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Beyond Food, Festivals, and Flags

To prepare students to live in today's interdependent world, weave international mindedness into the fabric of your school's standards, instruction, climate, and assessment.

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Events of the past 20 years have led many educators to think more about the development of international understanding in young people.

Their reasons for advocating this development, however, can differ substantially.

Some people advocate an international approach to schooling because they recognize that the economic and social world is changing. Students currently in school may, in the future, work for companies run from entirely different continents, owned and managed by people from different cultures. These young people are likely to experience their career not as a job-for-life but as a portfolio of jobs. Many of them will work in several different countries, with colleagues from cultures scattered across the world.

Others advocate an international approach in response to the many difficulties that the world is going through, including the threat of international terrorism, the rise of racially biased right-wing political parties throughout Europe, and the degradation of the environment caused by our lack of awareness of the impact of our actions. For these people, internationally minded education holds out the best hope for eradicating fear and suspicion and achieving peace, tolerance, and global cooperation.

A third group is neither economically, environmentally, nor socially driven. These advocates believe that now, more than ever, international issues are an important part of modern life. International understanding should be included in the curriculum because it is, quite simply, a subject worthy of study.

What Does It Mean to Be Internationally Minded?

These different perspectives all offer strong arguments for the development of internationally based education. But the danger is that each group assumes that it has the same definition of "internationally minded" or "globally based" as everyone else. To explore this assumption, try the following exercise.

Read this list of people: George W. Bush, Madonna, Tony Blair, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Madeleine Albright, Osama Bin Laden, Bono, Kofi Annan, Anna Kournikova.



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Now rank them in order from 1–10, with the most internationally minded person as number 1, and the least internationally minded person as number 10. You might want to do this at the same time as some of your colleagues in school or at home with friends. Then compare your lists. See where you agree and where you differ.

We often use this exercise to begin workshops with teachers. It's good fun and evokes much laughter, cheering, and hissing as different groups reveal their top 10. A good-natured but furious discussion usually takes place: "How can you put x at the top of the list? No way!" The differences between your list and those of your friends and colleagues can tell you something about the different definitions of international mindedness you each brought to your decisions. Here's the all-important supplementary question to this exercise: How did you define "internationally minded"?

In case you are interested, in our teacher workshops in recent months, Osama Bin Laden has topped some people's lists as the most internationally minded, but so has George W. Bush. Bush has also been listed as the *least* internationally minded. Nelson Mandela has only topped the list once; Kofi Annan ranks high on most people's lists. Does that tell us anything about teachers' definitions of international mindedness?

An Internationally Minded Curriculum

Confusion over definitions and goals does not help schools deliver effective internationally minded education. George Walker, Director General of the International Baccalaureate Organization, is correct to point out that international education must be more than the five "Fs"—food, festivals, famous people, fashion, and flags.¹ But we can sympathize with schools that concentrate on these aspects, given the difficulty of trying to reach consensus on any other approach to international education.

Four years ago, we faced the issue of goals as we set out to devise and develop a new primary/elementary curriculum that contained a significant international dimension. Shell International had asked Fieldwork Education to develop the International Primary Curriculum to serve the children of Shell's expatriate workforce in grades K-7. The International Primary Curriculum is now a fully independent organization, serving about 50 schools in 25 countries throughout the world, including the United States, Malaysia, China, India, Holland, the United Arab Emirates, and Nigeria.² Although this curriculum was developed specifically for international schools, the lessons we learned in developing it can assist all educators who want to develop a more rigorous approach to international education in their school or district.

Agree on a Definition

Begin with a definition of international mindedness. For obvious reasons, globally minded educators should not make any assumptions about shared beliefs and definitions. In developing the International Primary Curriculum, we spent much time discussing and arguing about our definition. Teachers and administrators from schools around the world influenced our thinking. We ultimately agreed that an international perspective includes

- Knowledge and understanding beyond one's own nationality.

- Awareness and understanding of the interdependence among peoples.
- Awareness and understanding of the interdependence among countries.
- Awareness and understanding of the independence of people and countries.
- Awareness and understanding of the similarities and differences among peoples.

This definition acknowledges that the term *international* is made up of both *inter* and *national*. International understanding does not replace a sense of nationhood with something “bigger” and “better,” but rather uses and builds on a sense of one's own national identity to understand and work with the national identities experienced and felt by others. We can, at the same time, be Californian and American, British and European, Nigerian and African, citizens of a country and of the world. These are complementary, not opposing, concepts.

Develop Learning Standards

To infuse a powerful internationally minded dimension into the curriculum, we must take this subject just as seriously as we take all the other curriculum elements. Defining standards is just as important for international education as it is for math or language arts. Our experience suggests a number of principles that help in defining these standards.

First, standards for international mindedness should encompass knowledge, skills, and understanding. The development of students' understanding, a crucial concern, arises out of the continuous application of skills and knowledge. So standards should respond to the nuts and bolts of international mindedness as well as the big picture.

Second, standards for international mindedness need to be appropriate to the age and experience of the students. Our experience suggests that educators often define international mindedness in mature, adult terms, more appropriate to the exit outcomes of high school students. Because developing international mindedness cannot suddenly start at age 12 or 15, we need to design standards for younger students without forcing them to deal with complex international issues that are beyond their current understanding.

Structure and Plan Curriculum Activities

The success of all teaching depends on the way in which the opportunities presented to students enable them to reach the standards or learning outcomes that we expect of them. Therefore, the curriculum should also define appropriate instructional activities that encourage rigorous thinking relevant to the standards for international mindedness. There is nothing wrong with a costume day or food festival; both can be great fun and contribute to a positive school environment. But simply asking students to dress in their national costumes and join the parade around the school does not provide the learning experiences that develop rigorous thinking about international concerns.

The International Primary Curriculum sets all instructional activities in an international context as well as a national one wherever possible. International mindedness runs through learning in all subjects. For example, geography learning outcomes for 6- to 7-year-old students include:

Children will know about some of the similarities and differences of children in their class.

and

Children will know about the weather and climate conditions in their home country and the home country of one friend and how they affect the jobs that people do.

In a typical learning activity linked to these standards, students work with partners to find out as much as they can about clothing around the world. They choose a specific country and find out what the people there wear. Does the country have a special or national costume of any kind? Are there clothes that people in that country wear for a particular reason?

In addition, we make sure that each unit of work contains specific activities that encourage children to think about issues in an internationally minded way. For example, here is an activity for 10- to 12-year-old students from a unit called Making the News.

Ask students how they would feel if news from their home or host country were misrepresented by another country. (This might be in the form of deliberately inaccurate reporting, unintentionally misleading reporting, or a deficiency of facts.) Have them work in small groups to investigate the following questions and present their findings to the rest of the class:

- Why would the media in one country want to do this?
- What would be gained?
- Can students find any examples of news that has been represented by a second country in a way thought unfair by a first country? (They might want to talk with an adult about this question.)

These straightforward activities have an international twist, and they encourage students to adopt a perspective different from the one they may have brought to their learning. Such internationally focused activities throughout every unit of work can help teachers create opportunities for students to develop their international mindedness.

Model Appropriate Behaviors

If curriculum activities set the context for students' learning, then the ethos of the school—its essential character and guiding beliefs—sets the context in which teachers and students implement those activities. We can't expect students to develop international understanding unless we surround them with a context in which international mindedness can be caught as well as taught.

Schools should be places in which students observe teachers, parents, and other adults discussing music from other parts of the world, reading authors from other countries, and eating food from different cultures on a regular basis, not once a year. Those who interact with students in schools can display international mindedness in countless ways. What matters is that we look at each of the learning standards and do our best to see how we can model them through day-to-day action in schools.

Assess and Evaluate Students' International Mindedness

There are two reasons to assess students' international mindedness. First, the importance of international mindedness as a goal of education makes it essential to find out whether students are developing their international mindedness or not. Second, we know that if something is assessed and evaluated, its perceived value increases. An effective assessment program that can demonstrate student achievement is likely to enhance the value of international mindedness in both the education community and the wider community.

The International Primary Curriculum is currently working on an assessment program that uses a mix of tests and authentic skills-based assessments. Within this program, international mindedness will receive equal weight with other subjects.

International Mindedness as a Goal

Today, helping our students develop a sense of international mindedness is more important than ever before. We can't afford to leave this crucial education goal to chance or some osmotic process. International mindedness deserves the same rigorous exploration and treatment as math, science, language arts, and every other aspect of the curriculum that we consider important.

Endnotes

¹ Walker, George. (2001, September 14). Learning to live with others [Online, speech to the conference of the Nordic International Baccalaureate schools, Denmark]. Available: www.seei.qc.ca/Conference-Textes-Lettres/11_septembre_%202001_par%20George_Walker_DG_OBI.pdf

² For more information about the International Primary Curriculum, visit www.internationalprimarycurriculum.com.

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