

## Ecopedagogy to Foster Global Perspectives



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### Abstract

Global perspectives instruction often focuses on current news events, neglecting deeper human connections between local and global issues. This paper proposes *ecopedagogy* as a solution. Ecopedagogy is a critical approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness of people and the environment. By integrating ecopedagogy into interdisciplinary units, teachers can engage students in meaningful activities that develop critical thinking, cultural competence, and a sense of responsibility for the planet. Examples of ecopedagogical strategies include collaborative projects addressing local environmental challenges, journal prompts reflecting on personal connections to nature, and outdoor learning experiences. By fostering social-environmental awareness, ecopedagogy empowers students to become stewards of the earth and active agents of change who contribute to a more sustainable future. Exploring environmental issues through a global lens exposes students to diverse cultural perspectives and worldviews. This exposure fosters respect for environmental and social values, laying the foundation for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration.

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### Introduction

The discipline of social studies is often described as an integrated field of knowledge. Any one of the social studies cannot be taught in isolation. For example, an educator cannot teach about geography without teaching about history, just as one cannot teach about history without teaching about government. Under the umbrella of social studies, the fields of history, geography, government, and economics dominate, receiving the most attention and consequently the most resources (i.e., funding, professional development, curricular time). This may be because these fields are tightly woven into primary and secondary education as these social studies domains are tied to mandated high-stakes standardized tests for students in the final years of their public education. Conversely, social studies electives, such as global perspectives, sometimes receive little prioritization. This is a disservice to society because understanding global perspectives is essential to producing a well-rounded, informed, and socio-politically engaged citizenry. The benefit of teaching and learning global perspectives cannot be underscored. Those who understand the dynamics of the world will be motivated to act on its call for cultural competence and the need for sustainability.

There are several pedagogies and teaching strategies that can be used to foster global perspectives, and because global perspectives is such a broad field, multiple pedagogies can be applied to instruction. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on critical pedagogy and interdisciplinary learning, specifically ecopedagogy, which

emphasizes the interconnectedness between people and the earth. Social studies teachers should convey the ideology that global perspectives are the foundation of world understanding, and as such, it should be approached through a critical lens that is designed to engage students in meaningful, thought-provoking activities.

## **Global Perspectives**

There is a societal push to shape globally competent students, but what exactly does this mean and how can it be achieved? Decades ago, Knight (2004) described global education as an integrated process that involves intercultural understanding and knowledge of one's own national history. The integrated process described by Knight speaks to the broad scope of global perspectives and how it encompasses several fields within social studies. Further illustrating this point, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2016) posits that part of global education involves "understanding the historical, geographic, economic, political, cultural, and environment relationships among world regions and peoples" (para. 1).

Prior to Knight (2004), Hanvey (1976) broached the topic of global perspectives and referred to his work as "a beginning effort to define some elements of what we call a global perspective-to flesh out some of the things that we need to know and understand if we are to cope with the challenges of an increasingly interdependent world" (p. 1). Hanvey's (1976) seminal work proposed that were five elements of global perspectives:

- Perspective consciousness: an individualized worldview that is shaped by factors outside of an individual's control
- Cross-cultural awareness: respect for diverse customs, ideas, and values
- Knowledge of world conditions: understanding of world characteristics such as migration, political climates, international conflicts, science, international laws, environmental landscapes
- Knowledge of global dynamics: understanding of interconnected world systems
- Knowledge of alternatives: understanding that there are alternative choices to run the world other than how it is currently being run

The elements set forth by Hanvey are multifaceted and complex. Teachers of global perspectives must understand the elements before they can teach them to students. Because of geographic, economic, and political facets, several teachers may focus their global perspectives instruction on students locating and summarizing news-worthy international events. This may be due to teachers' lack of subject knowledge and/or lack of instructional materials. Unlike other social studies fields, there is a paucity of readily available materials such as websites, reading passages, and classroom activities designed for the instruction of global perspectives. Those that are available are relegated to current events, and this perpetuates the current events task as a staple assignment in global perspectives classrooms. This is neither effective nor meaningful as the sole means of content material in an academic course (Kerkoff & Cloud, 2020). Summarizing current events may have its benefits, but overall, students may not be truly gaining critical knowledge in terms of global perspectives content.

Global perspectives, as a critical lens, is needed so that students can see they are members of a much wider

community and acknowledge that there is a purpose greater than their own. Chickering and Braskamp (2009) asserted that this realization requires a degree of self-reflection, emotional intelligence, and open-mindedness. Global perspectives cannot be taught without conveying to students that they have a sense of responsibility to their communities and the world.

### **Global Perspectives as Critical Curriculum**

Global perspectives, as a standalone course, is typically offered as an elective in secondary settings, that is, middle schools and high schools. Some schools do not offer the course in any capacity. Because global perspectives is a course that has the potential to impact students on a larger scale, teachers should take an interdisciplinary approach to planning units rather than teaching concepts in isolation through individual lessons. Interdisciplinary learning engages students by presenting topics in an interconnected manner (Lattuca et al., 2004; Ye & Xu, 2023). This interconnectedness allows students to scaffold their own learning by linking things they already know to things they might not be familiar with, providing students with a knowledge base to aid in the development of critical thinking and collaborative skills essential for effective citizenship (Everett, 2016; Holley, 2009; Ye & Xu, 2023). When creating interdisciplinary units, teachers should be purposeful and intentional in their planning. One way to create interdisciplinary units is to explore critical pedagogies that complement social studies. Through these critical pedagogies, teachers can find new ways to:

- (a) evaluate what students already know about a given topic,
- (b) find out what their students' thoughts are about what they know (reflection),
- (c) gauge where students' knowledge stems from, and
- (d) facilitate students' acquisition of new knowledge.

### **Ecopedagogy to Address the Missing Paradigm in Global Perspectives**

#### **Bridging the Gap**

Case (1993) feared that key elements of global perspectives would be overlooked or taught in a nonsystematic manner using non-rigorous methodology. To some extent, these fears were well-founded. For many secondary students, global perspectives is a surface-level course where they research and discuss current events. Some would argue that there is no rigor in this approach (Saye et al., 2018). The notion that global perspectives focus on economics and politics is outdated. Modern times demand that global perspectives curricula evolve to address and reflect the needs of citizens who are experiencing world events in real-time. In terms of content, many social studies textbooks fall short of providing sufficient information on how contemporary environmental and social issues affect local and global communities (Özdemir, 2022). When it comes to providing instruction on global perspectives, teachers' content knowledge may not be as strong as their pedagogical knowledge. These barriers suggest that teaching global perspectives in a relevant, meaningful way requires a paradigm shift. It is not enough to focus on world events related to politics and economics. Acquiring global perspectives requires students to understand their own local conditions in relation to world events. This critical component is missing from global perspectives instruction.

One way, out of many, to bridge this missing paradigm is through ecopedagogy. Many students are under-prepared when it comes to social-environmental awareness, and this interferes with students' abilities to make meaningful connections between problems in their local communities and problems around the world. Without meaningful connections, students will not be compelled to find solutions to social-environmental issues (Zocher & Hougham, 2020). This may be because students have difficulty recognizing the link between people, history, culture, and nature. Some students fail to see the importance of preserving the natural environment and why sustainability is necessary to preserve culture. Cultural values and norms are shaped by history, and history is shaped by people's interactions with the natural world. History, culture, and environmental landscapes are intertwined and are unique to the different regions of the world. Although these elements are unique, there are several similarities and lessons to be learned from each location because the earth is shared.

Misiaszek (2015, 2020) proposed that ecopedagogy is one way to connect environmental issues with social education. The term ecopedagogy was popularized in the 1990s as a result of critical discussions stemming from the Second Earth Summit held in Brazil. These discussions led to systematic beliefs about the interconnectedness of individuals and the earth (Gadotti, 2008). Ecopedagogy is an extension of existing critical pedagogy theorized by Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire. Freire (2005) philosophized that individuals construct the current world, and so individuals have the power to change it. Under the framework of ecopedagogy, students develop an understanding of how human impact on the environment transcends boundaries. It promotes global, shared responsibility for protecting the earth (Dunkley, 2023). Further, ecopedagogy encourages students to think about how they currently see the world and how they envision it in the future. Within this, students develop a critical understanding of the causes and effects of local and world problems.

Social-environmental education should be embedded in the content of global perspectives courses. There are several educational shortcomings that hinder students from understanding how preserving the natural environment contributes to successful communities (Dunkley, 2023; Orr, 2004). This could be due to a lack of teacher understanding and/or lack of instructional time. Some teachers may believe that environmental education should be taught by science teachers because, naturally, the environment equals science. This is a critical misunderstanding when, in fact, several state social studies standards include benchmarks that require students to understand the cultural characteristics of places and understand how human actions impact the environment. Teaching global perspectives through interdisciplinary units is one way to connect the current environment with past and present cultural and social beliefs.

Using this critical approach adds dimension to global perspectives curricula. It is a holistic approach to education and a natural conduit for interdisciplinary learning. Moreover, because ecopedagogy includes the infusion of the individual on a global level of citizenship, it meets the global perspectives tenets proposed by Hanvey (1976) and the NCSS (2016). Essentially, global perspectives and ecopedagogy are inseparable and contribute to a shared understanding of what constitutes social-environmental issues. It is not necessary for teachers to be experts in ecopedagogy, but it is necessary to be familiar with the underpinnings of the theory. Ecopedagogy can be used to complement teacher strategies that enhance students' understanding of worldviews on society and the environment. Because of this, interdisciplinary units are an excellent tool to integrate ecopedagogy and social

studies, specifically global perspectives. Through ecopedagogy, students can understand the significance of their presence in their local community and the world.

## **Instructional Suggestions**

### **Collaboration as a Gateway**

It can be argued that social studies teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare teachers to provide instruction in global affairs perspectives, and so it is up to teachers to hone their expertise (Kenna & Poole, 2017; Kirkwood-Tucker & Bleicher, 2004; Özdemir, 2022). According to Samur and Akman (2023), to effectively teach global perspectives through ecopedagogy, teachers need to be culturally competent on matters of the earth, which begs the question: How does a teacher become culturally competent? Teachers must step out of their comfort zones by conducting research and making their own international contacts. Novice and expert teachers sometimes shy away from reaching out to other educators due to time constraints or low-effort exchanges (Meyer et al., 2023). This approach should be reconsidered as there are many teachers and educational professionals who share an equal passion for teaching and learning and seek meaningful exchanges of knowledge. Collaboration can take place through multiple means, including email, video-conferencing, and face-to-face meetings for teachers willing to travel.

Shifts in mindset cannot occur unless teachers participate in meaningful cultural reciprocity and experiences. Teachers who cooperate with other teachers demonstrate increases in self-efficacy and global learning (Pearl et al., 2023). Teachers should be encouraged and motivated to create partnerships with teachers in other parts of the world to gain firsthand experience on how other countries develop social-environmental curriculum materials. This international cooperation model is enviable and shows that it is possible to build cross-cultural relationships.

### **Start and End Lessons with Meaningful Activities**

Each daily lesson should start with a reflective journal prompt about culture and people's interactions with the environment. Lack of reflective thinking is a problem within itself (Elder & Paul, 1996; Riggs & Hellyer-Riggs, 2010), and to a great extent, global perspectives rely on students gaining awareness through reflective thinking. There is much research to support that reflective thinking leads to greater awareness and genuine understanding (Carden et al., 2022). Teachers should start their daily lessons with a journal prompt that allows students to examine their own opinions and where those opinions originated. However, it is not enough to simply assign journal prompts—students should be encouraged to share their reflections with their classmates.

Without sharing, some students will not be exposed to different perspectives or opposing worldviews as they relate to matters of quality of life or sustainability. Moreover, sharing reflections can enlighten students and scaffold background knowledge. The intended outcome is that students use what they hear to question their own beliefs about the interrelationship between humans and the environment. Ultimately, if students question their own beliefs in one area, they may start to question their beliefs in other areas. This supports Freire's critical pedagogy and beliefs about ecopedagogy as the common thread that connects individuals.

To achieve this level of questioning and reflection, it is essential that teachers create respectful, culturally inclusive, safe classroom environments. If students are uncomfortable or feel that their opinions are undervalued, they will not share their views. The teacher should lead in setting the tone for classroom discourse and be consistent with their approach to assigning prompts and sharing views. Reflective journal prompts should be relevant to the lesson and can be teacher-created, student-created, or co-created. It is suggested that lessons end with a short assessment (such as a learning log completed by students to show at least five new things they learned from the day's lesson).

### **Develop Ecopedagogy-Based Interdisciplinary Units**

To create an interdisciplinary unit, teachers can begin by developing an integrated curriculum map. The map should include mandatory standards from state social studies curricula and relevant science standards. Teachers should provide students with an interest inventory, the purpose of which is to determine students' greatest environmental concerns. An inventory is necessary because students may not be aware of their own concerns until they verbalize their worries or they are presented with a potential list of issues to consider. Students have varying levels of environmental awareness depending on their exposure and vested interest in the topic.

Based on student feedback, teachers can choose instructional topics that are relevant. From there, teachers can facilitate dialogue designed to create local-global connections. Dialogue should focus on the role of the individual in society and civic responsibility to protect the environment, as these are some of the principles of global perspectives and environmental education. As students internalize how their local communities evolved and how their communities were influenced by culture, they can begin to learn how other countries and communities have done the same. The underlying belief is that fostering local and global connections motivates students to learn to become leaders in their communities and the world and become solution-seekers.

Regardless of location, teachers of global perspectives can research international conditions that are mirrored in their local communities. Teaching about global issues is not restricted to urban districts. Teachers in rural or suburban districts can relate their content to communities with similar concerns. For example, American rural areas might struggle with pollution from chemicals or crop destruction from super-pests. To create an ecopedagogical and global connection, teachers in rural settings can encourage students to conduct an online search for rural areas in Asia or Europe that may be experiencing similar challenges. The purpose of this teacher model of inquiry is two-fold in that it leads to more profound teacher content knowledge and shows students the importance of investigating world perspectives. Ultimately, students will see that while the earth may appear vast in its physical dimensions, the shared human experience contributes to a sense of global "smallness."

Once the unit has been developed, teachers can proceed to create opportunities for students to be active participants. One way to accomplish this is to conduct lessons outside. In Sweden, history and science are taught outside (Larsson & Rönnlund, 2021). This exposure allows students to investigate the environment as they learn about its history. Moreover, as they learn about its history, they can begin to understand how some of its problems originated. From there, a discussion can take place to determine the role of humans in creating the problem and

what actions can be taken to correct the problem.

Collaboration and immersive activities allow students and teachers to become active agents of change when it comes to positive teaching and learning practices related to social-environmental instruction. Teachers need not travel around the world to provide students with real-world experience to develop an effective interdisciplinary unit that covers social studies and environmental education.

### **Provide Opportunities for Student Growth and Learning**

Active learning is one of many ways to support students as they develop their sense of environmental awareness and stewardship (Misiaszek, 2023; Özdemir, 2022). To measure learning outcomes, students can create a culminating project for each instructional unit. For example, after learning about social-environmental topics, students can complete a small project that includes group and individual components. This satisfies the learning needs of students who may enjoy working with others but also wish to work on certain assignments on their own. Of the topics learned, students can choose the one they are most passionate about. Students can be placed in collaborative groups based on their topic of interest. They can conduct research for evidence that the issue exists locally and globally. From there, they can search for workable solutions to the problem. They should be encouraged to discuss the solutions to determine the effectiveness of each solution. Each group member can then choose a solution and conduct his or her own research to support the solution.

Students should consider their solutions from multiple global themes (i.e., economic, political, environmental) and determine the benefits of the solutions. To create elevated engagement, students can present their own individual research findings through a student-led research conference. Students should be provided with options on how they would like to present their projects. Providing options to students supports the practice of differentiated instruction and allows students to take pride and ownership of their work. Students should be encouraged to present their projects using any of the various multi-media presentation options available (e.g., presentation slides, video productions, animated skits, audience question-answer sessions).

Approaching a culminating project in this manner allows students to learn real-life, lifelong skills that they can transfer to authentic situations. These skills include digital citizenship, collaboration, problem-solving, research, and cultural competence. Such a project supports the very principles of social studies, global perspectives, interdisciplinary learning, and ecopedagogy.

### **Benefits of Utilizing an Ecopedagogical Approach to Global Perspectives**

Teaching and learning global perspectives through ecopedagogy empowers teachers and students beyond simply acquiring knowledge. The method fosters critical thinking skills, intercultural understanding, a sense of agency, and a connection to the environment. This multifaceted approach equips teachers and students with the necessary tools and motivation to become responsible global citizens, actively shaping a more sustainable future for themselves and generations to come.



## **Positive Outcomes for Teachers**

### *Increased Environmental Literacy*

Teaching using the principles of ecopedagogy increases teachers' environmental awareness, thus increasing their own environmental literacy and consequently allowing the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student (Samur & Akman, 2023). Environmental literacy is comprised of content information paired with research skills and the ability to teach others about environmental issues (Fang et al., 2023; Samur & Akman, 2023). In an era of global challenges like environmental degradation and climate change, equipping teachers with effective tools to cultivate responsible global citizens is crucial. Ecopedagogy, as a tool rooted in ecological and social principles, offers a structure for increasing environmental literacy. Because the teacher plays a pivotal role in fostering students' environmental literacy, the responsibility goes beyond simply imparting knowledge about ecosystems and conservation (Cheng & So, 2015; Samur & Akman, 2023). Teachers can show students how their communities are connected to the earth through the actions and experiences of its people.

### *Reflective Practice*

Another benefit to teachers is increased reflective practice. As teachers connect their behavior to environmental factors, they can begin to alter their behavior in a responsible and responsive manner. This action is an example of enhanced critical thinking and reflective skills that evolve as teachers emphasize the role of the environment in societies (Marques & Xavier, 2021). As teachers reflect on their instructional methods, they can identify areas for growth and improvement. This may lead teachers to pinpoint areas in their own professional practice where they can adopt and model more sustainable earth-conscious teaching methods.

### *Enhanced Virtual Professional Development*

Online collaboration with other educators provides meaningful professional development (Kučerová, 2023). Cooperative, interdisciplinary discussions and shared resources can expose teachers to new perspectives, innovative teaching methods, and best practices in their field. Working together on shared challenges allows educators to leverage diverse expertise and brainstorm collective solutions, leading to well-informed and effective classroom strategies. Teachers who choose to collaborate online with other teachers demonstrate increased self-efficacy (Kučerová, 2022). Self-efficacy refers to a teachers' belief in their capability to successfully learn a skill or teach a skill or concept (Pearl et al., 2023). In the context of teaching global perspectives through ecopedagogy, this translates to teachers' confidence in their ability to convey environmental content, implement meaningful learning techniques, and positively impact student learning.

### *Increased Classroom Engagement*

Ecopedagogy provides a wealth of options for transformative learning experiences. Teachers can create engaging and authentic learning environments by incorporating activities like nature walks, collaborations with local environmental organizations, and community service projects. This approach fosters both student and teacher

engagement, motivating educators to explore more purposeful teaching methods. Furthermore, combining these methods with international teacher partnerships can significantly increase engagement. Through these partnerships, both teachers and students gain valuable insights into how diverse groups around the world address environmental challenges. This deeper understanding stems from learning about the unique values and perspectives that shape how different communities approach these issues.

### **Positive Outcomes for Students**

#### *Environmental Responsibility*

Ecopedagogy transcends traditional global perspectives approaches that primarily focus on economic or political differences. It encourages students to understand the interconnectedness of global environmental challenges, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the planet. This surpasses geographic borders and encourages students to recognize the impact of local actions on a global scale, promoting a sense of global citizenship. One benefit, out of many, is a deep sense of responsibility for environmental responsibility (Mohamed et al., 2022). Students who feel connected to nature tend to be more likely to engage in nature-based activities as they grow older (Mohamed et al., 2022).

#### *Intercultural Understanding*

Examining environmental challenges through diverse cultural perspectives allows students to develop empathy and understanding for world communities affected by environmental issues. This fosters appreciation for different perspectives on resource management, conservation initiatives, and sustainability practices, promoting intercultural understanding and global citizenship (Misiaszek, 2015). Instead of reading current events or watching news stories, students begin to understand the direct impact these challenges have on global communities. When students only see environmental issues from their own local or cultural lens, they might hold implicit biases about how these challenges should be addressed. Exposing them to diverse perspectives helps them recognize that their own viewpoint is just one of many, making them rethink their assumptions.

#### *Enhanced Critical Thinking across Disciplines*

Unlike traditional global perspectives approaches which may be abstract, ecopedagogy anchors critical thinking in concrete real-world environmental challenges. With teacher guidance, students can learn to analyze case studies, engage in problem-solving activities, and analyze potential solutions, all within the context of global environmental issues. This fosters critical thinking skills that are directly applicable to addressing tangible, realistic problems and empower students to make informed decisions for a sustainable future. Thinking across disciplines pushes students to identify key factors and consider social, economic, and environmental factors that create challenges for communities. Along the way, students consider multiple perspectives and explore how different stakeholders are affected by the issue. In essence, ecopedagogy equips students with the critical thinking tools necessary to navigate the complexities of the world and become informed and responsible individuals who can actively contribute to solving global environmental challenges.

## Conclusion

For many years, teaching global perspectives relied heavily on researching and summarizing current events centered on economics and international political systems. Although these are significant global topics, teachers should broaden and enhance their instructional practices to emphasize global perspectives elements that focus on local and global connections. Teachers of global perspectives should develop interdisciplinary units that integrate social studies and environmental education so that students can learn to connect local issues with global problems. Using ecopedagogy as a critical approach is a cultural commitment to educating students in earth-friendly practices to ensure that history can be enjoyed by future generations.

The classroom is a powerful environment for teaching, but it can be limiting when it comes to how students expand their global perspectives skillset. Authentic experiences are crucial for growth, but the experiences need to be planned and intentional. In meeting students' needs, educators must continue to evolve as globally competent teachers. Global competence begets global competence. Although much of this paper focused on global perspectives, the principles can be applied to multiple social studies courses. Interdisciplinary learning as a best practice should be considered. Because the world is increasingly globalized, it is critical that students understand their impact on their local environment and the world. There are several potential benefits of utilizing ecopedagogy as an educational framework. Some of these benefits for teachers and students include increased environmental awareness, heightened critical thinking, and increased global collaboration. Fostering genuine global perspectives requires *moving beyond traditional methods* and embracing creative approaches that *connect students to the real world* and encourages them to think critically about their role in a globalized society.

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