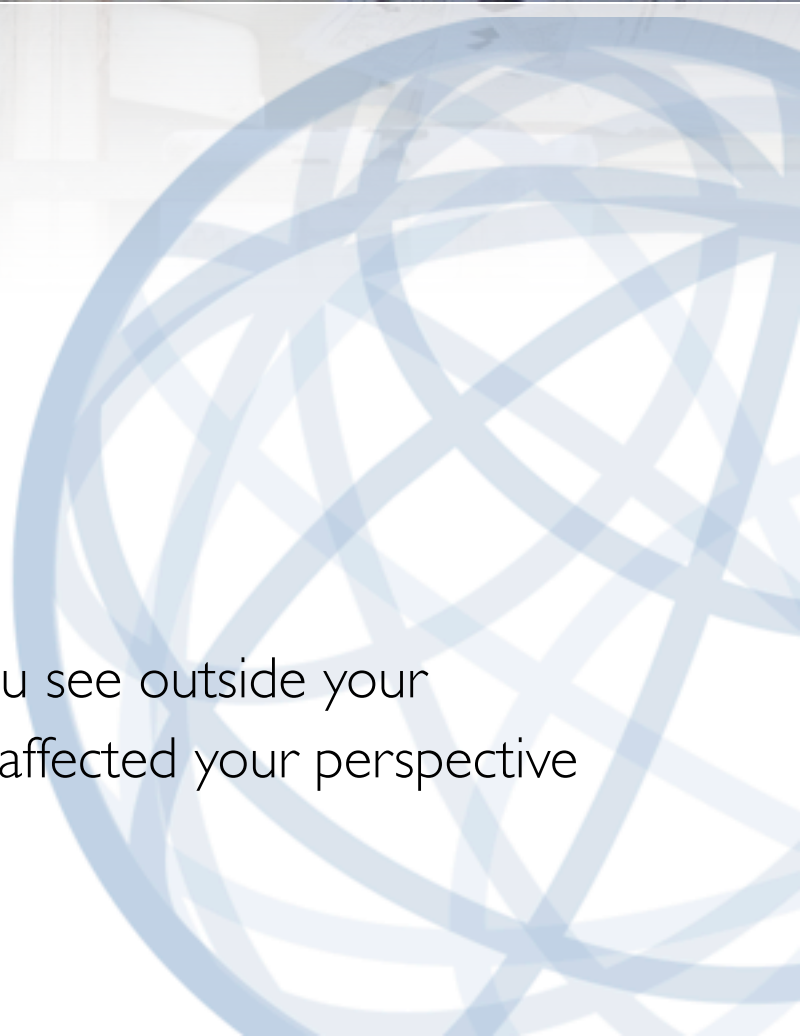




TEACHERS WITHOUT BORDERS

ASSIGNMENT: “What do you see outside your window? How has your view affected your perspective on education?”





What do you see outside your window? This question may seem strange at first, but allow us to explain. In 1999 (well before the social media explosion), one of your instructors asked a seemingly innocent question of teachers around the world via email: What do you see outside your window?

He asked it because he wanted to know more about the experience of teachers by connecting directly. Today, these seamless connections are commonplace. But back then; two responses (from two diverse parts of the world) to that question inspired the launching of Teachers Without Borders

What we see out our windows – in other words, our perspectives – are as relevant as ever because the teacher’s voice is often not heard. So, we ask you to take a creative leap for a moment. Describe the view from outside your window. There is no reason to answer all the suggestions below. They are only prompts. But we do hope you will respond both literally and figuratively. Length: A page and a half (approximately).

- Suggestions: What do you see? Bars? Open fields? What does your classroom look like? What do the desks look like? How do students travel to get to your classroom? What are the obstacles along the way? What are your daily rituals? What do you worry about? What are students' biggest worries?
- We hope the visual (outside your window) inspires reflection. You might want to address your challenges and opportunities, the obstacles your students face, or your views on an ideal global education. In the latter case, could that vision center on place? Subject? Theme? If you had the power (even a magic wand) to change education globally in order to meet your ideal, what would you do? Would you work at the level of the school, the district, and the government? Would you focus on policy? Pedagogy? An entirely new perspective?



DR. FRED MEDNICK, FOUNDER

As a high-school principal in the 80s and 90s, I sought a global perspective on issues of education, childhood, the future, and an increasingly technological world. I have always been disturbed by educational injustice (the knowledge haves and have-nots). I wanted to remove barriers and borders in order to level the learning playing field.

I looked outside my window and, frankly, was bored and claustrophobic. Bored by the tyranny of the urgent (yet, in perspective, not urgent at all). Claustrophobic about not being able to reach beyond the boundaries of my school.

At the time, I told myself that I really had very little to complain about. After all, I have had the good fortune of running the finest schools in two major cities, each with an innovative and caring faculty. I was even ashamed of myself for feeling this way. Nevertheless, Nevertheless, I felt as if I were getting too comfortable. Having lived in China and the Middle East, I wanted to be challenged by new ideas. My parents once told me a story about Elie Wiesel, the holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner. When he came home from school each day, Dr. Wiesel's parents did not grill him about whether or not he got good marks. Instead, they asked: "Did you ask any good questions today?"

I asked teachers around the world to describe what they saw outside their windows. What I learned from them changed me. It still does.

That's the spirit of inquiry and the value of an education I was seeking. I wanted to ask good questions. I longed to be in and of the world, rather than a distant bystander. After several conversations with the faculty, I was encouraged to remain as the head of the school, yet earn my doctorate.

I decided to study the qualities of an educated young person for the 21st century and so began to reach out to teachers. To get the conversation going, I asked teachers around the world to describe what they saw outside their windows.

From there,

I asked them to abstract a little and reflect on their views of education and how it might support the world's students. I knew the question was a bit abstract. I feared that nobody would respond.

I was wrong. With humility and grace, teachers flooded me with generous, insightful stories. Teachers in war zones. Teachers with few resources. Teachers at the beginning and the end of their careers. What I learned from them changed me. It still does. Brains truly are distributed throughout the world.

On one particularly pivotal day, a teacher from Nicaragua and another from Norway described what they saw outside their windows. After having suffered through weeks of unbearable heat, the Nicaraguan teacher wanted to see and feel snow for the first time.

Outside My Window...

The Norwegian, feeling trapped by dark northern days ahead, longed to bask in the sun. I connected the two teachers, and what followed was a set of rich interactions they shared, with me.

I quit my comfortable job as a principal in 2000 and launched [Teachers Without Borders](#) (TWB), a global non-profit designed to connect teacher development with global challenges.

The vision of the organization has not changed. Teachers remain the true catalysts of change, the acupuncture points of our society, and the glue that holds our world together.

Thirteen years later, with a small staff and an army of volunteers, TWB has been embraced by members in 184 countries. When something happens in the world, I contact a teacher who lives there.

I'm never disappointed. TWB is their organization. All TWB programs are conceived and led by teachers.

I often tell stories of teachers who don't have time—but somehow make time—for students, their parents, and their communities. Teachers who don't have much pocket change, but who make change anyway. Teachers who don't have resources, but fashion them from local materials, their own creativity, and the expertise of colleagues. Teachers without publicity firms, yet capable of transforming thousands, regardless of who is looking. Teachers who don't wait for an act of Congress, but perform acts of conscience.

At 59+ million, teachers represent the largest professionally-trained group in the world. They

know who is sick or missing or orphaned by AIDS. They have their ear to the ground. Every day, they take the community's pulse.

Unfortunately, their voices are rarely heard. More often than not, they are demonized as the problem, rather than the solution. In far too many cases, teachers are the subject of attack.

In many settings around the world, the view outside one's window may appear bleak, but only teachers can make it better.

In 2012, the view outside TWB's window got clearer and brighter. We saw past organizational borders and created deeper partnerships, an affiliation with a world-class university, the acquisition of pro-bono expertise that gave us an unprecedented opportunity to concentrate more effectively on mission and impact.

It's not easy to run a non-governmental organization. It's not easy to teach. But our challenges pale in comparison to what millions of teachers face every day. Natural and national disasters. Children at risk. Countries in turmoil.

But we're back at it every day. We simply have no time to waste.

Some day, I hope to meet the Nicaraguan and Norwegian teacher who inspired me to start Teachers Without Borders, but it matters little; I still hold them close.

Fred Mednick, EdD - Founder, Teachers Without Borders; Visiting Fellow, Johns Hopkins University School of Education



An Example...

Cuenca, Ecuador

If I look out the window at this time of the afternoon (around 2:30 p.m.), I'm likely to see the bright blue sky, lit by a close Equatorial sun, changing quickly as rain-heavy clouds blow in for the afternoon downpour.

Cuenca, Ecuador...

My school is right in the middle of the historic center of Cuenca: two blocks away, tourists from all over the world gaze up at the blue domes of the Catedral Nueva; the restaurants nearby are full of the gringos from the U.S. and Canada who've come here to retire. The difference between the Cuenca they live in and the city my students live in is vast.

This is not a residential area; my view out the window is of a shoe store, a cyber (internet café), a photo-developing shop, etc. The students come here from neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city, most traveling half an hour or more on city buses. There are three shifts at the school: primary students in the morning and secondary students in the afternoon and night. At five foot seven (1.7 m), I have trouble fitting into the desks; some of the teenage boys have the same difficulty (though very few of my Ecuadorian students are actually as tall as I am!).

If I fast forward to 3:40 p.m., I can cross the hall to look out one of the windows that overlooks the inner courtyard, a concrete space about half the size of the gym in most U.S. schools. This is where 980 students spend the 20-minute recess: there are a couple of goals set up, and some boys play football while others play volleyball using the goal as a net – weaving in and out of the footballers.

The rest of the students walk laps around the courtyard, gossiping and laughing.

On a survey I gave to students last year, the vast majority said that the lack of recreational space was the biggest problem at the school: “we walk in circles, like in a prison or an insane asylum.” Nevertheless, the sounds of recess are laughter and conversation. The low incidence of fights in this claustrophobic space continues to amaze me.

Fast forward again, and at 6:20 p.m., we can head downstairs to look out through the iron bars of the front gate. The afternoon students are pouring out into the plaza in front of the school while the night students arrive from work, pulling their uniform sweaters on over jeans. They will be in classes until 10:15, arriving home at 11 p.m. or later, waking up to go to work again in the morning.

These students are more likely than the afternoon students to show up bearing visible signs of the wear and tear of life at the edge of poverty: more pregnant girls; a hand cut in a cell phone robbery and healing badly; an infected tooth that hasn't been seen by a dentist; respiratory illnesses that drag on and on.

These students are also more likely, though, to attempt conversations in English with me, to pay attention when the teacher is speaking, to ask questions about what they've just learned.

Ecuador, p.3

To be honest, I'm not really sure what connections to draw between what I see out these windows and 'big picture' ideas about education. What I've given here is such an incomplete, fragmented glimpse...

But I'm caught on this idea of seeing. Being an educator has so much to do with vision—looking at our students fully and honestly, helping & encouraging them to look at the world with curiosity and a critical eye. And seeing, on their behalf, what might not yet be clear: that they are, to use the example from Laura K's classroom, “smart enough to be what they want to be”.

Port-au-Prince, Haiti



The first impressions when I wake up in Port-au-Prince are sounds. Hymns resonate from local churches, dogs bark, horns blare and roosters crow. Then I start to hear the sounds of foot traffic as people begin their long walks to schools and work.

When I look out of the bars of the school building where I sleep, I see parents walking their children to school, clad in neatly washed uniforms. It always impressed me how dedicated families are to education in Haiti. Despite waking up in a hot and possibly wet tent or small cement structure, their children are cleanly dressed and ready for school.

Many children walk alone and some as far as 2.6 miles to get to school in time for an 8:30am start. They start out before the sun even comes over the mountains that encircle Port-au-Prince. and some have not even completed secondary school themselves.

Port-au-Prince, p. 2

Every day they come to school faced with 40+ students who are hungry, often sick, sometimes abused and severely traumatized. They typically have a blackboard, chalk and benches and that is all. Less than 20% of the students will have their required books due to lack of family funds. The school may or may not have walls. Many classrooms are separated by hanging sheets, very few have electricity or running water. The school and its teachers may be a target of violence or extortion if the neighborhood gangs believe that they are too many resources there.

So when I am in Haiti, and I know all of this, why do I feel such palpable hope and joy? What keeps us all from thinking that this situation is just too difficult? I have learned more from the students and teachers at our school in Haiti, than I could ever provide

them. They show resiliency and hope in the face of difficulty.

They exude joy at the opportunity to learn and they put in the hard work to achieve success. I have seen the transformation of 145 children over the past three years. Despite the difficulties, they are growing healthier, physically and mentally. They are participating in rare educational opportunities like library time, art and music. The teachers are participating in ongoing training and continuous learning. But foremost, they have become a community.

They support and love each other and have found a way to create an island of hope and calm in their tumultuous lives.

So when I look out at the streets of Port-au-Prince, I see opportunity!