



Global Learners, Global Leaders: Building the Knowledge, Empathy, and Skills to Lead in an Interconnected World

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Abstract

Global Learners, Global Leaders is an elementary-level program designed to cultivate globally competent students through an integrated approach that combines language learning, cultural exploration, and engagement with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As globalization increasingly shapes social, environmental, and economic systems, education must equip young learners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to understand diverse perspectives and address complex global challenges. Global competence involves the ability to examine issues of local and global significance, communicate across cultures, and take informed action toward sustainable and inclusive societies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). Today's students are tomorrow's problem-solvers. This program encourages elementary learners to explore the world with curiosity, empathy, and a sense of shared responsibility. Through age-appropriate, interdisciplinary units, students develop foundational language skills that support cross-cultural communication and appreciation for linguistic diversity. Research indicates that early bilingual and multilingual education can strengthen executive functioning, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving abilities in young learners, contributing to broader cognitive and academic development (Alabi, 2024; Barbu et al., 2024). Students also explore diverse cultures and perspectives to understand the value of inclusion, collaboration, and respect for cultural differences. Through inquiry-based and project-based learning experiences, learners investigate global challenges—including climate change, access to clean water, and social equality—through the framework of the SDGs. By emphasizing critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and ethical decision-making, Global Learners, Global Leaders prepares students to thrive in an interconnected world and contribute as informed, responsible global citizens.

Keywords: *Global competence, intercultural education, sustainable development, dual immersion, elementary education*

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, education must extend beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge to include the development of skills necessary for navigating complex global systems. Students are required not only to understand content but also to engage with diverse perspectives, communicate across cultural boundaries, and contribute meaningfully to addressing global challenges. Global competence has therefore emerged as a critical educational priority. Global Learners, Global Leaders is an elementary-level framework designed to cultivate globally competent students through language learning, cultural exploration, and engagement with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As globalization increasingly shapes social, environmental, and economic systems, education must equip learners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to understand diverse perspectives and address complex global challenges. Through interdisciplinary learning experiences, inquiry, and opportunities for action, students develop communication skills, intercultural understanding, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) defines global competence as the capacity to examine issues of local and global significance, understand and appreciate multiple perspectives, engage in intercultural interactions, and to take action for collective well-being. The *Global Learners, Global Leaders* framework responds to this need by embedding global competence into elementary education through

interdisciplinary, language-rich, and sustainability-focused instruction. Rather than treating global education as an isolated subject, this framework integrates it into daily teaching and learning, positioning students as future changemakers capable of contributing to a more just and interconnected world.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of this work is grounded in global competence and education for sustainable development. The OECD (2018) framework identifies four core dimensions of global competence: investigating the world, recognizing perspectives, communicating ideas, and taking action. These dimensions align closely with Fernando Reimers' vision of education as a moral imperative, in which students are empowered to improve the world through knowledge, empathy, and purposeful action. In parallel, UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that education must equip learners with the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs provide a meaningful framework for connecting classroom learning to real-world challenges, including climate change, inequality, and access to education. Additionally, research on bilingual and multilingual education underscores the cognitive benefits of early language learning. Studies demonstrate that students engaged in immersion programs exhibit enhanced executive functioning, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving skills (Alabi, 2024; Barbu et al., 2024). These findings support the integration of language learning as a central component of global competence development. Together these foundations support an integrated model that develops knowledge, empathy, communication skills, and civic engagement.

Program Design and Implementation

The *Global Learners, Global Leaders* framework provides a comprehensive K–5 instructional model that integrates global competence into everyday teaching practices. It is guided by a vision of empowering learners to become curious, compassionate, and capable global leaders through language, inquiry, and purposeful action. This vision is supported by six guiding principles, including interconnectedness, multilingualism, critical thinking, collaboration, agency, and inclusive curriculum, which collectively ensure that global learning is embedded within core instructional practices rather than treated as an add-on. A key feature of the framework is its developmentally aligned structure, which organizes learning around grade-level themes connected to the Sustainable Development Goals, [Table 1](#). Younger learners begin by developing empathy and understanding of their immediate environment, while older students engage with more complex issues such as sustainability, equity, and global partnerships. This progression allows students to build knowledge and skills in ways that are both age-appropriate and increasingly sophisticated. Instruction within the framework is grounded in inquiry-based and project-based learning approaches. Students explore essential questions related to global issues, engage in perspective-taking, and collaborate with peers to develop solutions. Creative expression through art, storytelling, and multimedia further supports students in making connections between their learning and the world around them. The model is flexible enough to be implemented in dual language immersion programs, world language programs, and general education classrooms. Learning experiences may be delivered through interdisciplinary units, capstone projects, service-learning opportunities, and classroom investigations. Students explore topics such as environmental sustainability, cultural diversity, health and well-being, access to education, and community development. These themes provide meaningful opportunities to connect local experiences with global issues. Language learning is integrated throughout, enabling students to develop communication skills and an appreciation for linguistic diversity, which provides students the opportunity to strengthen their ability to communicate across cultures and engage with diverse communities.

Impact on Student Learning

The implementation of the *Global Learners, Global Leaders* framework supports multiple dimensions of student development. From a cognitive perspective, participation in bilingual and globally focused learning experiences enhances executive functioning, memory, and problem-solving abilities (Alabi, 2024; Barbu et al., 2024). Equally important are the social-emotional and intercultural outcomes. Students develop empathy and the ability to understand diverse perspectives through exposure to global cultures and issues. These experiences foster respect, inclusion, and a deeper appreciation for diversity.



Engagement is also significantly enhanced when learning is connected to real-world challenges. Inquiry-based instruction encourages curiosity and student ownership, while project-based learning provides opportunities for meaningful application. As students explore SDG-aligned topics, they begin to see themselves as agents of change, developing a sense of civic responsibility and ethical awareness (UNESCO, 2017).

Assessment and Evidence of Learning

Assessment within this framework is designed to be authentic, reflective, and formative, emphasizing growth in global competence rather than solely content mastery. Students demonstrate their learning through a variety of modalities, including reflection journals, presentations, creative projects, and portfolios that document their evolving understanding of global issues. Evaluation criteria focus on students' ability to understand global challenges, consider multiple perspectives, collaborate effectively, communicate ideas, and take informed action. This approach aligns assessment practices with the broader goals of global competence and sustainability education, ensuring that students are evaluated on both knowledge and dispositions.

Discussion

The integration of global competence and sustainability education within elementary classrooms represents a significant shift in educational practice. Rather than positioning global education as an additional component, the *Global Learners, Global Leaders* framework embeds it within the core curriculum, making it accessible and relevant to all learners. This approach highlights the importance of early exposure to global learning. Elementary education provides a critical foundation for developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for navigating a complex and interconnected world. By introducing global concepts at a young age, educators can foster long-term engagement and prepare students for future academic and professional success. Furthermore, the educational model demonstrates the importance of aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment with global goals. It also underscores the need for professional development and collaboration among educators to support effective implementation. The framework also aligns with major educational priorities, including the OECD Global Competence Framework, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, ACTFL World-Readiness Standards, and the Virginia Profile of a Graduate. This alignment demonstrates that global learning is not an additional initiative but rather a powerful approach for achieving existing educational goals while preparing students for future success.

Conclusion

The *Global Learners, Global Leaders* framework illustrates the transformative potential of integrating global competence, language learning, and sustainability education in elementary settings. By providing students with opportunities to explore global issues, engage with diverse perspectives, and take meaningful action, this model prepares learners to thrive in an interconnected world. As global challenges continue to evolve, education systems must prioritize approaches that foster critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration. This framework offers a practical and scalable model for cultivating the next generation of global learners and leaders, ensuring that students are equipped not only to understand the world, but also to improve it.

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