

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL AGE

As nations become increasingly interrelated, citizenship education must include development of a global perspective.



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Imagine a visit to the Anywhere, Illinois, School District, where students are taught American history as if our nation were simply a collection of 50 independent states. Each area of the curriculum centers on the state of Illinois in the Anywhere schools, as all other states are assigned a peripheral status. We have walked in on the first day of a two week "History of Arizona" lesson. This unit compares the distinct culture and history of far-off Arizona to what was learned last semester during the rather lengthy Illinois unit.

Our next stop is a literature class. Here, students are learning about the great works of the midwestern region. In the economics class next door, students are studying statewide economic systems in comparative perspective, using Illinois as the main focal point. Today they are discussing the relative strengths of the economic system of Illinois.

Of course, the Anywhere, Illinois, School District and its unusual approach to the study of the United States is as fictitious as it is ridiculous. The United States is a single social entity that has a history, geography, and culture of its own that incorporates, but at the same time is greater than, the sum of the particular histories, geographies, and unique cultures of each of the 50 states. Because

of this fact, we would have to conclude that the students of Anywhere are receiving a poor "American education," and hence a bad education about the state of Illinois.

Despite the growing awareness of the realities of our emerging global society, a great deal of education about the world today is based on the same fundamentally erroneous premise. Just as the United States is not merely a collection of 50 states, where "interstate" relations are a step above the ordinary citizen, neither is the world a collection of isolated countries. To the contrary, increasing global interrelatedness, on the individual and societal levels, is a global fact of life. Whether for good or for bad, each of us exercises citizenship within the context of a global age—a fact that has far reaching implications for citizenship education.

Over the past few decades, an increasing number of educators have recognized the need for more appropriate educational responses to the increase in global interrelatedness. This awareness has stimulated a wide range of efforts to change school curriculums in ways that would communicate a more global perspective and make schools more effective agents of citizen education in a global age.

From an Euro/North American-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. In traditional history classes, students' attention is focused overwhelmingly on Europe and North America. The "non-Western" world is examined mainly in relation to the

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"Western" world and studied in a Western frame of reference. Recently, however, curriculum changes have widened this frame of reference to allow for a more global perspective on the human experience. These changes include (1) introducing more content about Asia, Africa, and Latin America; (2) reducing Western bias in teaching about the non-West; and (3) globalizing the study of world history, that is, highlighting the global rather than the regional or national significance of a particular historical event.

From a Region-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. Curriculum based in a regional perspective portrays the world's nations and geographical regions as if they were isolated and self-contained units with no relationship to one another. Yet, to fully understand a particular region, its geography and history must be examined in context of the entire world. A curriculum embodying a global perspective treats individual nations and regions as parts of a larger whole and highlights the interconnections between nations and among world regions.

From a Group-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. The predominant group perspective emphasizes differences among cultures and civilizations, rather than stressing that which is shared by all and encourages students to view their own culture and civilization as inherently superior. In contrast, a curriculum grounded in a global perspective treats all of humankind as the main unit of analysis, and encourages students to tolerate and appreciate cultural differences.

From a State-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. The world in the 20th century is an organizationally complex arena composed of a multiplicity of subnational and transnational units in addition to national governments. A curriculum characterized by a state perspective portrays the international system as an exclusively political phenomena of interacting national governments. However, schools are beginning to give attention to multinational corporations and the relationships between local communities and foreign nations, and between students in America and citizens in other parts of the world.

From a Human-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. The human-centered perspective portrays humankind as standing apart from and capable of governing the remainder of nature as an absolute sovereign. Education is moving toward a global perspective which views humankind as belonging to the earth rather than the earth to us.

From a Past-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. A past-centered treatment of the world portrays time as if it were three disconnected line segments—the "past" we learn of in school, the "present" experienced outside of school, and the "future" no one need think about. A global perspective treats time as an interactive system of past, present, and future, mutually influencing one another as parts of a single human history.

To bring about a different attitude toward time, some schools use "historical flashbacks" and similar techniques designed to enhance students' perceptions of the relation of past to present. Also growing in popularity are courses in "future studies," which stress that human choices in the present will profoundly affect our globe's future.

From an Information-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. In a curriculum dominated by an information-oriented perspective, the world is treated as a depository of discrete bits of information waiting to pass into and out of the memories of each new generation—information such as the names of the capital cities, the chief exports of a country, the mean annual rainfall in a region, the current population of a nation, and so on. The global perspective, in contrast, emphasizes not the passive memorization of facts but rather the active use of factual information in conceptual, ethical, and policy analysis of global problems faced by all populations.

From a Spectator-Centered Perspective To a Global Perspective. A "spectator" curriculum treats world affairs as if they were a professional football game in which the "average citizen" can be no more than an observer. This is to say, the world is something to be observed, studied, worried about, and even prayed for, but world affairs are not an arena in which individuals can actively participate. The global perspective portrays the world not only as an object of

study but as an arena in which individual citizens can participate through personal, social, and political action.

The scope and rate of change toward a global perspective has not been great. But there has been change, and this is encouraging if we are optimists who judge glasses as half full rather than half empty. Even more important, the changes in school curriculum characteristic of the past few decades point the direction in which we must continue if schools are to become more effective agents of citizen education in a global age.

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