

Wanted: Global Citizens

By Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Carolyn Sattin

The world needs young people who are culturally sophisticated and prepared to work in an international environment.

During the last century, basic formal education has become an ideal the world over. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, higher proportions of people than ever before are completing primary, secondary, or postsecondary education (Cohen, Bloom, & Malin, 2007). Schools across the world—whether in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, or Oceania—tend to share some basic features: They are designed to prepare children and youth to become engaged citizens, ethical human beings, and productive workers who will contribute to the societies in which they live.

But for the most part, schools today are out of sync with the realities of a global world. Psychologist Howard Gardner (2004) points out the new tension between the glacial pace of institutional change in schools and the forces of globalization. Because of globalization—the ongoing process of intensifying economic, social, and cultural exchanges across the planet—young people the world over need more innovative thinking skills, cultural awareness, higher-order cognitive skills, and sophisticated communication and collaboration skills than ever before.

New Faces Everywhere

International migration is the human face of globalization. There are now between 185 and 200 million transnational migrants, making migration a global phenomenon involving every region of the world (United Nations Global Commission on International Migration, 2005). Some regions are becoming important centers of out-migration. For example, in the last decade, approximately 1 million Latin Americans left that subcontinent every year (United Nations Population Division, 2006). Other regions, such as Asia, are experiencing massive waves of internal migration. China is leading the way: More than 150 million people in that nation are migrants from rural to urban areas (Glain, 2005).

Some countries, such as Mexico, are becoming not just major sources of outmigration but also important transit regions. Migrants from every continent routinely choose Mexico as their favored route to enter the United States—mostly without legal documentation (Alba, 2002). Other regions of the world—notably the wealthier postindustrial democracies of the Northern Hemisphere, but also countries as far-flung as Australia and Argentina—continue to attract millions of immigrants annually (United Nations Population Division, 2006).

The United States is now in the midst of the largest wave of immigration in history, with more than 1 million new immigrants arriving each year, for a total immigrant-born population of more than 35 million people, or approximately 12.4 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The children of immigrants are a fast-growing sector of child and youth populations in such countries as Australia, Canada, the United States, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and France (Süssmuth, 2007). These new demographic realities have immense implications for education and schooling within the sending, transit, and receiving countries.

Dissolving National Boundaries

This is the first generation in human history in which the fortunes of youth growing up far apart will be demonstrably linked by increasingly powerful global socioeconomic, political, and demographic realities. In cities like Toronto, London, and Los Angeles, global cultural flows are increasingly normative; people have come to see immigration as an expected part of daily life. This morning in New York City, for example, youth from more than 190 countries got up to go to school, marking the first time in human history that one city represents practically every country on the planet (Linares, 2006). Youth now habitually create and exchange ideas with peers in faraway places, wear similar clothing, share tastes in music, gravitate toward the same Web sites, and follow the achievements of today's global sports heroes—like soccer stars Ronaldinho (a Brazilian who plays in Spain) or Beckham (an Englishman who now plays in Los Angeles).

Information, communication, and media technologies are the high-octane fuel that drives global interdependence, as people across the world connect with one another instantaneously. These communication networks and the digitization of data have another global effect with deep consequences for formal education: They are putting a huge premium on knowledge-intensive work and making it possible for entire economic sectors to go global. Complex data for a tax company based in Boston can be entered in Bangalore; X-rays for a hospital in Brussels can be read and analyzed in Buenos Aires at a fraction of the cost. Fewer jobs are strictly local now, as larger sectors of the economy outsource work to other regions of the world (Friedman, 2005).

Although much of the concern in the United States about globalization and education focuses on competition—how the country can maintain its global edge—competition is, in fundamental ways, the least of our problems. In today's globally interconnected world, issues that place youth at risk in China can lead to disaster in Canada. For example, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic that appears to have originated in Guangdong Province in November 2002 quickly spread globally, claiming victims half a world away, in Montreal.

Competition is yesterday's challenge. Today's challenge is collaborating to solve global problems that spill over national boundaries.

What Schools Can Do Right Away

Reforming education to be more in tune with the new global reality will require focused energy, creativity, political will, and a commitment of resources on the local, national, and international levels. Education reform does not come easily or cheaply, and it cannot be done without the political consensus to support costly interventions, such as major technological upgrades and intensive teacher training and mentoring. Schools can, however, replicate a number of elements from promising school models that may require less upfront financial investment.

First, schools need to restructure curriculum and pedagogy to place student engagement at the center of learning. Educators should implement lessons built on key concepts grounded in events and issues relevant to students' lives. For example, assignments can encourage students to think about certain everyday activities—the food they consume or the clothing they purchase—in such a way that they begin to identify how their actions are embedded in a larger global context and have widespread implications. Assignments like this can help make the global local for students. Public debates about sweatshop labor, global warming, and outsourcing take on new meaning when students understand how these issues actually relate to their daily lives.

Providing students with ongoing and timely feedback is another successful technique to promote and maintain student engagement. Using a host of evaluation and communication methods, teachers, students, and parents can become partners in tracking a student's development and collaborators in devising strategies to support continued academic growth. An important first step in connecting home and school is setting up interactive Web sites where parents can check their children's homework assignments and grades and teachers can post suggestions on how parents can help with assignments. In addition, virtual discussion boards—where parents can communicate with teachers or other parents and schools can post announcements or helpful tips—can facilitate interaction and community building.

Finally, generating a clear narrative of the school's basic mission and fostering a shared sense of purpose among students and school personnel can be a major factor in generating a positive school climate and an engaging academic community. But schools need to go beyond simply including a global mission statement on their official Web sites. Schools can adopt like-minded sister schools in other nations. Students in different parts of the world can work together on special units, developed and sustained using the Internet, that focus on global topics of mutual interest and relevance.

For example, youth in a country of emigration, such as Ghana, could work with youth in a country of immigration, such as the United States, on joint projects of study that consider such questions as, What are the causes and consequences of global migration now affecting Ghana and the United States? Why are there as many medical doctors from Ghana working in the United States as there are medical doctors working in Ghana? What economic, professional, and ethical issues are implicated in this global dynamic?

Meaningful human interactions in the form of work visits and exchanges can nourish global sensibility. Schools like the Tensta School in Stockholm, Sweden—in which approximately 80 percent of students come from immigrant and refugee families—and the Ross School in Long Island, New York, have successfully implemented such exchanges.

Long-Term Curriculum Needs

In addition to taking immediate action, schools and school systems must develop a broader agenda that incorporates the crucial elements of a comprehensive 21st century education. To lead successful personal and professional lives in the age of globalization, students will need an array of skills.

Critical-Thinking Skills

Students must feel at ease working with mathematical and statistical tools that enable them to understand—and, in some cases, manage—complex data in multiple domains. For example, to comprehend how SARS rapidly became a global health threat, students need a basic understanding not only of the genetics of viruses, but also of epidemiology and human migratory chains. Students will also need to master the concept of the scientific method to become informed consumers of scientific research that may have important consequences for their lives.

Interdisciplinary thinking will have a greater premium moving forward because single disciplines can no longer fully address the complex global problems that we face today. Although it is common for schools to link concepts from science and math classes and integrate social studies and language arts curriculums, educators must begin to think about making connections among all four subject areas. Schools should structure curriculum around thematic units in which science, math, language arts, and social studies classes all address concepts related to the same theme using different materials and analytic tools. Such innovation requires flexible scheduling, common planning time for teachers, and a significant commitment on the part of school administrators.

Communication Skills

Students will need to effectively interact with people of different races, national origins, and religions. They should develop a familiarity with other cultures and various religious practices, values, kinship systems, systems of governance, and methods of communication around the world. Technology has opened up many avenues to link students in one classroom to classrooms in other countries. Promoting assignments that require international collaboration, facilitating electronic pen pal programs, and setting up exchange programs are just some of the ways schools can promote this kind of learning. Most important, students must use this knowledge to act ethically and in a globally conscious manner, and schools must take on the responsibility of helping students reflect on and understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens of an increasingly heterogeneous global society.

Language Skills

Fluency in more than one language and culture is no longer an option—it is becoming a prerequisite for career advancement. Many schools, particularly in the United States, do their students a great disservice by providing inadequate foreign language training and, by extension, inadequate exposure to cultures outside the English-speaking world. School systems must train and attract high-quality language instructors and provide a host of options to equip students with the language skills and cultural awareness they need to live in a multicultural, multilingual, globally interconnected world.

Collaborative Skills

The ability to work collaboratively in a variety of environments has never been more important for securing employment and promoting responsible citizenship. Schools are now responsible for preparing students to work under such conditions. Group work and cooperative learning, in which the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than an instructor, needs to play an everexpanding role, replacing traditional “chalk and talk” pedagogical methods that confine students to their desks and dissuade them from interacting with their peers in their own classroom or from around the world.

Technology Skills

New technologies can help promote collaboration, develop interpersonal skills, and facilitate cross-cultural exchange. Also, advanced technological skills are no longer optional for students in the 21st century. Schools must embed technology across the curriculum and view mastery of technology alongside literacy and numeracy as skills required of all graduates. In addition, schools need to take some responsibility for improving students' information literacy and helping them develop into discerning, savvy media consumers.

Education for the Global Era

Education for the global era is education for lifelong cognitive and behavioral engagement with the world (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, in press). For students to develop the skills, sensibilities, and competencies needed to identify, analyze, and solve problems from multiple perspectives, schools must nurture students who are curious, can tolerate ambiguity, and can synthesize knowledge within and across disciplines. Students will need to be able to learn with and from their diverse peers, work collaboratively, and communicate effectively in groups (Gardner, 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). They will need to be culturally sophisticated enough to empathize with peers of different races and religions and of different linguistic and social origins. Education for globalization should aim to educate the whole child for the whole world.

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