At the UNESCO Forum On Global Citizenship Education, Youth Reveal a Fierce Commitment to Change

I participated in the UNESCO Forum on Global Citizenship Education: Preparing learners for the challenge of the 21st Century in Bangkok, Thailand from December 2-4 2013. During the three-day conference, I had the opportunity to engage and learn from scholars, educators and leaders representing organizations such as UNFPA, TakingITGlobal and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) who offered their experiences and perspectives on education. The conference explored a range of topics including education in relation to sexuality education, peace building and conflict prevention, teacher education and technology.

As members of the youth delegation, we engaged with young activists from over twenty countries who shared a similar commitment to education and a sense of hope and idealism that education plays a necessary role in promoting peace, fostering understanding and bridging ethnic and cultural divides.

During two youth-focused sessions facilitated by Chernor Bah, Chair of the Youth Advocacy Group for the Global Education First Initiative and Deepika Joon, National Program Officer at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development, we discussed the meaning of global citizenship education (GCE), outlined the most profound challenges that youth currently face, and discussed practical and action-based solutions to engage youth in a global conversation about the importance of education.

There were two important lessons that I took away from the forum. First, GCE transcends national, cultural and ethnic divides. The defining principles of GCE -- a belief in equality, compassion, empathy, hope for a better future and a commitment to human rights -- were common to all of us.

During a time of technological change, youth unemployment, rising university costs and civil conflict, we recognized the need for GCE, not only as a method of teaching in the classroom, but also as a mindset that should permeate both formal and informal learning. GCE is a philosophy of education of how we should treat one another and how we should envision the future. If we -- the young people, the next generation -- are to develop "interconnected" and multidimensional solutions, we need a "toolkit" to think about these "interconnected" and multilayered problems.

Consequently, the theme of "integration" became a driving force of our conversations. As our world becomes increasingly globalized, we cannot think of ourselves as isolated and insular individuals. In order to "respond to these emerging global challenges which require a collective response," we need to be aware of and responsive to the problems affecting communities beyond our own borders.

Second, I learned that the local and the global are inextricably connected and wholly dependent upon one another. Global citizenship education begins with understanding the social, political and economic challenges within our own neighborhoods and then compels us to frame and explore them through a global lens. GCE urges us to examine how our interactions on local, regional, national and global levels are influenced and shaped by one another.

On September 21, 2013 on the International Day of Peace, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, "Education is vital for fostering global citizenship and building peaceful societies."

The UNESCO forum reinvigorated my belief that our world needs a culture of empathy and understanding. We need to weave threads between communities and countries, linking individuals by our shared understanding that we are all citizens who bear equal responsibility and accountability in "fostering global citizenship and building peaceful societies." To eradicate extreme hunger, promote gender equality and ensure environmental sustainability, we need quality universal education. We need global citizenship education. Global citizenship education offers us the toolkit to become disruptive agents of change, mobilize resources and build sustainable development for our communities.
Forged by my experiences as a young woman, as the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants, and by my education in Chicago, Swaziland, Cambodia and now Abu Dhabi, I have seen the power of education to transform individuals, strengthen communities and inspire a sense of hope for a more inclusive and equitable future. My experiences compel me to believe that education is the way forward.

As I spoke to and listened to advocates and leaders discuss their educational initiatives, I was inspired by the already existing energy for GCE and the belief that Nelson Mandela championed, which is that, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

In memory of Mandela and his tireless fight for education, we must continue to do more together as global citizens. At the GCE forum, I was again reminded that we -- the youth -- have a responsibility to drive change, inspire action and make connections between communities across the world.

Wherever you are in the world, there are many ways to take action: (1) Join a group dedicated to change; (2) Share ideas with friends and colleagues; (3) Remain persistent; (4) Start local; (5) Define short-term measurable goals for action.

As youth, we must continue to create, change and amplify our vision for our futures.

*From the Concept Note for the UNESCO Forum on Global Citizenship Education: Preparing learners for the challenge of the 21st Century

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Thanks, Sofia, for bringing to light that youth understand that local, national and global peace and prosperity are interconnected and wholly dependent upon each other. They have embraced the concept that world peace is possible through global citizenship and collaboration for a better today and tomorrow. Meanwhile, it is incumbent upon educators everywhere to harness this optimism -- along with the Internet -- to use education as, you say, "a powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Below is a vision for Islamic school leadership that promotes educating for world peace:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpBjpEAtOKM

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