

Friday Institute Education Brief

Engaging in Global Inquiry: Teachers and Students as Agents of Change

Recent events, like the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement against racial injustice, have underscored the interconnectedness of our country and world. To navigate our continuously changing global context, schools need to prepare students to be globally competent; STEM and STEAM knowledgeable; creative problem solvers and critical thinkers; and effective communicators and collaborators. The [New Literacies Collaborative \(NLC\)](#) at the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation is addressing these learning needs through a collaborative, global inquiry-to-action process called [Project-Based Inquiry \(PBI\) Global](#) (see Figure 1 for PBI Global process and design features).

During this process, learners' inquiry is focused on one or more of the [U.N. Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) with inquiry findings being shared at a showcase. Additionally, students and teachers work together to plan and carry out collective social action to bring awareness to and take steps toward meeting the targets set for their focal U.N. SDG.

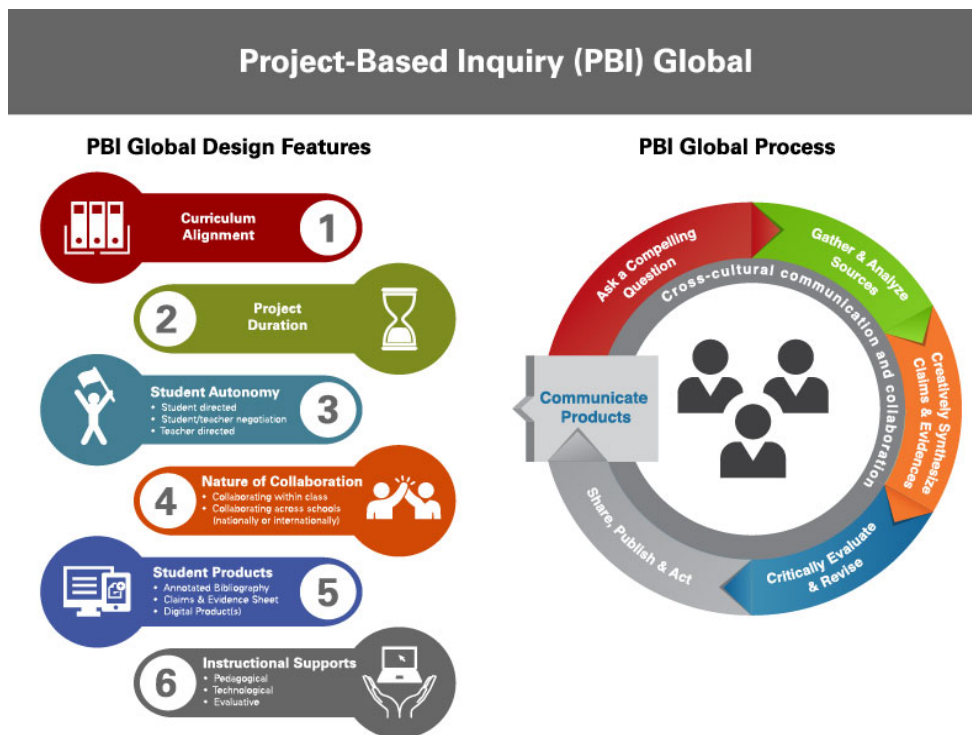


Figure 1: [PBI Global Design Features and Process.](#)

Through an [NSF DRK-12 Grant](#), the NLC is partnering with two North Carolina Cooperative, Innovative High Schools, [Person Early College for Innovation and Leadership](#) and [Wake STEM Early College](#), to engage in PBI Global focused on U.N. SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation with 9th grade students and teachers at each school. This rural-urban school partnership has afforded the research team with the opportunity to investigate how PBI Global supports students' science content knowledge and learning motivation, as well as teachers' comfortability with facilitating inquiry learning across differing learning contexts.

Based on data gathered through student and teacher focus groups and surveys, as well as student science content knowledge assessments, students and teachers viewed the inquiry focus on enduring global challenges to be important and motivational. Many students who participated in the social action of a Walk for Water -- fundraising for a water well building nonprofit by walking 3 miles carrying two gallons of water to simulate the walk that many women and children carry out daily to gather water -- expressed how that experience amplified their inquiry through the development of a greater sense of empathy. Additionally, teachers and students noted how the inquiry-to-action experience contributed to a growing sense of empowerment and agency.

Practical Suggestions

Based on these findings, we offer some practical suggestions for teachers wishing to engage in PBI Global with their students:

- **Choose a U.N. SDG focus for inquiry that aligns well with your curriculum standards.** PBI Global works best when it is implemented as part of the instructional mores of your classroom environment. Students will need to understand why and how their inquiry connects to broader course constructs.
- **Recognize that students may need additional support to access and build background knowledge prior to developing their Compelling Questions.** If your SDG focus is relatively new to students and/or if students are new to designing research questions, they will likely need instruction on the global issue to be investigated as well as how to structure robust Compelling Questions to guide research. We frequently launch PBI Globals with students all engaging in a common read. For the project highlighted in this brief, all students read *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park prior to developing their inquiry questions.
- **Communicate project expectations clearly to students during all phases of inquiry.** We have found it to be beneficial to explain the project to students by beginning with the end in mind; share what students' inquiry focus is (U.N. SDG) and then what learning products students will be sharing at the showcase and how the showcase will be formatted.

PBI Global necessitates teachers making informed decisions regarding the pedagogical, technological and evaluative supports needed by students throughout their inquiry. The level of student autonomy (e.g., Will students design their own Compelling Questions? Be given choices? Or will the Compelling Questions be assigned by the teacher?) and nature of collaboration (i.e., Will students work in small groups within one class? Across multiple classes? Across schools?) may impact student motivation and influence project duration and complexity. Thus, during planning, teachers must think deeply about the structure of their students' inquiry and the contingent scaffolds necessary to support learners throughout the process.

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