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## INTRODUCTION

# FOSTERING GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP BY MEETING IN THE MIDDLE

*There could be no creativity without the curiosity that moves us and sets us patiently impatient before a world that we did not make, to add to it something of our own making.*

—Paulo Freire

I like to use the phrase *meeting in the middle* when talking about building equitable, reciprocal global partnerships. What does it look like to meet in the middle? The middle is not a destination, particularly when it comes to classroom-to-classroom partnerships that occur predominantly or entirely online. Teachers or students from two or more countries might travel physically to meet during a partnership, creating a more personal, face-to-face opportunity as a component of a long-term online experience. But meeting in the middle doesn't rely on physical travel; it's about students and the educators who guide them seeing others as the people they are, without judging or trying to change them. It's about meeting others *where* they are, figuratively speaking, and of crafting rich experiences that benefit all involved. It's about seeing other humans in all their wholeness, for their strengths, weaknesses, and goals, not just their circumstances. It's about seeing the essential humanity in others by acknowledging that every person has his or her own complex set of gifts, needs, and hopes. It's about celebrating all we have in common and learning from what we see differently. It's about learning *from* and *with* one another as real partners, not being observers who simply learn *about* each other. It's about trust, building relationships over time, and helping students see the world and their lives through someone else's eyes. And it's about equipping students to become the kinds of "patiently impatient" change makers Freire (1998) describes (p. 38).

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*Giving students the opportunity to engage directly with the world can be life changing, often providing a sense of purpose that motivates and grounds young people well into adulthood.*

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Global education has experienced a boom since the mid-1990s, when it quickly became popular in schools worldwide. Connected educators around the globe are using new technologies to engage with communities and individuals, but many of those connections are not as equitable as they could be, by which I mean that they are founded on a deeply ingrained deficit mindset most teachers don't realize they have, which usually includes inaccurate assumptions about intelligence and capacity. Those inaccuracies don't do justice to what every child in every context has to offer the conversation. In fact, many connections are based on exploitative foundations by well-intentioned teachers who use global education simply to observe or *solve for*, rather than immersing students in what they can *learn from* others. In my experience, this approach can unintentionally dehumanize partners. For example, I've seen many young people come away from global learning experiences with the impression that they've "saved" a community, instead of seeing that community as perfectly capable of saving itself. Giving students the opportunity to engage directly with the world can be life changing, often providing a sense of purpose that motivates and grounds young people well into adulthood. But if that sense of purpose is based on the belief that one country or cultural group can save or fix others, these experiences may be causing more harm than good. We need a global educational revolution that puts equity at its core—one in which partners on all sides know they have something to learn *and* to teach, and one in which all partners have a voice and collaborate on equal footing.

## Why I'm Here

As an elementary student at the School in Rose Valley in Pennsylvania (an early progressive model developed by Grace Rotzel) and a graduate of the Jefferson County Open School in Colorado (the United States' second public alternative school focusing on experiential education, founded by thought leader Arnie Langberg), I was lucky to be in globally connected, student-driven educational systems that fostered my passion and purpose. At these schools, thinking differently was a merit, and being willing to oppose authority for the sake of what Vladimir Nabokov (1980) calls "a too early moonbeam of some too early truth" was practically a graduation requirement (p. 372).

My educational experiences in the 1970s and 1980s included a great deal of outdoor and expeditionary learning, meaning that I learned by doing beyond the classroom walls. I experienced global learning and partnerships long before there were technologies to simplify those connections. My first global learning

expeditions were two work trips with Open School to Sonora, Mexico, in ninth and tenth grades, during which my peers and I helped rebuild rural schools in small mountain communities through a partnership between the United States and Mexico. We provided the labor force, and the Sonoran government identified the school most in need of repair and provided paid foremen and materials.

I was on desk duty both years, which meant stripping, repairing, and then repainting all the students' wooden desks. I remember working in the shade in a beautiful courtyard and seeing my first scorpion. I remember sitting in the local church during breaks, feeling a connection between Catholicism and Judaism that I'd never recognized before, a sort of universal spirituality I still connect with today. I remember that the local women cooked a huge traditional meal midweek for our celebration, and we played in the river with children and adults from the community. I remember my friend Shankaron, a refugee from Ethiopia, riding a horse for the first time—and her bellowing laugh as the horse forded the river with Shankaron up high. I remember tastes and smells, trying my very poor Spanish, and laughing with the children when I failed to communicate well. I remember a lot of laughter and feeling oddly connected to that place, which I can't even name or find on a map, and to the people who lived there. And I remember that I had a deep urge for more—more learning, more travel, more connecting across the differences that usually separate us.

I was able to get more; at the end of my junior year, in May of 1985, I left Colorado to spend six months living and working in Israel/Palestine and two months traveling through Europe to complete three of my passages for high school graduation. While the experience created a great deal of political and spiritual discord I still struggle with today, it was a real, raw, and hugely formative experience that still motivates everything I do. It took me many years to figure out how to turn a difficult experience into constructive action, but in the fall of 1995 I started teaching tenth-grade English in Costa Rica to the children of presidents, ministry officials, and the most powerful business leaders in the country. From that moment forward, my classroom became my platform and my platform was, in a nutshell, *global citizenship*—not just an understanding of the world but an urge to respond constructively and collaboratively to our shared challenges.

Early in my teaching career, in the late 1990s, the global education landscape changed significantly. In 1997, the Lincoln School where I taught in San José, Costa Rica, established one of the very first videoconferencing suites in a Central American school, marking the beginning of a new era in technology-enabled global education. Suddenly, students didn't need to go anywhere to make connections and have authentic conversations with people around the world. They could engage with the world from *inside* the classroom, and even though physical travel remained a

priority, teachers could create transformative experiences without spending money, fuel, or time in transit. Technology meant we didn't have to wait until students were old enough to travel, either; even our youngest students could make connections with real people anywhere on the planet, as long as their teachers had access. It has taken several decades for mobile technology to narrow the digital divide more significantly, but online connections are increasingly accessible to students from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Since the late 1990s, technology-enabled global education has blossomed into a powerful movement, particularly as technology access has become increasingly equitable—though we still have improvements to make. Nearly every teacher I

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*Nearly every teacher I know is anxious to find a global partner—a classroom his or her students can work with to foster intercultural skills and see the world through a different lens.*

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know is anxious to find a global partner—a classroom his or her students can work with to foster intercultural skills and see the world through a different lens. The tragedies of September 11, 2001, created new urgency around building better relationships between the United States and key regions of the world, and several public policy groups issued reports in the following years that “called for increased language study not only for its educational value but because having more citizens able to speak other languages is in the national interest” (Jenkins & Meyers, 2010, p. 8). Further, a series of reports from the Government Accountability Office documents how the lack of expertise in critical languages such as Arabic was affecting the United States’ diplomatic relations, capacity to gather intelligence, and ability

to further its policy objectives (Jenkins & Meyers, 2010). The ground was starting to shift, and the word *global*, which had seemed threatening to so many during the Cold War, was suddenly at the heart of educational dialogue.

## Why Foster Global Citizenship and Equity

Many scholars identify global citizenship and education as moral imperatives. While the term *citizenship* is a largely Western concept, related concepts of community engagement and responsibility are not. Harvard University’s Fernando M. Reimers (in his work with Vidur Chopra, Connie K. Chung, Julia Higdon, and E. B. O’Donnell, 2016), describes a global citizenship curricula as providing the following:

All students with effective opportunities to develop the dispositions, knowledge, and capabilities necessary to understand the world in which they live, to make sense of the way in which globalization shapes their lives, and to be good stewards of and contributors to the Sustainable Development Goals. (p. xx)



In an earlier work, Reimers (2009) emphasizes that schools must embrace the need to prepare students for the future, but he also points out candidly, that most schools don't prepare students for the future. There is no question that schools need to provide early opportunities for practice and participation, especially since "globalization impacts job prospects, health, physical security, public policy, communications, investment opportunities, immigration, and community relations" (Reimers, 2009, p. 4).

While developing a classroom partnership can be very labor intensive, it is one of the best ways to develop these understandings, knowledge, and skills. Global partnerships can take years of effort and false starts before reaching significant success, but they are among the most rewarding experiences you can create for students when you take the time to make them equitable and relevant. A powerful global partnership experience can change lives, career paths, and even our shared world in the long run. Whether you are talking about five-year-olds in San Francisco understanding and upholding children's rights through a partnership with students in Sierra Leone, a middle school class in Toronto sharing local mythology with students in rural Costa Rica, or high school students in Denver trying to understand the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through photography and poetry exchanges, directly connecting with real people in the world can help humanize your curriculum in powerful ways.

Direct connections with people are essential if you want to get students to a place of *authentic citizenship*, which is when students can realistically understand or empathize with others' needs because they have met and collaborated with them personally. Ian Davies's work (as cited in Evans, Hawes, Levere, Monette, & Mouftah, 2004) suggests that traditional attempts to transfer citizenship concepts such as tolerance, justice, and civic participation to students are nearly impossible using conventional teaching methods. Davies (as cited in Evans et al., 2004) finds that when students participate in inquiry with people worldwide, they are much more likely to become authentically engaged in *practicing citizenship*, both during and after the classroom experience. Julie Lindsay and Vicki A. Davis (2013) take this idea a step further, indicating that making personal connections with people around the world fosters open-mindedness and builds bridges. Pointing out that these connections are no longer optional for a better future, Lindsay and Davis (2013) write, "Students are the greatest textbook ever written for one another and will be travelers on this bridge" (p. 2).

Unfortunately, much of what global education has produced fosters inequitable thinking, particularly when the partnership projects originate in more developed

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countries (Kubik, 2012, 2016). Global citizenship is often translated in simplistic terms, becoming an endless fund-raising campaign in which students in the West do what's referred to as *saving the rest*. This is not meeting in the middle. This kind of global education does not foster true citizenship; instead, such experiences can dehumanize the people students seek to understand, turning them into empty vessels who can only survive with the outsiders' solutions, not whole people with multifaceted lives and their own ideas about how to improve their communities. At their worst, these kinds of global connections can exacerbate power imbalances and even cripple local industry.

Consider the example of a classroom in Canada partnered with a rural classroom in a coffee-producing region of Colombia. Students in Canada discover the deficits in their partner classroom, including a lack of school supplies, technologies, and flexible school furniture. Students in Canada run a fund-raiser for which they buy the cheapest Colombian coffee they can find, mark it up, and sell it locally to donate profits to their partners. It sounds reasonable enough, but the students' action actually exacerbates both the Colombian community's reliance on foreign aid and the root economic problems that are causing that reliance. If the students instead work toward fair market prices for Colombian coffee, or help their partner community connect with free trade networks to eliminate the middlemen who lower their profits, the impact would be more about empowering their partner's economic independence, thus improving their ability to solve their own problems. Making this shift means recognizing that their Colombian partners don't need handouts, but are complete, competent people who live in a complex system that doesn't consistently reward their hard work, and who can benefit from a collaboration built on mutual respect and recognition.

During one of the most powerful experiences I've had since leaving the classroom, I got to see five-year-olds at the Town School for Boys ([www.townschool.com](http://www.townschool.com)) in San Francisco, California, explore photos of children sent by their partner community in Sierra Leone through a see, think, wonder activity. Amid the usual *wonderings* (for example, I *wonder* what their houses look like; I *wonder* what their favorite animals are; I *wonder* what sports they like to play at recess) were a few difficult questions about how children in rural Sierra Leone live. When one little boy said, "I wonder if they're poor," the class erupted; the other boys insisted loudly that this was a rude question to ask. The teacher artfully unpacked the problem, asking the students why it felt rude. "What are we really trying to find out? How might we ask this question differently?" To my surprise, one five-year-old raised his hand tentatively and said, "I wonder if they have everything they need," and then another followed with, "And if not, I wonder *what* they need." This was a demonstration of deep empathy, a central tenet of global citizenship because of how deeply it motivates students to work toward a more fair and equitable world.