act upon the greater world ecology in which they exist. In the 1975 political,

**Figure 2: What are levels of global engagement that schools must foster?**

**Global citizenship**

**Global competence**

**Global perspective**

DIAGRAM: global exposure, perspective, awareness, competence, citizenship, as a graph?? Global engagement vs. global knowledge and skills??

**Global awareness**

**Global exposure**

economic, social, and environmental context of Hanvey’s work, it might have been adequate to propose that the majority of Americans might only need a basic level of exposure to the international realities beyond the borders of the United States (Clarke, 2004, p. 55). This simple “global perspective” (Hanvey, 1975) would certainly be appropriate for individuals living in a society where mass international migration and immediate transfer of resources, data, and information was limited by or nonexistent due to international political conflict. It might have also been acceptable that, in the context of 1975, only the most gifted and motivated among American students would need to be globally competitive (Gibson, Rimmington, Landwehr-Brown, 2008).

Almost forty years later in today’s context of multinational corporations, the daily prevalence of international air travel, and the ubiquitous access to online communications and information from all over the world (Warlick, 2005, pp. 11-16; Pink, 2006, pp. 28-47; Zhao, 2009, pp. 98-113; Stewart, 2010, pp. 98-102), it seems insufficient to assume such a small representation of the American populous will be required to interact internationally in their future, or that just a “*perspective*” will suffice. Instead, it is necessary to recognize that the modern reality for future generations will not be satisfied by anything less than what the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Asia Society call “global competence” (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Others, including Dana Mortenson of World Saavy and Robert Harrison of the International Baccalaureate Organization, have explained the need for “competence” over “perspective” or “awareness” (figure 2):

“[We must focus on] creating a global lens for all teaching and learning which illuminates the connections between issues, events and people, locally and globally, and promotes informed, positive action” (Mortenson, 2011).

It is true that schools need an attainable approach to global learning. It is also true that balance must exist between what is attainable, and what is necessary. The examination in the last few paragraphs outlines how it may be important to further consider appropriate adaptations to Hanvey’s dimensions that are required by the progress and development of American schools and the global society since their creation, almost forty years ago.

Third, Hanvey introduces an argument that predicts some of the most contentious disagreements of contemporary schooling and education reform in the United States. Hanvey, in his introduction, clarifies his view that a global perspective may have a different form for different local communities or individuals (p. 2). This lack of standardization may have influence in current debates between educational leaders seeking greater consistency and accountability among schools, and others advocating localized curricula with broad flexibility in terms of achievement and the definition of success. Here, Hanvey addresses the issues of standardization, differentiation, and accommodation:

A global perspective is not a quantum, something you either have or don’t have. It is a blend of many things and any given individual may be rich in certain elements and relatively lacking in others… A global perspective may be a variable trait… Every individual does not have to be brought to the same level of intellectual and moral development in order for a population to be moving in the direction of a more global perspective (Hanvey, 1975, p. 1).

Hanvey goes on to explicitly state that “standardized educational effects are not required” for the implementation of global programs (p. 1). This view may have more to do with the search for attainability than it does Hanvey’s views on students with execptionalities, the role of the federal government in curricula development, or the rural-urban divide in American schools, but it certainly has clear implications for how global programs are designed and implemented in schools playing host to diverse populations and communities. It also predicts the contemporary polemic between political, business, and some educational leaders’ support for increased global competitiveness through national curricula and accountability standards (Duncan, 2010; Common Core Standards, 2010) and other advocates of local-context-specific programs emphasizing creativity, global awareness, and technology skills (Zhao, 2007, 2009). Surely, balance between the two camps must be found to ensure that all American children receive the requisite access and exposure to authentic global learning while also ensuring that the valuable diversity of American regions and communities is allowed appropriate flexibility to shape global learning goals toward the needs and aspirations of local citizens.

The idea of differentiated expectations for global learning supports the call for “gifted programs” to emphasize intercultural competence at a higher degree than the programs offered to the broader student population. Allowing room for learner differences and targeting global learning programs to the students with the greatest potential for achievement and future leadership is repeated by advocates who propose extending the emphasis on attainability to focus primarily on gifted students (Gibson, Rimmington, & Landwehr-Brown, 2008). Perhaps, this could be an opportunity to compensate for the meek expectations of the majority of American students implied by the term “global *perspective*,” as opposed to “global *competence*.” If schools are able to provide appropriate global learning opportunities to all students, it could be reasonable and sufficient to expect only the highest achieving students to reach “competence,” while fostering “perspective” and “awareness” for students who encounter greater academic struggles. While this approach may be satisfactory in the near future, there seems to be adequate evidence that this lowered expectation of some students will not meet the demands of the long-term global society.

Lastly, as Hanvey outlines each of his five dimensions of a global perspective, he embeds simple indicators that some dimensions are more attainable than others, and still other dimensions may be comparatively more important. For example, Hanvey states as he introduces the third dimension, cross-cultural awareness, “This may be one of the more difficult dimensions to attain” (p. 10). Similarly, Hanvey mentions that, for the dimension of perspective consciousness, “Achieving perspective consciousness is no small accomplishment” (p. 5). He continues to discuss each dimension, stopping in some to clarify special nuances such as the distinction between opinion and perspective (p. 6), or levels that an individual works through in fully achieving a specific dimension, such as he does for cross-cultural awareness (pp. 16-17). This aspect of Hanvey’s work provides an important detail for schools as they create global learning programs that are attainable as well as dynamically sufficient. School leaders and teachers can use these embedded details to evaluate which parts of the global perspective are most imperative for students in their local community as well as which dimensions require more emphasis, time, or resources to foster development and mastery. Through evaluating and considering these four foundational aspects of Hanvey’s work, teachers and school leaders can begin developing global programs that are not only attainable and appropriate, but also sufficient for today’s everincreasingly globalized world (Warlick, 2005; Pink, 2006; Zhao, 2009; Stewart, 2010) and to build a pathway toward meeting the needs of the future culturally-convergent international society (Clarke, 2004).

**The need for change**

A substantial change – “economic, technological, political, cultural, and environmental” (B. Tye, 1991) – is necessary in order to shift the American educational paradigm from Amerocentrism to world citizenship (B. Tye, 1991, pp. 39-43; Lamy, 1991, 49-53; Clarke, 2004, p. 52; Fischer, 2011). When Hanvey “impl[ies] a modesty of goals”, he is recognizing the struggle global learning must weather in order to become a pillar of American education (Hanvey, 1975, p. 1). Barbara Tye, writing in 1991 on behalf of ASCD, claims that “we are in a time of transition.” She continues:

We are in a time of transition, when a change in the direction of global awareness is taking place at the macro, societal level, as well as the micro level, in some individual schools and school districts. … We are in a “sea-change,” moving toward a society that places more value on being globally literate (B. Tye, 1991, p. 39).

Tye continues to reference Thomas Kuhn, stating that “When paradigms shift, the world itself changes with them” (qtd. in B. Tye, 1991). As the global society around us continues its runaway path toward becoming more internationally intertwined, the greater American perspective must shift to recognize the changing social structure of the world, the globalization of American society, and the vast social change brought on by human migration, travel, and everdeveloping technologies (K. Tye, 1991). As the people of the United States feel their lives become more dependent upon the realities of foreign cultures, economies, and political and human struggles, a demand will rise that American schools prepare our future generations for the world of cultural convergence (Clarke, 2004).

The question remains: What will it take for American schools to jump onboard? Will we stand aside and wait until we are yet again behind the curb of societal needs? Or will we recognize the eminent transition of our world to a unified, intercultural society, and move boldly forward onto a new foundation of global perspective, awareness, competence, and citizenship?

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