Global Citizenship in a Time of Standards-Based Assessment: US K-12 Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, through three research questions, US K-12 teachers' perceptions of global citizenship in a time of standards-based assessment, through the lens of Open Systems Theory. The study sought to capture teacher definitions and understandings of global citizenship from teacher interviews. The societal changes of the 21st Century have brought the importance of global competence and citizenship to the fore of discussions about contemporary education. Yet education policy continues to perpetuate standards-based accountability measures and high-stakes standardized testing for only a few subjects, which has resulted in the unintended consequence of de-emphasizing other subjects vital to preparing our youth for success in an increasingly global and rapidly changing world. Educators and policymakers need to rethink and redefine the future to include global competence and citizenship.

Keywords: global citizenship education, US education policy, K-12 public schools

1. Introduction

Friedman proclaimed the world is flat in 2005 and explained that countries, communities, and individuals must adapt to a new understanding of the world in which we live. Not only must we be prepared to compete in a global market, but citizens must shift their understanding of the disappearing boundaries both geographical and cultural. The societal changes of the 21st Century, including the rapid development of advanced technology and enhanced communication devices, channels, and distance capabilities bring the importance of global competence and citizenship to the fore of discussions about contemporary education. Ten years later, the United States continues to struggle to understand, value, and embrace a truly global perspective. In some instances progress is slowed because change takes time, and there's a learning curve and time-intensive process required to undertake such a seismic shift in worldview. In other cases, fear of global citizenship eclipsing nationalism slows ideological progress. Responding to the call to action for global citizenship education would require educators and policymakers to rethink the societal values surrounding education and create a school system that fully prepares our youth to become responsible citizens of a broader, global community. There is little disagreement that the educational community must prepare students for the future, but exactly what that future will hold, no one is sure.

Throughout history, education policy has reflected shared societal values. In 1990, Yale University President, Amy Gutmann identified two main values that have been at the center of education policy development throughout US history: individual freedom (the absence of barriers to individual thought and action) and civic virtue (the existence of individual responsibility to a broader community). The essential question to educators is "not whether to maximize freedom or to inculcate virtue, but how to combine freedom with virtue" (Gutmann, 1990, p. 11). Gutmann argued "education empowers citizens to make their own decisions on how to combine freedom with virtue [thereby directing] their individual and collective destinies" (Gutmann, 1990, p. 19). Twenty-five years later, our schools reflect a shift in the ordering of values guiding current education policy. Education as a process of civic and political socialization, based on the values of individual freedom and civic virtue, is all but missing from focus in schools today.

Instead, in public schools, standards-based accountability has become firmly entrenched in education policy, and it has propelled workforce preparation and postsecondary education to the forefront of the focus of our nation's educational system (NASBE Study Group, 2006). Preparing students for future career success in a competitive global job market is critical to our individual and collective destiny. However, it is equally imperative that we do not lose sight of the historical mission of schools: to prepare our nation's youth to assume the roles and responsibilities of citizenship in a rapidly changing world. Standards-based accountability and high-stakes standardized testing that has focused on math, science, and reading has resulted in the unintended consequence of de-emphasizing other subjects such as social studies, history, behavioral and social sciences, foreign language, music, and art. The subjects diminished in importance are fundamental to preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective citizenship in an increasingly interdependent global society.

Federal laws, regulations, and policies have shaped education at the state and local level. When it was announced in 2009, Race to the Top further reinforced the focus on test scores by detailing the standardized assessment of the Common Core State Standards for students, the results of which influence the performance-based evaluations for teachers and principals. To date, Federal lawmakers have been unable to reach agreement on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)/No Child Left behind (NCLB), which expired in 2007 (Cross, 2014). One explanation for the failure to pass ESEA is that we, as a nation lack a vision for a national education policy and are unclear of respective roles of the states and federal government to prepare our youth to take on roles as global citizens (Cross, 2014). This overdue dialogue must engage leaders at all levels, as well as students, teachers, and others about the value and priority that we, as a nation, place on education. Education must shift focus away from test scores and center on preparing our youth to assume the roles they will enter as citizens of our world. Before education policy can reinforce a global perspective, the education community must develop greater consensus of what global citizenship education means.

In a 2015 bibliography of theory and research on global citizenship education, Myers and DiCicco list just eight empirical research articles. Five of the studies focus on the US, but much more research and theory on global citizenship has come out of Canada (Shultz; Eidoo, Ingram, MacDonald, Nabavi, Pashby, & Stille; Guo) who appears to be just ahead of the US in making global citizenship a goal of K-12 education. Shultz found in 2007 that a review of a decade of work in Canada showed "little identifiable or attributable progress" in educating for global citizenship. She argues that educators have "vastly different ideas" about what global citizenship entails, often connecting it to traditional conceptions of citizenship (2007, p. 249). She recommends a clear understanding of global citizenship education must be reached in order to successfully address it in education policy. "Global citizenship" is difficult to operationalize in education literature because of multiple, often contested, definitions and perspectives (Tawil, 2013). Some US political rhetoric encourages global citizenship to ensure that the US can compete on a global scale and maintain leadership in the global economy, while much of the discussion of global citizenship in education theory focuses on connection and collaboration. In 2002, the American Council on Education announced, "Americans are connected with people the world over" (p.7). They also said Americans are not prepared to navigate the globalization of goods, people, ideas, finances, etc. because they do not have the appropriate cultural skills. While education for global citizenship can be a "complex and contested concept," (Shultz, 2007, p. 248) resources, such as the UN Millennium Development Goals, along with Oxfam, and organizations such as Skype in the Classroom provide an excellent framework from which teachers can work.

In 2015, how are US K-12 public school teachers thinking about global citizenship? This study sought to capture teacher definitions and understandings of global citizenship in their schools. The study discusses findings from teacher interviews in the context of current education policy. The study was guided by three questions:

1. How do US K-12 teachers define global citizenship and what or who influenced their understandings/attitudes?
2. How is global citizenship valued by students, teachers, and administrators?
3. What would motivate the integration of global citizenship into the curriculum?

2. Theoretical Framework

Open systems theory can be used to explain the environmental factors that affect the successful functioning of an organization. Each organization is unique because of the particular environment in which it operates (von Bertalanffy, 1950). The general environment includes four influences that come from the geographical location in which the organization operates.

They include cultural values, economic conditions, the legal/political environment, and the quality of education. Schools are one of America's oldest social institutions, and public school districts function as organizations with administrative leaders, roles, regulations, and policies guiding their mission, vision, and goals. Bastedo (2006) explains that open systems theory has dramatically changed how we view schools and is a necessary component in understanding organizational change. He states, "Contemporary studies of accountability movements, teacher professionalization, and instructional leadership all benefit from a strongly open systems approach to understanding environmental demands and the resulting adaptation in school policy and its implementation, or lack thereof" (Encyclopedia of Education Leadership and Administration, 2006). The environment of the organization impacts the experience and work of those in the organization. Open-systems Theory is an appropriate lens through which to view the way that US public schools are influenced by the various aspects of their environment, including the specific environmental factor of education policy and the cultural value of global citizenship and education.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2012) was used to explore the research questions of this study. Data were collected from interviews with US K-12 public school teachers and subjected to thematic analysis. The data reported here are part of a larger mixed methods study of US and International teachers' understandings of and experiences with integrating global citizenship in the curriculum. A snowball sampling technique was used to invite K-12 teachers in the United States and abroad to participate in a survey about global citizenship in the curriculum. Participants were asked to share contact information if they were willing to participate in an interview. Fifteen US teachers who responded were interviewed by phone in May 2015. Some effort was made to include a wide range of grade levels and localities in the US. After the interviews and data analysis, existing education policy was reviewed in light of the perceptions of the K-12 teachers. This paper illuminates relationships, both complementary and contradictory between teacher perspectives and current US education policy. In this study, 15 US K-12 teachers were interviewed. The teachers range from Kindergarten to high school, classroom teachers to library media specialists and technology coaches, and represent nine states and the District of Columbia. They include veteran teachers with more than 20 years in the classroom as well as new teachers with less than 5 years of experience. This sample is not representative of the entire country, but it provides a reasonably representational image of how US teachers are experiencing global citizenship across the county.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

State	Level/Subject	Years in Education	Influences	Integrate YES/NO
CO	Library-Media Specialist	12	NPR; reading	YES
AZ	5th grade Science, Social Studies	12	News; love of history	YES in SS
PA	3rd grade Math, Social Studies, Science,	18	Nothing –maybe my own reading	NO
PA	High School – Social Studies	9	Love of history, on my own	A little
PA	High School - English	24	My family upbringing; open-minded parents	NO
DC	Computer Technology	13	My upbringing; technology	Mostly digital safety
IA	5th grade all subjects	12	Meeting diverse people in college	YES SMT
KS	K-12 Instructional Coach	18	Skype in the Classroom	YES SMT
PA	Elementary curriculum coach	18	The service learning focus in church and college	YES SMT
ME	Kindergarten	22	Family	YES SMT
VA	1st grade all subjects	2	None	NO
KS	4th grade all subjects	4	Skype in the Classroom	YES SMT
VA	Middle School; SP ED - English (6, 7, 8)	8	Church	NO
NC	Middle School – 5th grade	13	None really	NO
WI	High School - music	15	Own exposure	YES

Note: SMT = Skype Master Teacher

4. Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine, through four research questions, teachers' perceptions of global citizenship Education in relationship to education policy. The findings are discussed according to each research question in turn.

Question 1: How do US K-12 teachers define global citizenship and what (or who) has influenced their understandings and attitudes?

To respond to part one of the questions, the US K-12 public school teachers offered multiple definitions for global citizenship. The definitions revealed four themes.

Multicultural awareness, appreciation, and respect. The most common definition described teaching students to be aware of people and events around the world. In most cases, that definition was expanded to include appreciating and respecting differences. Teachers described the importance of realizing the world is bigger than just the local community. Learning objectives described included exposing students to world events, world figures, and information about different cultures. Some teachers noted that students who live in environments lacking diversity are often sheltered and risk experiencing fear and exhibiting bias when they encounter different people later in life; therefore, they felt that students needed multicultural education. Three teachers stated that regardless of the grade level, teachers should try to teach lessons in a global context as much as possible. Further, their learning should be authentic and relevant for an increasingly global world.

Connecting to teachers and students around the world. A strong theme emerged among those teachers who said they do integrate global citizenship in their classrooms. Those who integrate global citizenship confidently identified connectedness and global competence as critical elements of the definition. The teachers who indicated that they actively integrated global citizenship were five Skype Master teachers who regularly connected their students with other students around the world and with experts on a variety of subjects using Skype. Several teachers shared projects in which US students in multiple locations connected with one another to learn about world water issues. The students connected with a school in Kenya, and this motivated the US students to work together to raise enough money to buy a water filter for every student in the Kenyan school. During a recent cholera outbreak, those students and their families did not have to worry about contaminated water for the first time in their lives. Connecting was critical, as was shared influence and education in this theme. Each of these teachers emphasized an exchange in which US students learn from students abroad and those students learn from US students. The teachers focused on connection and stressed that it cannot be a one-way conduit for information, education, and culture. The students in Kenya created artwork for a school in the US that now adorns the school hallways. Many stories of cultural exchanges were shared by teachers who felt connection was at the core of helping students to become global citizens. One teacher said, "I'll never teach another way" in reference to connecting her class to other classrooms around the world.

Digital Citizenship. The library media specialist and the computer science teacher linked digital media to global citizenship immediately. Two elementary school teachers echoed this theme. These educators cited a strong link between using the Internet and connecting globally. Therefore, for them, learning to conduct oneself appropriately and be respectful online, as well as being aware of one's digital identity and learning to evaluate credible sources are necessary skills for students who will become global citizens.

Impact and responsibility. One third of the teachers across grade levels described teaching students to consider the impact their actions have on the world and taking responsibility for what happens in the world in their definitions. Inherent in this theme was having empathy for others in the world and being responsible. Three of the 15 teachers (20%) were not confident that they could accurately define global citizenship. They cited lack of information and education on the topic, and through discussion with the researcher, generally agreed upon multicultural education as their definition. Each of these teachers regretted that they didn't know more about the topic.

Question 1a: What (or who) has influenced their understanding/attitudes [about global citizenship]?

When asked about their influences, education, training, and/or professional development regarding global citizenship, none of the 15 teachers had learned about global citizenship in their teacher preparation programs or in any college education courses. None had any formal training or any professional development on the topic.

Not a single teacher could cite any instruction or training to help them understand and implement global citizenship. The most common influence on their ideas about global citizenship came from the teachers' upbringing or family values. Some teachers described being raised by open-minded, tolerant parents, and a few cited a faith-based environment for encouraging them to engage in service learning and activities that promote peace, help others, and make the world a better place. Teachers also cited experiences interacting with students from around the world when they were in college and meeting international teachers at conferences. Teachers who felt confident in defining the term said they developed their definition and understanding by seeking it out. They primarily gained awareness through news outlets such as NPR, publications such as National Geographic, and books and articles that attracted their interest. For the Skype Master teachers an interest in technology met a desire to make a difference, and they have gained knowledge, skills, and understanding about the importance of connecting to the world via membership in the Skype in the Classroom organization.

Question 2: How is global citizenship valued by students, teachers, and administrators?

Teachers were asked if they believed global Citizenship was important to the students in their school, the other teachers, and to the administrators. Responses were divided into no and yes categories for each group. When teachers said that global citizenship was important to only 30% or less of the group, those responses was counted as No - Not Important.

2.1 Is Global Citizenship Important to Students?

Seven of 15 teachers (47%) indicated that global citizenship was not important to their students. Reasons included self-focus, only being aware of their own community, i.e. "living in a bubble," and lack of exposure. Eight of 15 teachers (53%) indicated that global citizenship is important to their students. However, most of them indicated that students care about global citizenship topics, such as poverty, water and sanitation, environmental sustainability, and issues affecting women and children after they are introduced to these concepts in school. Others indicated that their students are compassionate and caring, explaining that many are too young to articulate what global citizenship is, but they get excited about connecting to other parts of the world and participating in global citizenship projects.

2.2 Is Global Citizenship Important to Teachers?

Twelve of 15 teachers, (80%) indicated that global citizenship was not important to teachers at all or only to a small percentage. One third of the teachers substantiated this perception by indicating that the emphasis is on standards. "If it's not part of the common core standards, we don't need to do it," one teacher said. Another teacher echoed that message, "If it's not an emphasis of our Standards of Learning, it's not going to be addressed." "Teachers nowadays have to teach to the test," another teacher explained. Other reasons for not valuing global citizenship included living in a rural area lacking diversity, some teachers have not traveled--are not worldly, and it's only important or covered in social studies and history. Some teachers added that they believe if teachers had some exposure to the concept or some professional development, they would perceive it as important. While the teacher from Wisconsin only cited about 10% of the teachers in her school as active, she noted that there is a high level of awareness. She described "projects focused on addressing poverty, connecting to people all over the world, a realization that we still need to work on cultural empathy, and an increased focus on taking care of the Earth" emerging in her school district. Three of 15 (20%) of the teachers responded that global citizenship is important to teachers in their schools; one of them teaches in Colorado and one in Virginia. The third indicated that about 50% of the teachers in his Pennsylvania high school are aware and think it's important.

2.3 Is Global Citizenship Important to Administrators?

Twelve of 15 teachers (80%) said that global citizenship is not important to administrators. They say that administrators are focused on standards and the common core. Most teachers said it simply isn't a priority for administrators. A small segment of the 80% did add that the building principal has been supportive of classroom projects, and one offered the example of support for Model UN. Others added that while it's not a priority, some administrators may care about global citizenship, but it hasn't been discussed their schools. Teachers once again cited "test scores" as the priority for administration. Three teachers (20%) said that global citizenship is important to their administrators. One was a teacher in Washington, DC who said that the recent events in Baltimore have made citizenship and social justice "a big deal now." She added, "Everyone including administrators is interested in making a better living situation for everyone." The other educators who felt their administration recognized that this is an important topic teach in Colorado and Virginia.

Question 3: What would motivate the integration of global citizenship into the curriculum [at your school]?

Teachers were asked about potential motivators to integrate global citizenship into the curriculum. Their responses yielded four themes.

Teachers should be proactive. Many teachers suggested that educators should strive to provide learning in an applied way that is real and meaningful. Others said teachers just need to integrate it into the curriculum in spite of the standards. "It has to start somewhere," said one teacher. Many said they believe in the ripple effect that if a few teachers do it, other teachers will follow simply because of their enthusiasm. Several said a change like this must come from a "passionate educator" and others advocated for school-wide projects or incorporating global citizenship into graduation requirements. One teacher said, "We're not living life in little chunks; part of our job is to make connections." Another teacher said someone needs to show teachers how exciting and fulfilling teaching these concepts can be; she commented, "Some teachers get caught up in their own routine, are ingrained in their own world, and they forget that there should be more than running a pile of worksheets and teaching the same way we taught for the last hundred years." More than half of the teachers interviewed advocated for teacher sharing and professional development around global citizenship topics.

Change the hyper focus on test scores/administrator support. The second most common response was that a shift in focus would be required. This could only happen with support from administrators and less focus on test scores. Two teachers described what needs to happen as a paradigm shift and a change in school culture that would result in valuing rich, authentic, meaningful learning. One teacher said, "It would require a real shift in the priorities of the community and school administration."

Increased funding. Time and money are the answers everyone expects when asking what's required to make this change. Only three teachers mentioned funding directly. Two called for more funding for public schools in general, while one focused on better funding for the arts and music. One teacher said, "Public K-12 schools do whatever the state is willing to put money into like the STEM craze."

Time. Two teachers said integration might be successful if teachers were given time to plan and integrate new things. One of the teachers cited the pressure to meet the standards as the focus of most teachers' time. "Someone needs to show them they can meet the core standards and make connections and integrate global citizenship."

5. Discussion

US K-12 Public School Teachers' definitions of global citizenship focus on global awareness, connection, competence, and action. None of the teachers integrate global citizenship with a purposeful goal related to competition; rather their goals emphasize connection and collaboration. Global awareness reflects the most basic and common understanding of global citizenship, with connection that builds cultural agility and competence following closely. Teachers who integrate global citizenship in their classrooms include global action and social responsibility in their definitions. This illustrates incongruence between teachers' understandings and goals related to global citizenship and the rhetoric employed by policymakers and politicians, which focuses primarily on competition and a global economy. An illustration of this perspective is illustrated by a prominent quote in the center of the Whitehouse Education website, "To prepare Americans for the jobs of the future and help restore middle-class security, we have to out-educate the world and that starts with a strong school system" (whitehouse.gov, 2015). Teachers are not being educated on global citizenship, nor are they receiving training or professional development to support integrating it in their classrooms or across the curriculum. Pre-service teachers who will be under pressure to teach 21st century skills must be prepared to teach their subjects in a global context. Findings from this study indicate that education programs have not updated their curriculum to reflect our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

Teachers perceived that approximately half of their student's value global citizenship, but most of that value this concept after it's been introduced through connecting to a class in another part of the world or participating in a project. Teachers report that students are generally compassionate and caring, and therefore interested in being good citizens of the world. This indicates that students are ready to become aware of other cultures, diverse ways of being, and global issues. They are poised to become caring world citizens, guardians of the planet, future decision-makers, negotiators, and peacemakers. The education system need only catch up. Conversely, teachers report that high numbers, 80%, of teachers and administrators do not value or actively implement global citizenship.

A focus on standardized test scores overshadows any impetus to educate our students on bigger issues and prepare them to perform in an increasingly global world. Teachers perceive necessary changes if public K-12 schools are to integrate global citizenship and perceive the current education polices as inhibitors to that change. Many believe the change must be teacher-driven, that passionate educators need to focus on meaningful authentic learning in spite of the focus on test scores. They call for a paradigm shift, or a change in values. This will require support from the administrators, who take their cues from the education policies that place demands on them by administering report cards and tying accountability and teacher evaluation to test scores as we have done through NCLB and Race to the Top (Cross, 2014). Dedicated time for professional development and increased funding, especially for the arts and foreign language studies were cited by some teachers as well. It is interesting to note that shifting the emphasis or focus away from test scores exclusively far outweighed cries for time or money.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore, through three research questions, teachers' perceptions of global citizenship in a time of standards-based assessment, through the lens of Open Systems Theory. The most common definition of global citizenship from teachers in this study was facilitating multicultural awareness and empathy and making global connections. About one fourth of the teachers identified considering global impact and taking responsibility for their actions in their definitions, and taking global action is commonly associated with global citizenship education. The US K-12 public school teachers in this study provided a cumulative definition of global citizenship that includes making global connections, developing global competence, and inspiring global action. They indicated that the value of global citizenship to students was related to it being introduced in the classroom, but the value of global citizenship to teachers and administrators was directly influenced by an emphasis on the Common Core Standards and what is perceived as a hyper-focus on test scores and a focus on math and reading at the expense of other subjects. Open Systems Theory says organizational change cannot happen independent of the environment. If global citizenship is not a cultural value in the communities surrounding US schools and if education policy does not emphasize the importance of global awareness, competence, and action, the change necessary to enable the integration of global citizenship across the curriculum will not occur. Purposeful efforts to help promote global awareness, connection, competence, and action must become a priority. Education programs must introduce these concepts to pre-service teachers, and current teachers should have access to professional development as well as support from administration. Only concern from the community and reform of current education policy can create the paradigm shift needed to create an educational environment in which global citizenship is valued and therefore transmitted to students who will need to function effectively in a flat world.

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