

# Teachers as agents of social change

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## **Abstract**

Teachers are seen as key actors of change within programmes and projects on global learning. But all too often they are regarded in an instrumental way or as promoters of some form of ideal global teacher. Evidence from the UK and elsewhere suggests that if a pedagogical approach is taken to the role of teachers within the process of learning, then three distinct locations of teachers as change agents can be identified. These are as change agents within the classroom, within the wider school, and within society as a whole.

**Keywords:** global learning, critical thinking, transformative learning, social justice

## **Introduction**

In an interview on the role of teaching (2013), Professor Arnetha Ball from Stanford University suggests that teachers should see themselves as agents rather than as objects of change.

In many societies around the world, teachers are looked upon as the individuals who can help to bring about positive changes in the lives of people. They are seen as natural leaders who can give advice on various affairs in the community. For example, in many countries in the Global South teachers are seen as key players in securing change within communities (Freire, 2005; Tikly and Barret, 2013).

Global learning and its related concepts of global education, global citizenship, education for sustainable development, and development education are all built on the assumption that learning is closely linked to personal and social change (see Bourn, 2015; Kirkwood-Tucker, 2009; McCloskey, 2014). Within these discourses and practices, the role of the teacher as the agent for promoting these changes is often assumed but what it means is rarely discussed.

Projects led by non-governmental organizations, for example, often tend to assume that the learners will want to change the world merely as a result of learning about global poverty. Funders of development education, usually ministries or bodies responsible for aid budgets, see their role as funding projects that lead not only to increased understanding of global development issues, but also to greater public engagement in support of development. Teachers are usually seen as the vehicles through which this transmission and engagement in learning for global social change takes place.

This paper aims to address the role of teachers within the theories and practices around global learning and in particular their role as agents for change. The paper will first of all review how and in what ways the concept of change is reflected within global learning. It will then discuss the role of teachers within societies and education more widely before directly relating this to global learning. It will also review the relationship of these debates to a range of theoretical influences, including critical pedagogy and transformative learning. It will conclude by positing that there are dangers to assuming that there is an ideal role for teachers, some ideal global teacher. It will instead suggest that a more helpful approach would be to break down the concept of change into three elements: change within the classroom, the school, and the wider community and society as a whole.

### **Policy-makers' and practitioners' approaches towards global learning and change**

Since the 1970s, there has been funding support for promoting learning about global and development issues in many industrialized countries. Funding has been primarily driven by bodies that wish to see greater support and engagement in international development issues. While many of these funded programmes emphasized increasing knowledge and understanding of development (see DFID, 1998), they were also based on the assumption that there is a moral purpose to securing support for 'building a better society', particularly among young people (Verulam Associates, 2009).

Among policy-makers and bodies close to strategies on development education in the European Commission, there has also been a stronger and more overt change agenda of citizenship involvement to secure change towards a more just world (Rajacic *et al.*, 2010b).

Many NGOs see their approach as coming from a values base of social justice and human rights, as seeking to secure behaviour change in the learners they were working with, so that they can offer better support and involvement with their campaigns (Krause, 2010: 13).

Weber (2012), in her research on the work of Save the Children in the UK and Canada, notes that the approach taken depends on whether the organization is promoting a specific narrative or is seeking dialogic collaboration.

One NGO that has attempted to bridge these different approaches and to recognize the relationship between learning, reflection, and action is Oxfam UK, who state that their educational work is based on three principles:

*Learn: exploring the issue, considering it from different viewpoints and trying to understand causes and consequence.*

*Think: considering critically what can be done about the issue, and relating this to values and worldviews and trying to understand the nature of power and action.*

*Act: Thinking about and taking action on the issue as an active global citizen, both individually and collectively.*

Oxfam UK, n.d.

Central to Oxfam's approach is also the usage of the term 'global citizenship', to empower 'young people to be active Global Citizens' (Oxfam UK, n.d.). The inclusion of this term is important in understanding and engaging with the debates on change and global learning, because behind the usage of the term 'global citizenship' is the assumption of a relationship to and involvement in society. The usage of the term 'citizenship' for example brings with it a range of themes regarding human rights, sense of identity, and place in the world. Debates on global citizenship and education tend to be polarized between a passive, or soft, identity and humanitarian sense of the term on the one hand and an active, or critical, and therefore socially engaged sense on the other (see Andreotti, 2006; Oxley, 2015).

These debates pose questions about the purpose of global learning within education. Is it primarily interested in the learner and the process of learning, or in the wider societal concerns? In her research on Save the Children, Weber found the work of Askew and Carnell (1998) particularly valuable, as they saw the relationship between educational goals and the purpose of education could be positioned in different ways, particularly in terms of social change, between a liberatory approach that emphasized the individual and a social justice one that emphasized the collective (Askell and Carnell, 1998: 83–96, quoted in Weber, 2012 and 2014).

It is suggested here that both approaches have value, but what is needed is some debate on the role of the teachers as actors within this process of change around global learning.

## The role of teachers within global learning practices

In a range of academic studies on global learning and global education, the role of teachers is seen as central to their success. Kirkwood-Tucker had noted in 1990 that 'teachers were more influential than textbooks as the primary source of information for students about global education' (Kirkwood-Tucker, 1990: 111). Much of the literature on global learning also suggests that the role of educators has often been seen in terms of the promotion and transmission of specific perspectives and approaches towards learning (Hicks and Holden, 2007; McCloskey, 2014). This can take the form of goals the teachers have to work towards in their own professional development, such as increasing their knowledge base, developing a strong ethical and values commitment to social justice, and encouraging and supporting participatory approaches towards learning. An example of this in the UK is the Global Teachers Award, promoted by many Development Education Centres (DECs). This award mentions including activities within global learning that can 'measure changes in attitudes of their pupils' and an understanding of 'how to promote informed, active global 'citizenship' (CoDEC, n.d.).

Many NGO-led projects on global learning tend to emphasize the change element with regard to both teachers and pupils. For example, the Global Fairness project, which includes a consortium of NGOs from five European countries, states:

*We expect Global Fairness to have a variety of effects on schools in the area of global learning. These include, among other things, the integration of global issues in the curriculum and school programmes, improved competencies of teachers and increased commitment from children as 'Agents of Change.'*

BGZ, 2015

As another example, a project by NGOs and universities in the Czech Republic and Poland is directly entitled 'Teachers: Agents of Change'. This project aims to strengthen those competencies in teachers from these countries that would enable them to introduce innovative approaches towards development education (Varianty, 2013).

Andreotti, one of the leading theorists in global learning, suggests that:

*a teacher who is not a global citizen and global learner cannot teach global citizenship effectively. In other words, a teacher who has not experienced global learning ... will find it very difficult to practice global education grounded in an ethics of solidarity.*

Andreotti, 2012: 25

She further suggests that a combination of personal experiences and supported intellectual engagement with social analyses provides the basis for being a global citizenship teacher.

A range of studies have recognized the need to develop global education competencies among current and future teachers (O'Connor and Zeichner, 2011; Steiner, 1996; Kirkwood-Tucker, 2009). O'Connor and Zeichner suggest that global education needs to do more than raise awareness of global problems; it needs to encourage and support students to move towards taking action, to encourage a sense of hope that students can make a difference. This, it is suggested, means moving beyond encouraging charitable actions by those that promote solidarity and empathy with oppressed peoples in the world (see Merryfield, 1997). Fisher argues that teachers who want to promote transformative change among their students should also be willing to embrace the struggle for change within their own places of employment (Fisher, 2001).

Steiner (1996), in her seminal work on the global teacher, stated that she saw this concept as meaning a teacher who:

- *Is interested in and concerned about events and movements in the local, national and global community;*
- *Actively seeks to keep informed while also maintaining a skeptical stance towards their sources of information;*
- *Takes up a principled stand, and supports others who do so, against injustice and inequalities; ...*
- *Informs themselves about environmental issues as they impact upon their own and other communities;*
- *Values democratic processes as the best means for bringing about positive change and engages in some form of social action to support their beliefs*

Steiner, 1996: 21–2

While many of these concepts have validity and relevance to the current debates on the role of teachers as agents for change within global learning, there are a number of assumptions that need greater exploration. The first is that teachers should be seen as people who are socially responsible and actors in securing change in both their own educational community and in wider society. Secondly, there is an assumption that teachers who are teaching global issues from a global learning perspective need to have themselves a clear values base rooted in social justice and social change. For NGOs and other providers involved with global learning, there is a further assumption that many teachers are lacking in these skills and approaches and that what they need is a combination of further exposure to different worldviews,

professional development opportunities, and opportunities for self-reflection and to be given the space to recognize that they need to change their own perspectives.

### **Teachers' perceptions about their role**

Teaching has always been seen as more than just another profession or job. Hansen refers to it as a 'moral practice' (Hansen, 2011: 4). Fullan states: 'scratch a good teacher and you will find a moral purpose' (Fullan, 1993). However, he goes on to suggest that this moral purpose must be combined with the 'skills of change agency' (ibid.: 2). Including change within the moral purpose, he suggests, enables teachers to develop strategies to accomplish their moral goals.

Taking these elements forward within the discourses on global learning, there is evidence that many teachers see it as part of their role to be 'vision creators,' to give inspiration and a positive outlook on the world to their learners, to encourage them to not only learn but to participate in society (Jones, 2009). Teachers also need to have the skills to engage others within their educational institution and secure support for their vision. They need, too, to be able to reflect on their own needs, to identify areas of personal professional development that can help them be better teachers.

However, it needs to be noted that while many teachers may initially support this vision, the reality of their experience as teachers and the societal and ideological influences on their daily practice can often work against this. Since the 1980s, it could be argued that the role of policy-makers has been to control and tame teachers rather than to empower them. Therefore, any discussion on teachers as agents of change needs to be predicated on an understanding of the limitations many teachers face in their desire to be agents of change.

Therefore, it is suggested here that any consideration of this area with regard to global learning needs to move beyond notions of rhetoric and idealized forms of what a good global teacher should be and towards an understanding that locates the practice within an educational process of exploration and learning for the teachers themselves.

### **Putting learning at the heart of the process of change**

The author of this paper has elsewhere suggested that if global learning is seen as a process of learning, as a pedagogical approach, rather than an ideal state, then changes in outlook and perception of the world may well emerge in the learner, but this by itself does not mean or should not mean societal change (Bourn, 2015). This pedagogical approach encourages critical reflection, belief in social justice, an understanding of power and inequality in the world, and promotion of a global outlook. It encourages learners to identify and seek out active engagement in society

so that they can put into practice their own perspectives of what a better world could look like (Bourn, 2015: 195).

It is suggested in this paper that this approach can help to review and assess the role of teachers as agents for social change if the analysis is located within a theoretical framework that puts pedagogy at its heart. This means above all recognizing that change can and does take place at a number of levels within and around the learner, the school, the community, and wider society. It also means recognizing that if learning in itself is seen as transformative, the impact on society can be judged directly in terms of the impact of the educational process.

In her doctoral research on how young people learn, Katharine Brown suggests that the work of Peter Jarvis is particularly relevant within the discourses in and around global learning (Brown, 2015a). For Jarvis, learning is a transformative process in itself that links our thoughts, actions, and emotions into seeing a new form of reality (Jarvis, 2006). As Brown further notes, Jarvis is also important because he reminds us that emotion and action are part of the learning process alongside cognitive processes. These factors are important to note when considering the roles of teachers as agents of change, for not only do they need to have increased knowledge and understanding of global issues and the skills to impart that knowledge, they also need to be empathetic to concerns of social justice and recognize that learning can often include some element of active involvement in the subject of the learning (Brown, 2015b).

The debates around transformative learning are also relevant here. Mezirow defines transformative learning as:

*the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.*

Mezirow, 2000: 8

Criticisms of Mezirow, notably Brookfield (2005), suggest that he puts too much emphasis on individual transformation and does not sufficiently address social and collective action for change. While these comments have some validity, Mezirow's work is particularly relevant to debates regarding teachers and global learning because of the attention he gives to feelings and emotional beliefs, hence, potentially, to social justice and inequality in the world.

A term increasingly used to reflect the need for teachers to have a global outlook is that of being a 'cosmopolitan teacher' (see Dyer, 2013: 22-5). Luke (2004: 1439)

describes a cosmopolitan teacher as a 'teacher with the capacity to shunt between the local and the global'. Dyer further notes that teachers require pedagogies that enable them to move across different knowledge spaces and contexts, both local and global, and to engage and explain the ways and effects of globalization. Dyer goes on to suggest that being a cosmopolitan teacher presupposes some experience with cultural pluralism and interconnectedness.

These approaches have some validity, but, as Heuberger (2014) notes, unless this ethical and world outlook is combined with a 'critical understanding' of the causes of inequality in the world, a global outlook can all too easily be a mechanism for reinforcing the dominance of Western ideologies. Scheunpflug (2011: 30) goes even further and suggests that teachers need to have a 'sense of how to get students to look through other lenses and perspectives' and to be able to activate their own students' 'reconceptualization of these issues'. This means developing the skills to understand and reflect upon different worldviews, to question assumptions about how poor people live in the world, and look at the underlying causes of inequality and the relationship of this inequity to power relations in the world.

### **The Global Learning Programme in England and social change**

Within England, the current main mechanism for supporting teachers promote global learning within their schools and therefore to be effective agents for change is the Global Learning Programme, funded by the Department for International Development (DFID). Begun in 2013, this Programme aims to:

- *help young people understand their role in a globally interdependent world and explore strategies by which they can make it more just and sustainable,*
- *familiarize pupils with the concepts of interdependence, development, globalization and sustainability,*
- *enable teachers to move pupils from a charity mentality to a social justice mentality,*
- *stimulate critical thinking about global issues, both at a whole school and pupil level,*
- *help schools promote greater awareness of poverty and sustainability,*
- *enable schools to explore alternative models of development and sustainability in the classroom.*

GLP-E, 2013

Specifically, the programme supports teachers to achieve these goals through working in partnership with nearby schools through programmes of professional



development and practical support, accessible resources, and accreditation opportunities as lead practitioners for global learning.

The accreditation process to be a lead practitioner includes the following key elements:

- *Development of professional knowledge – including an understanding of both the content and pedagogical approaches of global learning and how to apply these approaches within the classroom;*
- *Personal skills development to enable the teacher to work successfully with colleagues, to be open to new ideas and to be able to inspire others;*
- *How to influence others through development of skills to negotiation, leading and networking.*

SSAT, 2013

The programme therefore includes the key elements identified by Fullan and others about how teachers can become leaders for change within schools as well as a recognition of the fact that their professional development is much more than just acquiring more knowledge; rather it requires recognizing a different pedagogical approach. This is perhaps best summarized in the phrase ‘moving from a charity mentality to one of social justice’. This implies a process of critical reflection, of learning to unlearn, and learning new ways of thinking and their application within the classroom and the wider school.

### **The methodologies and approach of the global teacher as agent for change**

In her influential work, Steiner identified three key teaching components as part of being a global teacher:

- *A methodology that valued personal experience of both the teacher and the learner, with a range of pedagogical approaches.*
- *Recognizing that teaching principles that come from a social justice and democratic perspective means putting them into practice within the classroom.*
- *Choosing diverse ways of presenting information and planning a range of approaches*

Steiner, 1996: 25–6

This means that the role of the teacher is to act as an agent for change within the classroom. The recognition of this is key in relation to global learning.

Global learning as an approach is much more than learning about development and global issues. It is an approach towards learning, a mode of pedagogy that questions dominant values, promotes a critical approach and recognizes the ideological framing within which it takes place. As Wright (2011) suggests, this means that within a school classroom context the teacher will expose learners to a range of viewpoints and encourage them to question what could well be dominant assumptions about a particular place, people, or culture. It also means that the teacher needs to have the skills to engage learners in this complex process of reflection, dialogue, and engagement, which moves beyond a mere transmission of knowledge to recognizing that there are different lenses through which a subject or topic can be seen and understood.

The fact that this approach to learning within the classroom is transformative can be noticed by teachers who have applied this global pedagogical approach. For example, Tanswell notes:

*that children are more able to talk about issues affecting them and others around the world. They are also able to say what can be done about it, which will hopefully empower them to become active citizens and realize they can make a difference in their immediate and more wide reaching global community.*

Tanswell, 2011: 35

This transformative impact is often noted when pupils are exposed to broader social and cultural experiences, often through some form of international exchange or links with their peers elsewhere in the world or through visiting speakers who have brought world issues to life through personal stories (Bourn and Hunt, 2011; Bourn, 2014).

### **Teachers as agents for change within their school**

Securing change within the wider school can often be more challenging and more difficult than securing change within the classroom. Teachers who are supportive of the principles of global learning are likely to see it as their role to secure greater engagement with its principles within the school, to be agents of change, ambassadors for global social justice. There is evidence from research by Cox (2011) that understanding the role of distributed leadership in securing change within the school is key to this influence. Referring to the work of Durrant and Holden (2006: 169), Cox notes the importance of cultures and policies across the school that can encourage shared leadership, values that underpin the way the schools work (Cox, 2011: 6).

Noting evidence that has looked at school leaders in sustainable development in the UK, Cox refers to the work of Jackson, who emphasizes the importance of having

an optimistic worldview (Cox, 2011: 7–8; Jackson, 2007: 34). This emphasizes the relevance of vision, determination, the ability to empower others and be outward-looking to global learning as well as sustainability (Cox, 2011: 8).

With regard to global learning specifically, securing change within a school is often related to encouraging and securing a whole-school approach. This means promoting activities across multiple areas of the school and involving a range of stakeholders within the school. Change needs to be part of a wider vision or ethos and implemented through strong and committed support from senior leadership within the school (Hunt and King, 2015: 12).

The evidence from schools is that where such a whole-school approach is taken, there is likely to be greater impact upon the learners (Hunt, 2012: 51). This evidence builds on earlier research by Edge *et al.* (2009), which showed that where the global dimension was embedded within the school's strategy, it is much more likely to have a longer-lasting impact. This study also showed that identifying a teacher who has the global element as a key component of his or her work was important to securing change within the school (Edge *et al.*, 2009: 18).

### **Teachers as global citizens**

Teachers are not isolated from the world around them. Many will be active in a wide number of social issues. While there have been debates about the need for teachers not to be political, this is an impossible demand because refraining from taking a political stance is itself a political act. But this is perhaps the most challenging and controversial aspect of teachers as agents of change. There is considerable evidence to show that teachers are often reluctant to engage in what could be termed 'controversial' or political issues (Holden, 2007).

At a broader level, however, by virtue of their role within communities and particularly if they are passionate and committed to global learning principles, teachers would be seeking to influence others beyond the classroom.

For many teachers this might be done through their active involvement in their trade union. Teaching unions in the UK, for example, are known to be active supporters of global social justice themes.

Beyond the UK, there is a wealth of literature on the role of teachers as activists. Much of this is located within discourses around gender and race discrimination (Verma, 2010), although there are also examples related to themes such as global inequality in the world.

Giroux (2011), influenced by the work of Paulo Freire among others, suggests that teachers can play a role as 'public intellectuals', engaging in the debates regarding more equitable and democratic societies.

In some cases, teachers can have an impact through political activism and by participating and supporting social movements for social change. Active involvement in a teaching union may well be one example of this.

But this wider social concern for change may manifest itself through teaching overseas and directly engaging in projects that can help to reduce global poverty. For example, in the UK there is a lot of evidence that volunteering experiences can help to radicalize teachers' view of the world, to get them to question their own assumptions and seek ways to channel their enthusiasm and emotional commitment to broader movements for change (Bentall *et al.*, 2010).

It is with regard to these issues that those working within the teaching profession could be encouraged to reflect on their role as agents for global change, as responsible citizens for a more equitable society.

### **Teachers as agents of change**

Hansen and others refer to teachers as cosmopolitan educators, as people who have a global outlook and are open to new ideas and approaches. However, being an agent of change is more than just having a particular outlook on the world and a commitment to greater social justice. It also means having the skills and opportunities to influence education and learning at all levels.

All too often, discourses around teaching and social change have tended to revert to debates about either social activism or some form of ideal state to which teachers have to aspire. What has not been debated enough is the relationship between teachers as agents for change and the learning processes in which as individuals they are directly involved.

If learning is seen as much more than the acquisition of facts and data, or even the improvement of skills and a stronger values base, namely as a process that brings together all of these elements alongside experience and the power of emotion and feeling, then learning is by itself an agent of change. This is why the research by Brown is so important, because her work, influenced by Jarvis, suggests the direct relevance of this approach to global learning. As Brown notes, global learning theories and practices give a great deal of weight to the impact of emotions, experiences, and spaces for reflection that can result in transformational change. She also notes that an individual's cognitive processes are just one aspect of learning; there are others related to experience, emotion, and behaviour that need to be included as well (Brown, 2015a: 12).

Therefore, for teachers, a direct relationship needs to exist between what happens in the classroom, in the school, and within wider society. Teachers are agents for change within the classroom. They can also be agents for change within the school. But within society as a whole, any discussion on teachers as agents for change has tended to focus too much on aspects of political activism that are seen as distinct from classroom practice.

If what happens in the classroom, in the school, and within wider society is seen as part of the change process for both teacher and learner, global learning can be a real agent not only for individual change, but also for society as a whole.

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