

Chapter 6

Geography Education and Global Understanding: Exploring Some Ideas and Trends in a Fast-Changing World



Joop van der Schee and Tine Béneker

6.1 Introduction

Already 400 years ago, Comenius seems to have said that ‘universal education would provide people the skills, competencies, and intellectual tools to live in peace with one another and relate across national boundaries’ (Reimers 2013: 60). Especially after World War II, a lot of energy has been invested in stimulating education for Global Understanding. Some initiatives like the Eco Schools and Global Schools projects are more successful than others. Apart from special programmes and projects, nowadays many countries have regular curricula in which young people learn about other countries and societies. However, there is considerable variation across countries, regions, schools and even teachers regarding what knowledge, skills and attitudes students should acquire about the world in which they live. Much attention in education worldwide is given to reading, writing and mathematics but in most countries, not much attention is given to Global Understanding and significant questions related to how we wish to live together in the world of today and tomorrow. That is quite strange, as all education is for the future. *‘Besides being important, the future is also seen by many as urgent and likely to be very different from the world we grew up in’* (Pauw 2015: 307).

Whereas the opportunities to cross borders and become world citizens are growing fast, counter-movements are also visible. Modern technology enables more and more people to travel (digitally) across the planet and to communicate with other people wherever they are. The Internet is ‘a big leap forward’ for humankind as it gives very fast access to huge amounts of local and global information, and

J. van der Schee (✉)
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: j.a.vander.schee@vu.nl

T. Béneker
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
e-mail: t.beneker@uu.nl

offers the opportunity to exchange information and to cooperate. Thus, world citizenship seems to be the near-future for many on planet Earth. What happens on the other side of the globe affects our life directly and what we drink, eat and waste has effects in other parts of the globe. These effects can, of course, be positive like more efficient international trade and international scientific projects, but also negative, for example, in the cases of the rapid diffusion of diseases, environmental pollution and cyber computer attacks. The fast changes during the last decennia and the new threats perturb many people. Xenophobia has made a comeback and national borders are once again significant. To stop immigrants, new walls between countries have been built in Europe, the US and the Middle East. Speeches by Trump, Erdogan, Orbán, Le Pen, Wilders and others are full of anger, nativism and rampant populism. This populism is not new, but closing windows and looking inward is a reaction to a fast-changing, complex and interdependent world that appears to have become a more and more ‘successful’ answer in the political arena.

A 2016 research among 18–25-year-old people in the Netherlands (Broer and Pleij 2017) shows that many of the 262 respondents have a completely different image of their world than the same age group 10 years earlier. In 2016, 27% of the respondents voted for the populist and nationalist party of Geert Wilders (PVV) while in a comparable 2007 survey 7% of the respondents voted for Wilders’ PVV. The researchers conclude that *‘youngster are living in a more fearsome world than 10 years ago, no wonder that they are more pessimistic about the future’* and *‘the message is that we have to look for new democratic ways of living’*. In contrast, Dutch children (15 years of age) are still among the happiest in the world according to several reports, for example, UNICEF (2013). However, what we do know from several research outcomes is that (Western) young people often show a dissonance between their personal and a global future (for example, Reynie 2011; Rubin 2013; Béneker and Wevers 2013). They are relatively optimistic about their own future and very pessimistic about the future of their country and the world. What concerns they have vary over time (Hicks and Holden 2007).

These rising fears of the global have implications for what to teach and learn at school. Does it lead to new ethnocentrism and the tendency for students to ignore the global consequences of local actions? (Merryfield et al. 2008:7). Do young people learn the skills to survive on an individual basis in their own societies and not to bother about anything that is foreign? Or are young people and their teachers able to strive for learning about different scenarios of the future and working together across borders? The International Year of Global Understanding is one of the initiatives to put Earth and all inhabitants that live on it in a global perspective on the (educational) agenda again (YIGU 2016). YIGU aims:

To yield deep but actionable insights into the ways all peoples can live together more sustainable. The focus will be on developing strategies for targeted local projects with a global reach. There are three elements to this: research, education and information. Research will bring scientists together to understand the global impacts of everyday local activities related to culture, society, economy, and nature. The YIGU will empower bottom-up movements for sustainable everyday politics. Classrooms throughout the world will use the research results at all educational levels. The YIGU will provide information

and promote knowledge sharing to increase public awareness by means of publications, computer games, TV programs, etcetera. (<http://www.global-understanding.info>)

The IYGU website also states that Global Understanding has four key messages that all together consist of 11 sub-messages.

However, a precise definition of Global Understanding is missing. Global Understanding seems necessary for managing change from the bottom-up and to solve global problems sustainably. It links local everyday actions to global issues and is based on research outcomes. But is that it? Educators can ask many questions about the list with 11 messages in Table 6.1. The ‘understanding’ part that could be promoted by education is not described or defined at all. When do people have a global view that reduces the risk of regional conflicts? How is Global Understanding based on research?

Surprisingly, the 2016 International Charter on Geographical Education (IGU-CGE 2016) does not mention Global Understanding at all. The word ‘Global’ as well as the word ‘Understanding’ can be found five times in the Charter, but the combination ‘Global Understanding’ is not present. However, ‘International Understanding’ is part of the old 1992 and the new 2016 International Charter on Geographical Education, referring to the *UNESCO Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace*. One might think it is strange to miss Global Understanding in the New International Charter on Geographical Education as the new International Charter on Geographical Education was published in 2016, the International Year of Global Understanding. On the other hand, many phrases in both documents seem to be in-line. The aim of the IYGU is ‘to yield deep but actionable insights into the ways all peoples can live together more sustainable’ as the new Charter speaks about geography that ‘enables us to face questions of what it means to live sustainably in this world’.

Table 6.1 List with 11 key statements about Global Understanding (Source <http://www.global-understanding.info>)

A. Linking the global and the local
1. Everyday actions matter for global climate change
2. Everyday decisions depend on lifestyle
3. A global view reduces the risk of regional conflicts
B. People’s practices
4. Global problems require sustainable solutions
5. Sustainable change should emerge from the bottom
C. Science and everyday life
6. Everyday life and science belong together
7. Global Understanding is based on joint social and natural science research
8. Research should address the logic of everyday life
D. Sustainability and Global Understanding
9. Climate change is an example of the links between global and local effects
10. Global change may be climatic, social, cultural or economic
11. Societies need Global Understanding to manage change sustainably

The new Charter states that ‘*geography is concerned with both the local and the global and the interconnections between these scales of human experience*’ as the *IYGU* has as its key message ‘*linking the global and the local*’.

Nevertheless, Global Understanding is not a very clear concept and more information and discussion about how to apply it in education is most welcome. So we decided to consult some experts in the field to get a better view on their ideas about what Global Understanding should be and, more importantly, whether and how it can be realised by geography education.

6.2 Survey Method

To get a better view of Global Understanding, a digital questionnaire was sent to 50 geography educators in January 2017. All these geography educators are part of the network of the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union. The selected geography educators are living all across the globe. The biggest groups of selected geography educators come from Europa, Asia and South America. The response rate was almost one third (32%). Six women and 10 men sent the questionnaire back before the deadline. The reactions came from different continents, but were distributed unevenly, see Table 6.2. Most respondents live in Europe.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions. Most of them were open questions. The questions focused on three sub-themes (Table 6.3). The data were analysed by

Table 6.2 Number of reactions on the Global Understanding questionnaire per continent

Continent	Number of reactions
Africa	1
Asia	4
Oceania	1
Europe	9
North America	1
South America	0
Total	16

Table 6.3 Sub-themes and some questions in the Global Understanding questionnaire

Sub-theme	One example of the questions
A. What is Global Understanding?	Can you give us three keywords that should be part of a definition of Global Understanding?
B. Why Global Understanding?	Do you think it is important to increase Global Understanding in your country and if so why?
C. How Global Understanding?	Please mention at least one good practice of Global Understanding in geography education in your country, or if that is not possible, in another country

the two authors of this chapter. The focus of the analysis was on the three sub-themes of the questionnaire. No analysis was made by gender, location, or other background characteristics of the respondents.

6.3 Results

6.3.1 What Is Global Understanding?

We asked the respondents to mention three keywords that should be part of a definition of Global Understanding. There is a big variety in answers (Table 6.4), but most frequently mentioned are cultural diversity, sustainability and global issues. No item is mentioned by 50% or more of the respondents. Sixteen respondents sent 48 reactions, of which 23 were analysed as different. Table 6.4 shows 35 reactions that were mentioned more than once. Most striking is the frequent mention of cultural diversity, a keyword not very prominent in the majority of the key messages of the IYGU, although the IYGY states *'IYGU recognizes culturally different paths to global sustainability'*.

Furthermore, we asked the respondents to reflect on the differences between global and international understanding. We used a quote from Graves and Stoltman (2016) to highlight this: *'the story of the IGU Commission on Geographical Education begins with the view that geography was a key scholarly component of international understanding'*. Only one of the respondents sees no difference between global and international understanding. Six respondents explain the difference by saying that Global Understanding has to do with a different scale, five respondents mention that the idea of a global system is crucial in Global Understanding and three respondents mention the link between local and global as a key focus of Global Understanding.

The respondents were also asked to think about the statement of the IYGU by looking at the list with the key messages from the IYGU (see Table 6.1). We took

Table 6.4 Top 10 answers to the question 'What is Global Understanding?' ($N = 48$)

Keyword	Frequency
Cultural diversity	7
Sustainability	6
Global issues/globalisation	5
Personal action	3
Empathy/respect	3
Acceptance/tolerance	3
Causes and consequences/interaction	2
Climate change	2
Awareness	2
Complex systems	2

Table 6.5 Main elements of geography education that contribute to Global Understanding mentioned three times or more ($N = 47$)

Elements	Frequency
Geographical thinking	8
Relation humans–nature	6
World, regions, places	5
Scales	5
Diversity	3

the first eight statements in order to avoid too long a list. Five respondents agreed with the IYGU key messages as the core of Global Understanding without an amendment; one respondent deleted two key messages; three respondents added as well as deleted messages; while seven respondents added new key messages. The key IYGU message ‘Everyday decisions depend on lifestyle’ was deleted twice. One of the respondents argued that ‘*lifestyle is not the only aspect that is important for everyday decisions*’. All added comments were mentioned only once; however, a key message about the cultural dimension and a key message about the geographical perspective were mentioned twice. A remarkable new key message reads: ‘*Diversity in communities is celebrated and valued in a context of lived social justice*’. It fits nicely with the frequency of cultural diversity as a reaction to the first question of the survey.

‘What does geography education contribute to Global Understanding?’ was another question in this part of the survey. The respondents stick to ‘geographical thinking’ and aspects of it such as ‘looking at different scales’ and the ‘relationship of (hu)man and nature’. Moreover, they mention the study of (the diversity of) places and regions. In Table 6.5, the three elements the respondents wrote down are divided among the five most mentioned—sometimes overlapping—categories. Altogether, respondents sent 47 reactions. The elements mentioned in Table 6.5 align well with key precepts of the 2016 International Charter on Geographical Education.

6.3.2 Why Is Global Understanding Important?

All respondents think that it is important to increase Global Understanding in their countries, but they give different explanations. Some notable comments include:

Global Understanding increases co-operation among regions which could lead to a better understanding and efficient management of the earth’s resources (Nigeria).

My country is very vast and diverse in ethnics, religions, and culture. We need to respect others so there will be no pitting, and the majority will protect vulnerable groups. Physically our country is also varied. The west region is relatively fertile and rich of natural resources. Some regions are very dry and infertile. We need to help and share the prosperities to people from the poor regions so that there will be no imbalanced welfare (Indonesia).

We are all on the same planet and we should give it to future generations in good condition (Spain).

Global Understanding trains students to understand the state of the world in which they live. This is the best way to fight extremes. That is a burning issue in France. It is also a way to educate to sustainable development (France).

Because our students are in need of more and better geography education, which is foundational to Global Understanding (USA).

6.3.3 How to Realise Global Understanding?

The last sub-theme of the survey focused on how to realise Global Understanding. We asked respondents to mention three barriers to increasing Global Understanding in geography education. The participants raised many different bottlenecks, but one dominated over all others: geography teacher training. Many respondents sent reactions like *‘teachers lack geographical thinking and knowledge of geography’*. Approximately, 50% of the respondents advised to train primary and secondary teachers better in geography and Global Understanding. Two other barriers were mentioned more than once. First, curriculum content problems like *‘geography is taught within a social course’* were identified. Second, obstacles that have to do with policymakers who do not recognise the importance of geography education were cited. Among other things, respondents recommend as solutions to avoid these barriers were *‘to increase discipline-based education in primary school teacher education’* and *‘seeing technologies just as nice tools, not as important content in geography education’*.

Despite the bottlenecks listed, when asked to mention good practices of Global Understanding in geography education in their country, respondents provided these examples:

Thick Jumper Day to stimulate students system thinking about ecosystems (Belgium).

A local school helps students to maintain aquaponics systems and learn about sustainable agriculture (Taiwan).

Some teachers learn students to read newspapers or web info critically with special attention for actual issues like the crisis in Ukraine, the migration crisis, the war in Syria (Czechia).

The International Geography Olympiad is very effective through geographical studies and experiences (Japan).

Some characteristics of Global Understanding like connecting the local and the global and developing critical thinking about information and about the relationship between (hu)mans and nature are found in more than one suggested good practice.

The last questions of the survey asked participants to reflect on personal and geography community actions that may increase Global Understanding through geography education. In addition, respondents were invited to add remarks about

the topics of the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents mentioned personal actions related to their work as a teacher, like:

I try to encourage my students to join international activities and go to try to know other countries and join exchange programs (Turkey).

To use holistic approach and new technology to help students to understand the interdependencies and conceptualizations of space, place, and people (Greece).

Some of the respondents also wrote about research and discussions with teachers and national standards as fields where they are able to make a difference in developing Global Understanding.

Most respondents think that the international community of geography educators can help to increase Global Understanding by collaborating in research and practical programmes. Materials, toolkits, sharing experiences and information exchanges are keywords in the reactions of the respondents.

A few respondents added interesting remarks at the end of the questionnaire, such as this from Australia:

We do not do enough. We could take a leading role with statements but we need a media or social media plan. I would like to have an opportunity to explore what we could do and say to explain, for example, the Trump movement. I believe President Trump has little understanding of transcultural global issues. As a result he has some rather outdated ideas, and is trying to authorise some rather insensitive policies. In Australia we have a politician, named Hanson, who I think also lacks transcultural understandings. She is very outspoken and alienates a lot of Australians and new immigrants. We, as educators, need to explore how we can use our curricula around the world to educate the students that such attitudes are not needed anymore – that the world has grown up since World War II when other rulers had such simple ideas

6.4 Conclusions and Discussion

Although this survey is basic, the number of respondents limited and not all answers very surprising, we can learn three things from the results.

First, that the cultural element—diversity and commonality—needs more attention in a definition of Global Understanding. One might argue that the IYGU aim *‘To yield deep but actionable insights into the ways all peoples can live together more sustainable’* includes this aspect, and that it is more than thinking about climate change and using green or blue energy. Nevertheless, the key messages of IYGU can be more explicit in seeking attention for respect for cultural diversity. A second and connected issue is social justice. Without social justice, there is no foundation for sustainable living together. The gap between have’s and have-nots is big and those who are poor are fighting to survive and are focused on short-term goals. Long-term issues like sustainability will only be reached if the gap between different groups is not too big. Morgan (2015: 304) states that *‘Whilst geographical futures are to some extent open, it is important to recognise that*

powerful forces act to limit possible and preferred futures. Geographical education is an important arena for the study and understanding of probable futures'. Our late colleague Gerber (2003: 32) cites Castells (1998) who wrote about 'The Fourth World' which he defines as comprising:

Large areas of the globe, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, and impoverished rural areas of Latin America and Asia. But it is also present in literally every country, and every city, in this new geography of social exclusion... And it is populated by millions of homeless, incarcerated, prostituted, stigmatised, sick, and illiterate persons....But, everywhere they are growing in number, increasing in visibility, as the selective triage of informational capitalism, and the political breakdown of the welfare state, intensify social exclusion. ... The rise of the Fourth World is inseparable from the rise of informational global capitalism.

Speaking about the challenge for the next 25 years Gerber suggests that *'the least geographical education can do is acquaint learners with the four Worlds and encourage them to use this kind of understanding in the development of our World as a better place to live in'*. Gerber (2003: 31) speaks about *'reawaken of conscience amongst all peoples on our planet'*, *'tackling the worst inequalities that are occurring around the world'*, and geography education *'that promotes education for justice'*. In addition to an analysis of spatial and social injustice at different scales, *'stories of hope'* are necessary (Hicks 2006). We as geography educators can help students think critically about what is happening on Earth and what can be preferable futures. Sustainability, cultural diversity, solidarity and social justice are keywords, necessary in whatever scenario will be chosen. As geography educators, we should avoid succumbing to pessimism, and offer opportunities to develop new futures linking the local and the global. This is in line with what is written by the IYGU. It is also consistent with the 2016 International Charter on Geographical Education (IGU-CGE 2016: 5):

geographically educated individuals understand human relationships and their responsibilities to both the natural environment and to others. Geographical education helps people to learn how to exist harmoniously with all living species.

A second outcome of the survey is the need to specify Global Understanding in classroom (geography) projects and to share project materials and experiences obtained through research. We do not have clear evidence on how to stimulate Global Understanding in geography education. How should that be done? Do we want a transmissive type of learning that focuses on delivering and developing knowledge and understanding? Or should our goal be a more transformative learning that focuses on socially reflective and critical approaches? What Smith (2013: 260) writes about in her work about geography education and Sustainable Development is also true for geography education and Global Understanding: Transformative learning is learning *'in which pupils are encouraged to recognise and question vested- and self-interest in order to develop their own thinking about the sort of society they want to be part of, and to reflect on alternative solutions and lifestyles that can achieve that state'*. Smith (2013: 260) follows Vare and Scott (2007) saying that *'transmissive learning needs to go hand in hand with transformative learning'*.

Which steps can be taken in a classroom depend on the teachers and the context in which they are working, but can also be supported by international initiatives like the Geocapabilities project. The Geocapabilities project (Solem et al. 2013; Lambert et al. 2015) offers a platform for teachers to realise a curriculum to expand young people's capabilities in geographical understanding that can stimulate Global Understanding. The website of this project learns us that *'the school curriculum (including geography) enables young people to think beyond themselves and their everyday experiences. It therefore contributes to the "substantive freedoms" available to young people. That is, for example, freedom to think, make good choices and decisions how to live. To be able to think geographically enables young people's capabilities in a particular way'*. Interesting in this respect is the contribution of Kenreich (2013: 161) advocating for 'critical geographic literacy': *'the capacity of students to use geographic tools and concepts to critically examine spatial expressions of power in their lives, communities, nations and the world'*. This should cultivate a stronger sense of agency to move towards a more just society—locally and globally. Kenreich (162) mentions important bottlenecks like *'technocrats thirst for data to rank schools, judge teachers, and sort students'*. Given the political context, it is often difficult for teachers *'to see their class as a community of learners who take up vital and pressing social issues of our day'* especially as some teachers *'feel ill-equipped with insufficient knowledge and materials to teach inquiry based'*.

One big step forward in geography education is to build an international databank or clearinghouse of successful materials and practical suggestions for teaching Global Understanding. This can help to realise ideas of colleagues involved in IGU, IYGU and the Geocapabilities project and it can concretize the call from many geography teachers around the world. Such a databank can only function well if good international geography education research is included. The materials should be tested through clear and transparent methods and the results included in the databank. A second prerequisite for such a databank is that we do not focus only on the upper levels of secondary geography classes, but also equally on all children in primary and secondary schools, including vocational schools. Without listening to the voices of young people, living in different cultures and social classes (Robertson and Tani 2013) geography education for Global Understanding is not viable. Priority should be given to developing quality geography education for Global Understanding for students in lower vocational schools as often these students do not take advantage of globalisation.

Third, there is the call of a group of respondents in our survey to invest more joint energy in putting geography education and Global Understanding on the educational agenda of policymakers. This is also a point of action in the 2016 International Charter on Geographical Education (IGU-CGE 2016: 5). For a long time, EUROGEO President Karl Donert is one of the most active in trying to convince policymakers to invest in projects that stimulate young people to think about planet Earth, including the use of modern technologies. He rightly argues for better and bigger coordinated international action to stimulate geography, IT and Global Understanding. He deserves our support. In our actions, we should focus on

what geography as a discipline and thus, geographical thinking, has to contribute to learn about planet Earth's grand challenges like water, food, energy, urbanisation, transport, migration, borders and pollution.

Early in 2017 'Earth needs thinkers not deniers' was a slogan used by American scientists worried about climate change and sceptical about what President Trump said about it. We as geography educators have to show policymakers that Earth needs geographical thinkers, geographical knowledge and geography education, not deniers. Take them on (virtual) field trips and show them what modern geography has to offer.

Last but not least, change is everywhere and goes on. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said it already 2500 years ago: '*Panta Rhei, everything goes*'. Heraclitus also said that it is not easy to create things, it is always a battle, and working on things we should be careful and know our limits to succeed on the way to peace. Finding that way, that is what geography can help us with.

References

- Béneker, T., & Wevers, I. (2013). Thinking about the future? Young people's perspectives from the Netherlands. In M. Robertson & S. Tani (Eds.), *Young people: Cross-cultural views and futures* (pp. 146–165). Camberwell: ACER Press.
- Broer, Th., & Pleij, S. (2017). Vernieuw de democratie. *Vrij Nederland*, February, 48–57.
- Castells, M. (1998). *End of millennium*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gerber, R. (2003). Globalisation and geographical education. In R. Gerber (Ed.), *International handbook on geographical education* (pp. 21–33). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Graves, N., & Stoltman, J. (2016). History of the commission. IGU Commission on Geographical Education, <http://www.igu-cge.org>.
- Hicks, D. W. (2006). *Lessons for the future. The missing dimension in education*. Oxford: Trafford Publishing.
- Hicks, D. W., & Holden, C. (2007). Remembering the future: What do children think? *Environmental Education Research*, 13(4), 501–521.
- IGU-CGE. (2016). *International charter on geographical education*. Beijing: International Geographical Union (<http://www.igu-cge.org>).
- IYGU. (2016). *International year of global understanding* (<http://www.global-understanding.info>).
- Kenrich, T. W. (Ed.). (2013). *Geography and social justice in the classroom*. New York: Routledge.
- Lambert, D., Solem, M., & Tani, S. (2015). Achieving human potential through geography education: A capabilities approach to curriculum making in schools. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2015.1022128> (<http://www.geocapabilities.org/>).
- Merryfield, M. M., Lo, J. T.-Y., Po, S Ch., & Kasai, M. (2008). World mindedness: Taking off the blinders. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 2(1), 6–20.
- Morgan, J. (2015). Making geographical futures. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 24(4), 294–306.
- Pauw, I. (2015). Educating for the future: The position of school geography. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 24(4), 307–324.
- Reimers, F. M. (2013). Education for improvement. Citizenship in the global public sphere. *Harvard International Review*, Summer, 56–61.

- Reynie, D. (Ed.). (2011). *World youths: A worldwide survey*. Fondation pour l'innovation politique. Online. www.fondapol.org/en/etudes-en/2011-world-youths/. Accessed April 28, 2014.
- Robertson, M., & Tani, S. (2013). *Young people: Cross cultural views and futures*. Camberwell: ACER Press.
- Rubin, A. (2013). Hidden, inconsistent, and influential: Images of the future in changing times. *Futures*, 45, 38–44.
- Smith, M. (2013). How does education for sustainable development relate to geography education? In D. Lambert & M. Jones (Eds.), *Debates in geography education* (pp. 257–269). London: Routledge.
- Solem, M., Lambert, D., & Tani, S. (2013). Toward an international framework for researching the purposes and values of geography education. *Review of International Geographical Education Online*, 3(3), 214–229.
- UNICEF Office of Research. (2013). *Child well-being in rich countries: A comparative overview*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research. (Innocenti Report Card 11).
- Vare, P., & Scott, W. (2007). Learning for a change: Exploring the relationship between education and sustainable development. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 1(2), 191–198.