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Educating Billy Wang For the World of Tomorrow

By Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Howard Gardner

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Meet Billy Wang, student extraordinaire for the new millennium. Billy's family moved from China in 1997, when he was 14 years old. Like millions of other immigrants over the last decade, the Wang family voted with its feet after concluding that Billy would have far better opportunities in the United States. They chose to settle in Boston, in part because of the city's fame as America's educational Mecca.

At 5 feet, 4 inches, Billy was dealt a severe reality check on his dreams for NBA stardom as soon as he faced the much taller boys on his new school's basketball court. But Billy quickly excelled in school. A Taishanese speaker, he picked up Cantonese (the language of his peers in his multiethnic school) on his way to English. By his freshman year in high school, Billy was earning top grades in English, math, and computer science. By his sophomore year, Billy continued to succeed academically and had discovered two new hobbies:

building and programming computers and playing simulation games in stock trading. With his newly assembled computer, he kept in touch with old friends in China and made new friends in Boston and beyond.

Billy's teachers loved him, often referring to his belief in hard work and effort—not innate intelligence or luck—as the way to get ahead in life. Billy, in short, is the kind of kid every teacher dreams about.

But by his junior year, the boredom bug bit Billy hard. Boredom has become the elephant in the American classroom. Ask a teenager to complete the following sentence: "School is _____." "Boring" will be the most probable response.

What was Billy's response to that question? "A place where one goes but can find nothing to do." When asked why he felt that way, he elaborated: "There is not a lot of competition and challenges. People sleep in class. In geometry and biology when the teachers lecture, it is like they hypnotize the students. When the geometry teacher tests the lessons, the students don't study, so many of them sleep in class."

Billy's school, like many schools around the nation, had become obsessed with high-stakes testing—the earthquake that has rearranged, maybe deformed, the American education landscape. When Billy's teachers began "teaching to the

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test," preparing for state assessments and College Board exams dominated the curriculum. Billy's cognitive engagement and excitement came wholly from extracurricular activities—from his love of computers and a growing passion for Chinese history.

Billy—like millions of kids in American classrooms—got bored. The failure to harness Billy's contagious energy is the failure of an education system more in tune with the realities of early 20th-century America than with the demands of the 21st global century. And the bad news is that the standards movement with its incessant mantra—test, test, test—is likely to transform the boredom bug into a national epidemic.

The irony is that Billy is way ahead of those policymakers, because he understands the character of the globalized millennium in which we live. Four features characterize our era of globalization. First is an unprecedented flow of capital and goods around the world (one trillion dollars cross national boundaries every day). Second, human beings are moving from one nation to another—often from halfway around the globe—at an unparalleled rate. In the United States, immigrants are the fastest-growing sector of the child population, with one in five children coming from an immigrant household. Third, new information and communications technologies connect humans as never before and make available the sum of the world's information (though not wisdom) at the click of a mouse. Finally, the resultant challenge to traditional cultural values and norms makes it necessary to learn how to interact in a civil manner with those whose backgrounds and value systems may appear extremely alien.

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These and other forces of globalization are challenging education systems worldwide, but we have not even started to consider how best to prepare our children to thrive in that world. Instead, we trudge ahead lemming-like in replicating curricula (from trivial facts about state history in middle school, to trigonometry in high school), teaching methods (chalk and talk), and assessment tests (short-answer and regurgitation) that would have been familiar to our forebears. Yet clearly the fortunes, identities, opportunities, and constraints of young people growing up in Bali, Beijing, Beirut, Berlin, Boston, or Buenos Aires will be linked to economies, societies, and cultures that are thoroughly global in scope. Moreover, the pivotal problems that confront these societies—deep poverty, terrorism, and disease, among others—can no longer best be understood within the confines of single-discipline or national perspectives.

Such a severe diagnosis makes it tempting to throw out the entire educational curriculum with the preglobal bathwater. This would be a mistake. In the elementary years, students still need to become literate in word, number, and—in today's society—computing. Nor should we bypass the major ways of thinking—historical, scientific, mathematical, artistic. Both for their sake and for ours, the Billys of the world ought to have an education that differs dramatically

from what their grandparents remember and from what current policymakers favor.

How should we envision an education for the new millennium? More than any generation before them, today's children need to develop the cognitive skills that allow them to work comfortably with new and evolving technologies. They need to be able to sift through unprecedented amounts of information to figure out what is true, what is trivial, what is worth retaining, and how to synthesize disparate bits into a meaningful whole.

They need to learn how to approach issues and problems that cannot be solved within the confines of a single discipline, but instead involve a blend of multiple perspectives. They need to develop equally unprecedented interpersonal skills and flexibilities to live peacefully and productively with those who are increasingly likely to be of a different race, religion, or culture.

But most importantly, these budding citizens will need to understand the nature of the changed world that eludes their elders. If we are to survive as a planet, we will need to develop universal values—not *a priori* ones, but ones that take into account the major religious and political systems that have evolved over the last few millennia.

So where do we go from here? Just as generals often fight the last war, educational policymakers have responded by adding courses on economics, culture, or globalization without dropping any current offerings. We endorse a different approach. New messages need to come through as much in the daily operation of institutions as in new curricula. Students need to see adults of diverse backgrounds interacting respectfully and productively with one another. Students need to work with one another on complex problems that allow them both to recognize the contributions of different disciplines and to make headway with those whose culture and values may be very different. Students, parents, and educators also need to construct educational communities to replace hierarchies and guarded special interests with a sense of shared mission and joint accountability.

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Taken together such practices will constitute the foundation of the most decent and just cultural democracies of the 21st century. The search for such a society motivated most of our own ancestors to come to the United States, and it continues to attract families like Billy Wang's. But in today's rapidly changing world, the pressures on such immigrants have become acute. Our research indicates that while some will end up as beneficiaries of life in the new land, too many others are unable to cope with the global dislocations. As we have come to put it, the life options become Yale or Jail, Princeton or Prison.

And what of Billy himself? He hung in there. During his senior year, he did well enough to qualify for a scholarship in college. As of this writing, Billy is a freshman at a major research university on the East Coast. He is majoring in

computer science with a minor in Chinese history—his first true loves. But then, the irrepressible Billy Wang hasn't given up on his hoop dreams, either.

Marcelo Suárez-Orozco is the Victor S. Thomas professor of education at Harvard University's graduate school of education, in Cambridge, Mass., and a co-director of the Harvard Immigration Project. Howard Gardner is the John H. and Elizabeth A. Hobbs professor of cognition and education at the school.