Why Teach About Globalization?

Pre-service Teachers’ Perceptions of the Benefits and Challenges of Teaching Globalization Issues

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Globalization enables a better understanding of the modern world and inspires responsible actions that will change our future for the better. Even though the term globalization was introduced more than twenty years ago, little research has been directed towards the preparation of teachers for introducing this controversial, present-day phenomenon at the secondary school level. This paper is based on a qualitative study developed by the researchers to examine pre-service Social Studies teachers’ perceptions of the main benefits and challenges of teaching globalization and related global issues. The findings provide valuable insights into the importance of teaching controversial topics as well as what it means to teach globalization and global issues in the rapidly changing world.

Key words: controversial topics, global issues, globalization, pre-service teachers, qualitative inquiry, social studies curriculum

Introduction

The history of human civilization has entered a new era. Today, neither nation nor individual remains untouched by globalization. The speed and range of changes around us become more and more pronounced as globalization advances. We cannot eliminate changes from our life; however, we can learn to grow and advance together with them. These changes can allow learners to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes with which to face the challenges of the future.

Tony F. Kirkwood (2001) describes globally educated people as “those who possess high-tech skills, broad interdisciplinary knowledge about the contemporary world, and adaptability, flexibility, and world-mindedness to participate effectively in the globalized world” (p.16). Having this description in mind, the main challenge facing educators in the 21st century, is finding the strategies and approaches that meet the requirements of the future. As Stephanie Marshall states: “Adding wings to caterpillars does not create butterflies --- it creates awkward and dysfunctional caterpillars. Butterflies are created through transformation” (1996, p. 5). It is clear that the transformation of the students cannot be achieved without the transformation of the teachers. The evaluation of the pre-service teachers’ perspectives, addressing their concerns, and suggesting possible approaches to teaching globalization and global issues is, therefore, critically important. The purpose of this study was to examine pre-service social studies teachers’ perceptions of the main benefits and challenges of teaching globalization and global issues.
Teaching about Globalization

Few subjects are more important for understanding our contemporary world, and few are more contested and more in need of careful empirical investigation than globalization. According to German historians Jurgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson (2005), the word *globalization* refers to a series of related processes reaching back far before modern times. Osterhammel and Petersson (2005) suggest that the early history of what is known today as globalization probably started with European overseas expansion of the 16th century. Large-scale colonization, state-building in the New World, and expansion of trade by land and by sea among different countries, definitely stimulated the integration of world markets for goods, capital, and labor that occurred by the middle of the 19th century. Since that time, the evolution and impact of the world economy on the individual countries and societies has been one of the main factors promoting links across the planet.

Although globalization is not a new phenomenon, the discourse of globalization as a popular concept has emerged in the last two decades. The economist Theodor Levitt (cited in Spring, 2008) is credited for coining the term *globalization* in 1985 to describe the changes in global economics. Since the 1990s, the term, previously used by a few economists, has been integrated into vocabularies of many languages and various scholarly fields to explain today's world. In spite of the incredible popularity of the term, its clarity and definition continue to be matters of constant debates. In many of the proposed definitions of *globalization* (Codrington, 2003; Ghorayashi, 2004; Osterhammel & Petersson, 2005; Robertson, 1992; Scholte, 2002; Soubbotina, 2000; Wiest, 2004), the most common factors affecting the controversial nature of globalization are expansion, concentration, and acceleration of worldwide relations.

Globalization enthusiasts and opponents perceive these common factors in different ways. While pro-globalization authors welcome it as the beginning of a new era of prosperity and growth, their opponents see globalization as the emergence of global domination by big businesses at the expense of labor rights, democracy, poor countries, minorities, and the global ecology.

Even though the term *globalization* was introduced more than 20 years ago (Stromquist, 2002), little research has been directed towards the preparation of teachers for introducing this controversial present-day phenomenon. Kathy Hytten and Silvia Cristina Bettez (2008) reflect on their experience, and provide the following benefits of teaching about global issues:

1. Teaching about the dynamics of globalization is an important aspect of teaching for critical awareness and social justice.
2. Globalization serves as an umbrella-term that allows students to have a better understanding of many current social, political, economic, cultural, and educational issues.
3. Discussion of globalization issues may provide teachers with many opportunities to disrupt students’ commonsense understandings, help them think systemically, and create new habits of learning and engaging the world.
4. Learning about globalization can help students view local issues differently and provide them with a better understanding of the circumstances within which they live.

“Responses of the participants to survey and focus group questions revealed different levels of understanding of the term globalization, its specifics and controversies.”
Despite numerous benefits, teaching about globalization presents many tensions and challenges. The most commonly reported challenges are:

1. Students often feel overwhelmed learning about the controversial and disruptive issues.
2. Students’ approach to global issues may rapidly change from neutral and uncritical to explicitly critical and leftist, leading them to both cognitive and emotional conflicts.
3. Questioning the dominant cultural values, teachers and students may experience the feelings of guilt, hopelessness, and unproductive anger. These emotional responses may cause considerable barriers to productive analysis and positive actions.
4. Some educators resist discomfort, complexity and uncertainty related to globalization issues and prefer teaching more neutral topics (Hyttén & Bettez, 2008).

According to many researchers (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000; Long & Long, 1975; Selby, 2004), teachers need to stir student interest and emotional involvement by discussing controversial issues. Constructive controversy is:

...an instructional procedure that combines cooperative learning (in which students work together in small groups to develop a report on an assigned topic, for example) with structured intellectual conflict (in which students argue the pro and con positions on an issue in order to stimulate problem-solving and reasoned judgment) (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000, p.28).

The discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions, called by Aristotle *deliberate discourse*, is one way to achieve novel solutions and resolve the controversy.

For the past 30 years, scholars have been examining the effects of controversial issues discussion through empirical research. This line of inquiry was inspired by John J. Patrick’s review of political socialization research, in which he noted that educational programs might have a greater impact on the development of democratic attitudes “if they were conducted in an atmosphere more conducive to inquiry and open-mindedness” (Patrick, 1967, p. 71). Since then, many reasons have been given by scholars and practitioners to support the use of controversial issues discussions in the classrooms. Three of the most prevalent include the following: preparing students for their roles as citizens in a pluralistic democracy, developing critical thinking skills, and improving interpersonal skills (Newmann, 1989; Pike & Selby, 1988; Pike & Selby 1999, Pike & Selby, 2000; Wink, 2004).

**Methodology and Research Design**

The methodology for this inquiry involved an exploration of pre-service teachers’ perceptions of addressing globalization and global issues. Two qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis were used: a) an individual, written questionnaire and b) a focus group interview. Using multiple research methods can operate to enrich the data and to enhance validity (Reinharz, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). According to David Morgan (1996), the reasons for combining individual and group interviews typically point to the greater depth of the former and the greater breadth of the latter.
**Data Collection and Analysis**

A written questionnaire (Barchuk, 2009) was used with forty, pre-service teachers who were willing to participate in the research study. The questionnaires were coded and analyzed using an inductive approach (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Sim, 1998), to identify shared experiences, repetitive themes, and to capture pre-service teachers’ present understanding, if any, of globalization and related issues. This information was used to foster discussion during the focus group (see Appendix A: Focus Group Questions Guide). The focus group discussion was audio recorded then transcribed. A thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts was conducted following the same processes as the written questionnaire.

**Participants**

The participants in the study were first year, secondary social studies pre-service teachers enrolled in a two-year Bachelor of Education program in eastern Canada. Of these respondents 12 (30%) are men and 28 (70%) are women. Most of the participants (n = 33 or 82.5%) fall under the category less than 30 years old. The participants came to the social studies methods course from different backgrounds, having majors in History (n= 18 or 45%), English (n= 8 or 20%), Sociology (n= 4 or 10%), Psychology (n= 3 or 7.5%), Art (n = 3 or 7.5%), Geography (n = 2 or 5%), Economy (n = 1 or 2.5%), and Math (n = 1 or 2.5%). In spite of a very enthusiastic participation in the written questionnaire component of the study by these students, which took place in the Social Studies Methods class, 11 participants signed up for the focus group but only six were able to attend the discussion, which took place at the university recording studio. Because the participants represent different perspectives, their views are not homogeneous, and benefit the study by contributing to the holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon.

**Importance of Teaching about Globalization and Global Issues**

Responses of the participants to the survey and the focus group questions revealed different levels of understanding of the term globalization, its specifics and controversies. As one of the participants commented, “My generation has grown up in a global world”. Some of the definitions of the term globalization suggested by the questionnaire respondents were:

- **Globalization is the erasing of lines, boundaries, tariffs, nationalism, and, to an extent, autonomy in terms of relations between nations in the name of more efficient production, consumption, and overall capitalistic values.**

- **Globalization is the epitome of the statement ‘It’s a small world after all’ in which all countries are interconnected through the involvement with outsourcing for products and services, importations, and exploitation of less powerful countries.**

- **Globalization to me is a result of Western beliefs, practices, lifestyles, that have become globalized in part because of the global market and increased access to technology/media/communication.**

- **Globalization is the integration of economies, cultures, and society on a global scale.**

- **Globalization is a continuous creation of a world community and culture. It can have a positive and negative impact and is often facilitated through technology.**

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... it [globalization] may create global harmony, but may risk a country’s sovereignty.

In spite of differences in perspectives, most of the participants showed a clear understanding of the complex nature of the globalization process as well as of its’ positive and negative aspects. The respondents constantly referred to integration, one of the most important features of globalization (Chossudovsky, 1998; Fulford, 2004; Ghorayashi, 2004; Osterhammel & Petersson, 2005; Robertson, 1992; Wiest, 2004). The world has become an increasingly interwoven place, and the pre-service social studies teachers seem to be aware that they live in the “global web” (Friedman, 2000, p. 8).

All of the 40 pre-service social studies teachers agreed that globalization had become an important part of our life and thus, needs to be reflected in school curricula. Even though participants understood possible challenges of teaching global issues, they all agreed that controversial global issues need to be taught at school. This is a telling statistic, indicating that participants regard teaching current global issues as important and relevant. In the words of the participants of the focus group:

What is more relevant than what’s going on right now? These kids are going to go on to university and start careers, and they’re going to be dealing with the issues that are happening now. So, we should give them a better sense of the world that they’re going to be moving into.

You need to give them the tools to deal with the world we’re dealing with, because they may have to move to Alberta, or China, or Korea, or somewhere to pursue their career.

The importance given to the topics, was seen as due to present professional considerations, a desire to educate competitive and responsible future citizens, and to frustrating past school experiences of the participants. According to the pre-service teachers, it was quite possible to finish high school and not have a course encouraging the knowledge and understanding of current global issues as well as the ability to deal with controversial topics. One participant commented:

In high school, I wasn’t really aware of globalization because it wasn’t a discussed topic, so, I missed out on a lot of really relevant issues that were current, and were applicable for me. And, I didn’t start developing critical thinking and strong stances on things until university…. How do we expect to see any changes take place in the world if our children aren’t educated on what’s happening to them?

It was not surprising that, when given a choice to design their own social studies curriculum, these pre-service teachers rated the main criteria for topic selection in the following way:

- Relevance to students’ cultural and social experiences (24.44%)
- Helping students understand current global topics (22.22%)
- Interesting for students (15.6%)
- Helping students to become thoughtful and educated global citizens (10%)
- Developing critical thinking skills (10%)

Although, 24 (60%) participants agreed that studying global issues can be overwhelming for the students, they also stated that such issues need to be addressed. In the words of one of the focus group participants:
You can’t always shelter either your children or your nation or your society from what’s going on outside of it, especially in this context that we’re talking about, in the globalization. It’s just not feasible; you can’t throw up walls anymore. You can try, but good luck.

Benefits of Teaching about Globalization and Global Issues

The data obtained through the questionnaires and the focus group interviews shows that these pre-service social studies teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and role of teaching controversial global issues were largely consistent with existing scholarly opinion on the topic (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, Long and Long, 1974; 2000; Selby, 2004). All of the participants agreed that although discussing global issues might create conflicts of opinions in the classroom and will demand a lot of work on the teachers’ part to structure, monitor, and assess, the benefits of introducing such topics are well worth it. The main reasons for teaching controversial global issues were expressed as fostering understanding of current world processes, preparing responsible and active future citizens, and developing and improving the critical thinking skills of the students. Many respondents viewed these reasons as overlapping and interconnected goals of teaching rather than separate skills and understandings. Globalization and global issues were viewed as “a great way to approach critical thinking and… impact the learners that are going to be the society of tomorrow” (participant, focus group). Many pre-service teachers referred to their own high school and early university experiences when as one said, “We hadn’t really come to the point where we’d take a stance on something and argue a point” and how some students were struggling with essays and assignments that demanded critical analysis. The participants agreed that teachers have a responsibility to lessen students’ frustration related to critical analysis and to help students acquire necessary skills and understanding to meet future academic and working requirements.

Given a choice of identifying the top ten global issues, the pre-service Social Studies teachers identified the following as the most important, stimulating, and relevant issues:

1. Environmental issues (15/92 responses, 16.3%)
2. Social issues (13/92 responses, 14.1%)
3. Economic issues (12/92 responses, 13.0%)
4. Human rights issues (11/92 responses, 11.9%)
5. Resources management (11/92 responses, 11.9%)
6. Power issues (9/92 responses, 9.8%)
7. Globalization (9/92 responses, 9.8%)
8. Peace (7/92 responses, 7.6%)
9. Cultural/religious issues (5/92 responses, 5.4%)
10. Technology (5/92 responses, 5.4%)

In his study of global education around the world, Kenneth A. Tye (1999) saw “a very hopeful sign” in teachers’ growing interest in and recognition of the importance of global education content. Comparing the responses of the participants in Tye’s study and the pre-service Social Studies teachers in the present study, indicates that among this group of participants, an interest in global issues is still strong and that some issues continue to remain as important as they were a decade ago.

“The world has become an increasingly interwoven place, and the pre-service Social Studies teachers seem to be aware that they live in the “global web” (Friedman, 2000).”
Challenges of Preparing for and Teaching about Globalization and Global Issues

Although including constructive controversy in a lesson can motivate students and inspire them to learn beyond the demands of the intended curriculum, many teachers avoid creating controversies. Some teachers fear losing control of the classroom, and thus losing their own sense of being a good instructor. Others are concerned about their lack of training in monitoring and evaluating academic controversies. Still others may avoid the approach because the student involvement and interest generated can result in noisy and spontaneous discussions contrasting with the “traditional” view that a good teacher has a well-ordered and quiet class (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000).

Two key challenges in preparing for, and teaching about global issues identified by the pre-service social studies teachers in the questionnaires were: a) awareness of possible bias/covering all perspectives objectively; and b) lack of knowledge and understanding of an issue.

Awareness of Personal Bias

Objectivity when presenting controversial material was identified by the majority of these pre-service social studies teachers as the most challenging part of preparing for and teaching about globalization and global issues. Most participants viewed teachers’ personal biases as one of the biggest impediments to objectivity. The participants often referred to the necessity of constantly questioning their personal objectivity on the issue or topic and making an effort for not transmitting their bias to the students:

I think you also need to be aware of your own bias, and where you stand on issues so that you’re not indirectly passing them onto your students. ... you have to make sure that you present two sides of the story, be as objective as possible so you’re not presenting your bias.

According to the questionnaire, 90% of the respondents believe that teachers should not express their position while teaching a controversial global issue. The focus group participants recognized the strong necessity of leading and monitoring the discussion of the controversial topic by a teacher to avoid potentially harmful or offensive situations. They also agreed that there are some situations when it might be beneficial for the students to be aware of a teacher’s perspective on the issue or his or her personal understanding of it.

These participants expressed the desire to be objective and understand their biases through proper theoretical and methodological preparation; however, they also realized that teachers’ objectivity might be influenced and challenged by the perspective of the community (for example, parents, guardians, family members), authorities (school administration, school board, government officials), and even general society on the issue. These opinions were shared by many questionnaire respondents, who considered “unsupportive teaching staff, administration” and “parental sensitivity/resistance” as very important challenges that might influence the intentions of a teacher. Participants commented:

I think it gets difficult in what maybe the Canadian government expects you to promote within the classroom because of our own culture in Canada. We need to be aware of the culture that we come from, for the most part, accepts globalization and the open market and promotes them, and maybe in some circumstances-
stances we’re kind of disregarding or turning a blind eye to those things. We need to make sure students are aware that maybe the policies that we currently go by can be negatively affecting ourselves, as well as others without being too concerned about government reaction.

It’s harder to probably teach Canadian content …we have to teach in a balanced way. You can do that by saying, here’s the Canadian perspective and then here’s how Canada fits into the world. You can’t just talk about your own nation.

Taking into account all perspectives on issues is a vital practical necessity for both students and teachers of increasingly diverse school populations in Canada. Addressing the needs of their communities has become an important responsibility for many teachers. Challenges are the inevitable part of the above-mentioned responsibility. Many participants in this study fear they will not be competent, experienced, and knowledgeable enough to be able to teach a controversial global topic in a balanced, non-offensive, and objective way.

Lack of Knowledge and Understanding of Global Issues

The second most important challenge identified in the questionnaire responses was lack of knowledge and understanding of global issues. Most of the participants of the focus group stated that even if they did not feel fully knowledgeable and/or completely prepared pedagogically for addressing global issues in practice, they were willing to try. They considered the topics essential and unavoidable in the modern school. Most participants stated that they would feel comfortable discussing global topics with the students, and would not fear possible debates and controversies. One participant concluded:

We’ve all kind of grown up in a global world, and we’ve all grown up being exposed to other cultures and people from other cultures. So there’s no fear there, which maybe would have been there fifty years ago. You know, we’re not afraid of other people or other cultures. We don’t know, but we’re not going to avoid asking or we’re not going to avoid approaching the subject.

Although participants in neither the questionnaire nor the focus group denied the importance of global issues, not all of them felt comfortable with, and prepared to, address controversial issues. Discussing the issue of foreign labor in the Canadian agricultural sector as an example of a possible controversial topic, one of the participants said:

It’s such a complex issue and I would be so afraid to misrepresent individuals in that conversation. I agree that just because I don’t feel comfortable doesn’t mean I shouldn’t do it. But, I would feel a little bit uncomfortable tackling that issue, or issues similar to that because of the complexity. I would still try.

The question of how to address possible challenges, remove fears and frustration, and encourage pre-service teachers to include global issues in their future practice emerged during the focus group discussion as a logical continuation of the participants’ preparedness discussion. It became clear that the number of these pre-service teachers willing to undertake the challenge of teaching controversial global issues would likely be significantly greater if they were provided with more knowledge about possible pedagogical approaches and resources. Two important means of helping pre-service social studies teachers address
these challenges suggested by the participants were: providing practical strategies and increasing teachers’ cultural competence. Practical strategies, recommendations, and resources were named as the most highly anticipated and appreciated part of any course of the Bachelor of Education program. According to focus group participants, practical methodological workshops need to be added to their program:

Workshops that are conducted by teachers that are successfully teaching global studies would be great! I mean, we can all read a theory... but it’s another thing to apply it.

Talking about the theories is definitely useful because it gets your internal dialogue going, and it gets you going out and doing more research, so you have knowledge to bring to the table when you do teach it. But, to hear of methods, it kind of adds some confidence. Because you might not do exactly what they do, but it gives you a building block.

Increasing cultural competence of the pre-service social studies teachers was viewed as a second major means of addressing possible fears and encouraging further interest in global perspectives. As one participant stated:

We need actual classes or workshops on cultural competence to learn about different cultures more in-depth. You hear different things but you don’t actually know the whole body. ... I think if we have more of a full education about different cultures, it might make us more prepared to deal with global issues.

Reflections and Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this study was to identify pre-service Social Studies teachers’ perceptions of the main benefits and challenges of teaching globalization and globalization related topics. The purpose of the study was to identify theoretical and practical considerations, suggestions, and strategies to help keep pace with our rapidly changing world. Because of the limited sample and methodologies used, this study provides an initial step towards fostering further academic research on perceptions of globalization and on pedagogies to teach it that address pre-service teachers’ concerns.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the data gained did not “represent a wider population of people, events or situations in a strict probabilistic sense” (Cuba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Sim, 1998, p. 350), and it was not possible to make empirical generalizations as may be possible for quantitative studies. The initial belief that the data gained from this research would allow hypotheses which “possess a sufficient degree of generality or universality to allow their projection to other contexts or situations which are comparable to that of the original study” (Sharp, 1998, p. 787).

This qualitative study has only begun to scratch the surface of what it means to teach globalization and global issues in the rapidly changing global world. Common themes and practices, however, emerged as well as additional questions for future research. Among the most interesting themes and questions that emerged during the study that could be explored more fully in future research are:

“Pre-service teachers’ voices can be a valuable source of useful knowledge, as they are the teachers of future generations.”
• The influence of school staff and school authorities on individual teaching style;
• The impediments and limits of the personal objectivity of a teacher;
• The role of mass media on the development of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the world;
• The ways of developing and improving critical thinking and critical evaluating skills of teachers and students;
• Possible ways of increasing the cultural competence of the pre-service social studies teachers.

It would be interesting to explore further the research questions of this study by comparing and contrasting the results of the data obtained from pre-service social studies teachers at different preparation levels and from different institutions.

Conclusions

Pre-service teachers’ voices can be a valuable source of useful knowledge, as they are the teachers of future generations. The participants indicated their understandings of the inevitability of ongoing knowledge changes. They acknowledged that being a social studies teacher demands open-mindedness and a desire to continue the learning process. Therefore, advanced research, critical thinking, and critical evaluating skills were considered by the participants as determining factors of pre-service teachers’ preparedness for teaching about globalization and global issues. The enthusiasm with which the participants discussed globalization, global issues, and the practical implementations for teaching practices showed a great deal of interest on their part, in addressing these topics in a balanced, effective, and responsible way. These pre-service teachers demonstrated the need for future re-search on issues relating to globalization and have given us hope for the future, as they seem determined to continue the process of finding new ways to address issues related to globalization.

References

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