

Global Education: Important Focus for 21st Century Curriculum

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It was Asst. Prof. Dr. Ratchaporn Rattanaphumma, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Rangsit Journal of Education Studies*, who asked me if I would have time to prepare a Reflection article on the subject of Global Education. As it is a topic of interest to me, I did not hesitate to say yes, even though this is an extremely very busy time of the year. However, now as I re-read this writing, I am wondering that because of my strong interests, these Reflections may be somewhat too long, and perhaps some of the material may touch upon issues which some readers may find unusual or even disturbing. Some readers may think some parts of this article are beyond the purview of academics.

Global issues are occupying the attention of nations more than ever before. Three contemporary examples come to mind: (1) trade wars that affect all nations, (2) rising sea levels and their impact on the future of coastal cities like Singapore and Bangkok, and (3) lower birth rates in developed countries like Japan and Thailand, rates which have already begun to affect the supply of workers needed for the growing number of large-scale infrastructure projects in many Asian countries. Readers will know of a host of others.

In these reflections an argument will be made that Ministries of Education should give their curriculum specialists the task of examining their national curriculums to see whether their scope is sufficient to meet the needs of the present generation of students. Specifically, is there sufficient content which focuses on global issues and enormous number of human achievements which have helped millions of people in every part of the world, for example.

Global Education. What exactly is ‘global education’? It is education that has a focus beyond national borders. It is not just about the growing number of concerns about the environment. It is also about becoming knowledgeable about the cultures of all of the world’s regions. It is important that modern youth become acquainted with cultures other than their own, as well as the importance of understanding what is needed to assure sustainable futures.

Students need to understand the fundamental truth that *survival of one’s own culture ultimately requires the survival of neighbouring cultures*. It is this basic and undeniable fact that human societies must collaborate in order to survive. For a national curriculum, this may mean adding some new content – content which can lead students to a clear understanding that Planet Earth’s future is at stake.

Students need to realise that sustainable futures cannot be ordered on-line!. And, that the inevitabilities which the world’s scientists are predicting cannot be solved by pleading to their favourite deities, or, as some young people say ‘we can only hope for the best’. Global studies will include new knowledge about what is urgently needed to stave off some of today’s environmental concerns.

Human Achievements. Yes, global education is about knowing not only about the dangers facing the planet, and, the ways in which humans can help to slow down the environmental forces now plaguing many parts of the world. It is entirely likely that knowledge of the full range of what is happening to the planet may have escaped the attention of a majority of young people. Thus, a contemporary global curriculum should include a

detailed look at issues surrounding air quality, fresh water shortages, rising temperatures, and an increase in destructive storms, to name but a few of the many realities.

Global education programmes though would be remiss, if those programmes didn't provide students with a deep understanding of the ever increasing number of achievements which have improved the lives of countless people world-wide in the past 50-60 years. These could be called success stories of enormous proportions. However such stories tend to be buried in the daily newscasts Both TV and print media are quick to show so graphically the wild fires that are raging in some parts of the world, the extreme weather being experienced in other parts of the globe, or the pollution of oceans which is depleting fish stocks, for example.

A review of recent writings by noted scientists documents numerous breakthroughs and advances that have benefited countless people throughout the world. Modern-day youth should know about them and recognise what were the conditions which contributed to those breakthroughs.

Before proceeding, a cautionary note: it is beyond the scope of this Reflection to list all of the significant advances. Some of the truly great ones will necessarily be absent. Among them will be medical, technological and engineering breakthroughs, to name three. However, this present article will focus on three significant advances: reduction in violence and wars, lower levels of poverty, and declines in overpopulation. All three of these have contributed to multiple improvements in the quality of life of people in every part of the globe.

Personal violence and the implausibility of war. Only a few examples will be listed. Studies have shown that fewer people fear violence during the night time than in previous times; students no longer suffer physical abuse from their principals and teachers; fewer children will be sold into slavery. And, most women know that there is now a law in their country which forbids their husbands/boyfriends from beating them, and more governments are restricting the sale of guns.

Wars? In the year 2000 (some 19 years ago), wars caused 310,000 deaths world-wide; but in that same year, violent crimes, robberies and murders, caused 520,000 deaths. Wars in the past were over wealth (material things such as fields, cattle, slaves, and gold); looting was the objective. Wars today are seen to be evil and avoidable by most people. And, the leaders of those countries which have nuclear capability understand the consequences of using nuclear bombs, especially after seeing the complete destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Extreme poverty. Few readers of this journal will know from personal experience the meaning of 'extreme poverty. International relief organisations define this condition in various ways. Basically, families or individuals living in extreme poverty have no stable shelter from the elements; they're not sure from where will they get food each and every day; they exist without electricity and piped water. Typically, their children do not go to school – no money for uniforms or lunches.

In 1993, some 35% of the world's population lived in extreme poverty. However, in 2011 that figure was reduced to 14%. It's even lower now. In 1990, 12 million children died before age 5; by 2014 that figure was reduced to 5+ million.

A final example: in the 1980's only half of the girls in the developing world went to school. Why is that an important? A major of girls become mothers. They have never learned to read or write their own language. Thus, if their children were able to go to school they cannot ask their mother for help with their homework! However, by 2015, only 4 years ago, statistics show that some 80% of girls were able to go to school.

Overpopulation. International agencies report that as national prosperity and educational levels rise, birth rates decline. Recent data reveal that two Asian nations with large populations, Indonesia and Bangladesh are experiencing a serious decline in their birth rates. Indonesia, the 4th most populous nation in the world, now has a birth rate of 2.3 births per woman in the age category 15-39. Bangladesh, the 7th most populous nation, has now a birth rate of 2.2 per woman .

A word of explanation about what is 'overpopulation' is timely. A stable birth rate, also known as the 'replacement rate', is 2.2. If a nation wishes to stabilise the size of its population at the so-called replacement rate, 2.2 is the rate needed to merely maintain the size of its population. However, in a growing number of developed nations, the birth rate is dangerously low. Two examples: Thailand, 1.3, and Singapore, 1.2. Both countries have to rely on immigrant labour.

Global cooperation. In a global studies programme, these important advances will be an important part of the curriculum. Students will have the facts and gain practice in analysing the implications such realities have for the supply of labour, and for immigration. Allied with those is an understanding of what are the financial implications for health care services for the elderly in aging societies such as Japan and Thailand.

International cooperation is an important topic which is addressed in a global studies curriculum. Students will learn that the advances which have taken place thus far reflect *a deep commitment which nations and international organisation have toward enhancing the lives of all peoples, without regard to colour of their skin, religious beliefs, or their status as world citizens.*

Seeing others as members in a global family. Collaboration, though, requires a basic respect for people different from themselves. Working and associating alongside other cultures requires an understanding of the numerous perspectives and the histories of the world's people. It is important for today's students (and teachers) to become familiar with the diversity of cultures. And, at the same time, cultivate an attitude, not of superiority to those cultures, but of respect for the diversity of global citizens: black, brown, yellow, and white, as well as their different shades. Included in this list is a respect for, and an acceptance of the many variations of peoples' beliefs: Buddhism, Christian, Hinduism, Judaism, and Taoism – to name five.

On another positive note, attitudinal barriers between nations and people are showing signs of fading as more and more people are travelling to and experiencing the hospitality of their neighbours. This has been shown to be true in multicultural societies such as Canada, France, Singapore, the United Kingdom, to identify four. Now many schools provide global

learning experiences through exchanges and intercultural visits. Such experiences can help modern-day students to appreciate the larger world and to develop new and accepting perspectives on diversity.

However, for these changes to happen, students and their teachers need support from Ministries of Education through the provision of a truly 21st century national curriculum which includes global studies. With such support, teachers will be able to deliver the intellectual tools and skills students need to thrive personally and professionally in the decades ahead.

Concluding comments. The OECD (Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development) invites many nations to participate in its triennial testing programme known as PISA (Programme for International Student Achievement). It measures 15-year olds knowledge of reading, mathematics and science ‘to meet real-life challenges’. The scores can be used to gauge the adequacy of their educational systems. More than 70 nations participated in 2018.

In 2018, China’s and Singapore’s 15-year olds obtained the two highest test scores *in all three subject areas*. China’s score was clearly the highest. Other Asian countries which participated included Japan, South Korea and Thailand. Absent from the 2018 PISA test were countries such as Cambodia, India, Laos, and Myanmar. They chose not to participate.

Looking at Singapore, for example, a question emerges: who are their teachers? Readers may find the answers interesting. Singapore allows only Singaporeans to teach in their government schools. Foreign teachers cannot be hired. Okay. But, who, then, can be admitted into teacher preparation programmes? Answer: only Singaporeans with ‘A’ averages are considered. Thus the standard for admission into the teaching profession is not essentially different from that of those seeking admission to programmes which prepare other professionals such as architects, engineers, or health care professionals.

Can it be concluded that Singapore’s PISA success be attributed only to its teachers? Before trying to answer this question there is another fact which may help. It is related to the national curriculum.

Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) employs some of the world’s outstanding specialists in curriculum building and revisions. Their officers representing a broad range of specialties including syllabus design and revisions in the humanities, mathematics and the sciences. Additionally, there are full-time experts in the teaching and learning of Singapore’s four national languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

The above information offers some support for the conclusion that high level academic achievement of its 15-year olds result from two factors: high ability, well-trained teachers, and specially trained curriculum specialists at the Ministry of Education level.

Per student expenditures in Thailand. One final reflection. Although per student expenditures in Thailand are among the highest in the region, yet its 15-years olds have not fare well on the PISA triennial tests. Out of a field of more than 70 countries, Thai students in 2018 ranked #57 in mathematics, #53 in science, and #66 in reading (Thai language). For a developed nation this is difficult to explain.

Is the national curriculum of Thailand the reason why 15-year olds are disadvantaged when it comes to the PISA test? Is the basic training which teachers receive adequate? Or, are the standards which govern who can gain admission into the teaching profession low? A cursory search of recent literature shows a paucity of research work on this matter.

But wait. Actually, *Thai 15-year olds attending international schools and university-linked schools in Thailand were among the top scorers on the 2015 test.*

What is troubling with this finding, however, is the realisation that only a small percentage of Thai families have the financial means to gain admission into one of Thailand's 170-plus international schools, or one of the 57-plus university affiliated schools! In contrast, children in China and Singapore, are very fortunate. Their government schools are tuition-free to children, rich or poor.

Could this fact be one explanation for the overall low performance levels of Thai 15-year olds in mathematics? In science? And, in reading?

End of this reflection.

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