Preparing Middle-Grades Students for the Global Age

Developing the skills and competencies needed for success in a global world should not be left to the last four years of a student’s education.

by Judith Conk

There’s no denying it—students in our schools today live in an increasingly global age. Communication advances continue to shrink the planet, and future employment opportunities may include making connections with people in different parts of the world. Today’s middle school students will find employment in jobs that have yet to be imagined, dealing with peers from increasingly diverse backgrounds, and having to solve problems that have global implications.

Educators are quickly recognizing that the skills and competencies necessary for success in this global landscape will be different from the ones that have been developed as part of the current school experience. Students who graduate without these competencies will have difficulty thriving in this new environment.

Recent attention to the need for change has been mainly focused at the secondary level. High schools across the country are offering more world languages (e.g., Mandarin Chinese), arranging for student travel abroad, and re-examining the curriculum to include an emphasis on world cultures, world geography, and developing multiple perspectives. They are providing opportunities to wrestle with authentic, complex problems through simulations and programs such as Model United Nations.

Global Education for the Middle Grades

Those of us who have focused on the education of young adolescents realize that the development of these skills and competencies should not be left to the last four years of a student’s K-12 educational career. Middle-grades students are a prime audience for this kind of learning since it feeds their ongoing curiosity and their desire to make sense of the world by giving them opportunities for exploration through a connected curriculum. However, a foundation for these competencies must be developed for the middle grades if we are to prepare these students to function effectively in a dramatically different world.

The Asia Society International Studies Schools Network has spent the past five years facing this challenge as it develops a network of schools, many of which include middle-grades programs, in cities across the United States. Through a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, these schools have adopted a mission to create globally competent and college-ready students. In embracing the middle grades, these internationally focused schools have combined the middle school wisdom found in Turning Points 2000 (Jackson & Davis, 2000) and This We Believe (National Middle School Association, 2003) with the structures, content, and processes that help middle-grades students begin to develop global competence.

Middle-grades programs that embrace this type of learning begin with a belief that global education is for all students—not just an elite few. High expectations provide the cornerstone, and these expectations include competence in literacy and mathematics as well as opening student thinking to multiple perspectives. The interdisciplinary nature that traditionally has been at the core of middle-grades work allows students to examine issues with global implications, such as world hunger, migration and immigration, and climate change, in a deep, interconnected way. This examination can involve core subjects that are enhanced by exploratory programs and extracurricular activities.

Through carefully guided service-learning projects, students begin to truly understand the phrase “think globally and act locally” as they make connections between themselves and their communities. Classroom work is engaging, with students learning the content and processes of the traditional subject areas while examining them through a global lens.
Students are given opportunities to work in large and small groups to learn the skills of solving real-world problems and articulating their ideas effectively.

In middle-grades classrooms where global skills are emphasized, students don’t just research particular countries; they also complete comprehensive area studies while learning the valuable skills of comparing and contrasting across regions. They read literature that allows them to see things through the eyes of people whose experience is different from their own. They have the opportunity to study a world language in a sequential, sustained manner that spans their middle-grades years, immersing them in the richness of the culture in which the language is spoken.

Teachers link their middle-grades units and lessons to a framework of international education. Such linkages allow them to continue to meet and exceed local, state, and national standards while creating experiences that help students learn about multiple perspectives on global issues and how these issues interact with one another. In the process, students develop an awareness of the world and its peoples, and the impact of human choices on the planet, and an understanding of and appreciation for the rich cultures of diverse people.

Technology is a useful tool in global learning programs. It serves as a vehicle for research and provides an opportunity for students to read English-language publications from around the world that often present issues differently than does our Western press. Video conferencing allows middle-grades students to communicate in real time with people throughout the world. Technology also allows students to collaborate with students in other nations on projects that are rich in academic opportunities.

**What Principals Can Do**

What can leaders of middle-grades instruction do to support this kind of teaching and learning? First, you can recognize and celebrate the opportunities that already exist within your programs. It might be a world language program that engages students in sequential learning over a period of years. It might be a language arts teacher who chooses literature that reflects perspectives from around the world. It might be an art teacher who infuses opportunities into the curriculum for students to learn about the art and culture of countries not familiar to them. These are foundations on which you can build.

Start small. Discuss opportunities with your teachers. Encourage them to examine their curricula through an international lens. Provide them with resources that will spark their thinking, and give them examples of what might be possible. Many resources can be found through the International Studies Schools Network at [www.asiasociety.org/education](http://www.asiasociety.org/education), including online lesson plans.

Encourage your teachers to connect with other teachers across the country who are pursuing the same goals. Seek opportunities to send teachers to regional and national conferences where they can network with colleagues and share best practices.

Finally, recognize that the global focus for education can no longer be an option for your middle-grades students. You owe it to them to support their acquisition of skills and competencies that will help them find success in an increasingly interconnected global world.

**References**


**Judith Conk** is director of academic affairs for the Asia Society International Studies Schools Network. Her e-mail address is consult4results@optonline.net.