

EDUCATING STUDENTS TO IMPROVE THE WORLD

by Fernando M. Reimers

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Globally, we are at a crossroads as we face increasingly challenging risks and possible threats to our human existence—“environmental degradation, social exclusion, and the various forms of violence, within and across nations, that undermine the possibility that we can live in peace” (p. 129). As global citizens, we can only solve these challenges through collaboration, shared understanding, and dialogue. In his new book, *Educating Students to Improve the World*, Fernando M. Reimers, a longtime faculty member of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, highlights the importance of global education now more than ever as educators, researchers, and practitioners seek to prepare students to understand these challenges and equip them with the skills to address them.

As defined by Reimers, global education is both “practices guided by a set of purposes and approaches intentionally created to provide opportunities for students to develop global competencies, and the theories that explain and inform those practices and their effects” (p. 25). Against this backdrop of risk, Reimers addresses why attempts at global education have previously failed by examining the process of change in schools. To provide a comprehensive understanding of how students learn and how schools change, he presents a set of five “complementary perspectives” that “reflect the multidimensional nature of the education enterprise, addressing global education from a cultural, psychological, professional, institutional, and political perspective” (p. 8), positing that educators must take steps to coconstruct a curriculum that spans all subjects in school, rather than one that is “sprinkled” across them.

In eight succinct, well-written chapters, Reimers substantiates these perspectives and their connections to global education with empirical examples and experiences from his work and based on his collaboration with graduate students, further demonstrating the importance of bridging research and practice. He argues that scholars and academics have dedicated too much time to defining global education and too little providing critical details on instruction and implementation of its practice. Delving into social, cultural, and historical contexts, Reimers explores the emergence of global education as a concept and, more importantly, as a vehicle to equip students with twenty-first-century skills. He cites three imperatives for global education today: first and foremost, it must teach students about the risks we currently face and equip them with the skills to address them; second, it must deepen students’ understanding of the risks so that they can think critically about complex solutions to these risks; and third, it must convey that these risks require global cooperation and people equipped to work collaboratively. Central to these imperatives is an understanding that global education should permeate all aspects of education. Reimers demonstrates that it is a “pervasive” misunderstanding

that global education “‘belongs’ in social studies . . . and can hamper efforts for interdisciplinary collaboration” (p. 63). Instead, he argues, global education should be seen as a set of skills that students learn across disciplines, preparing them to develop global competencies as well as laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

At the center of this perspective on educational change is the teacher’s role in implementing global education and participating in developing a curriculum. Reimers appropriately acknowledges that “curriculum is not self-executing” (p. 65) and that this work cannot be done without the help of teachers. Drawing on a range of studies, including Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) data collected from teachers, he explains how teachers are often confused when it comes to teaching global education because academia has focused on defining global education rather than “discerning how to teach it” (p. 107) or because global education is not included in local standards and therefore teachers are unable to allocate class time to teaching global competencies. Reimers offers that professional development has the potential both to equip teachers with the expert knowledge they need to teach global education and to serve as a space for collaboration across disciplines.

Importantly, Reimers draws on a 350-unit global education curriculum he designed with graduate students and a set of different curriculum prototypes and lesson plans to present practical examples schools and teachers might adopt in an effort to teach global education. These protocols include deliberate direction on how to make a school-wide shift towards teaching global education across the curriculum that aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These concrete examples woven throughout the text, in addition to Reimers’s personal reflections, render this text useful to the practitioner trying to incorporate global education into their school.

Missing, however, is an examination of the role of colonialism and power in global education. Given global education’s goal of fostering understanding between individuals in an increasingly interdependent world, Reimer’s discussion of global education should also address how power and resources are unequally distributed. Countries afflicted with poverty and war do not and cannot approach global education in the same way as higher-resourced, more developed countries. Also, in the sections on psychological, professional, and institutional perspectives, Reimers stresses the importance of global education in “help[ing] students value differences across multiple lines of identity, such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and nationality” (p. 60). He posits that culturally diverse classrooms are central to creating rich discussions in global education curricula. Yet, although he provides a brief discussion of resources that might serve to help students value difference, he falls short of situating global education in the more macro-level histories and harms of colonialism, including wars and the depletion of natural resources, that still plague many

developing countries. And how might global education incorporate informal, non-Western, or Indigenous educational practices? Acknowledgment of these legacies is critical to having authentic conversation around diversity, history, and difference. Similarly, when Reimers discusses the resources necessary to effectively teach global education—“high-quality resources, textbooks, and online resources that engage students in structured opportunities to develop skills” (p.104)—we are left to wonder who can engage with global education. How do countries that are low resourced still teach global education to their students if they are without the resources to do so? While Reimers masterfully bridges research and practice, questions around power, resources, and how colonialism’s roots are still present in many countries today are not fully addressed.

Despite these shortcomings, *Educating Students to Improve the World* is a critical read for educators, researchers, and practitioners interested in global education or global citizenship. Rather than simply providing us with a definition of global education, Reimers provides important empirical evidence and examples that might serve as models for educators looking to incorporate, transform, or redesign our curricula to further incorporate global competencies and twenty-first-century skills into student’s learning. As trends toward nationalism continue to grip countries worldwide, it is increasingly critical that we, as a global community, think about how we are developing a shared vision and future by equipping students with the skills, tools, and language they will need to improve the world.

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References

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