Is Hope Enough? Navigating the Complexities and Competing Pressures of Action and Global Justice in Education

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Abstract: Global citizenship education (GCE) aspires to meet complex and contested global challenges within systems built on violence, exploitation and extractivism. This article comments on the silence surrounding the toll that this can take on educators working to meet the impossible task of making the world fairer, more just, more equitable, and sustainable for all. While the goals of GCE are themselves challenging and problematic, the content involved can also give rise to trauma. This article discusses the challenge of engaging with 'difficult knowledge' as an educator aiming to facilitate a space which honours the complexities inherent in global justice, while also being mindful of the psychological safety of all those involved in the learning space. The 'call to action' is often proposed as a mitigating factor to address the potential harm inherent in GCE. While recognising the possible transformative impact which engaging in action can have, it is crucial to also comment on the contradiction of seeking to build a 'fair', 'just' or 'sustainable' world within the neoliberal and capitalist societies which have themselves given rise to existential threats. Yet, we find hope in examples of GCE practitioners engaging with these multiple challenges in their daily practice, and in the development of frameworks and pedagogies that open educational spaces to consider and build as yet unimagined alternatives.

Key words: Global Citizenship Education; Taking Action; Vicarious Trauma; Difficult Knowledge; Neoliberalism.

This article aims to consider the silence surrounding the psychological pressure and toll which follows from engaging in an educational approach, variously known as development education (DE), global education (GE), and global citizenship education (GCE), which is often cited as aiming to take action towards a fairer, more just, equitable, and sustainable world for everyone (Council of Europe, 2002; GENE, 2022a; Irish Aid, 2021) and which necessitates engagement with traumatising topics. The aim of this article is not to offer a

critique of GCE or a deterrent for engaging in GCE work, but to advocate for time spent reflexively, for sufficient supports for educators, and for strategies for self-protection and collective care within a challenging and pressurised field. We believe that there is a need to consider the multiple challenges of the 'action dimension' of GCE, and the constraints of 'taking action' in the context of neoliberal orthodoxies that determine from the outset the constraints and targets of actions emerging from GCE.

While there is an ever-evolving bank of research, theory and policy which explores strategies for supporting learners to grapple with the complexity, and often despair, inherent within GCE, there is much less available around the impact for educators themselves. As educators, we are exposed to pressure and at risk of indirect, or 'vicarious' trauma when working to meet the goals of GCE. Vicarious trauma is recognised as a risk factor for clinicians, support workers, educators and others, that may emerge from ongoing exposure to the details of traumatic stories and reports, even if one has not experienced the trauma directly oneself (Pearlman and Mac Ian, 1995). As such, indirect trauma can be a component of preparing to teach about injustice, of facilitating our learner's navigation of controversial and heavy topics, and of engaging with the call to action within GCE. This article aims to uncover and comment on this silence, highlighting the toll which this work can take on educators.

Acknowledging that this work does not take place in isolation, and that the potential harm for individuals is just one component of this silence, we also aim to look beyond these potential harms, to consider the impact of the deeper silences and evasions that exist around the economic, political, and social system that gives rise to the profound inequalities and ecological disasters that GCE aims to address by raising awareness, fostering skills and nurturing values to 'take action'. Additionally, we raise related concerns about the potentially traumatising effects for GCE practitioners operating within the constraints of neoliberalism's double bind: that of addressing immense 'global' challenges produced by a system that is also defined by atomisation, individualism, and isolation.

The 'goal' of GCE

GCE, and its many related fields, places a strong focus on improving the world around us for all. Indeed, the definition within the 'Dublin Declaration' states that this field of education 'empowers people to understand, imagine, hope and act to bring about a world of social and climate justice, peace, solidarity, equity and equality, planetary sustainability, and international understanding' (GENE, 2022b: 3). Furthermore, the identity of a 'global citizen' is one imbued with a sense of responsibility to take an 'active role' (Oxfam, 2015) in the building of this better, fairer, more sustainable world. If the goal of GCE is to make the world a better place, then the implication is that it is the responsibility of the educator to make this happen, or at least play a significant role in creating the conditions for their students to become 'change-makers'. This is a daunting expectation and a significant challenge to place at the feet of any educator. While it can be acknowledged that no single educator is expected to change or 'fix' all of the world's problems, there remains an insinuation, within mainstream definitions, that this should be the end goal of the work of GCE practitioners. While worthy, the aspirations of GCE as a field could be considered impossible, and so the pressure that it places on educators to meet this unreachable goal is an unfair burden.

In creating what is, in reality, an impossible aspiration, we further question the role that GCE might play in masking the contradiction of seeking to build a 'fair' 'just' or 'sustainable' world within the very neoliberal political and economic systems that give rise to social and environmental existential threats. And how, in placing the responsibility for action on educators, old colonial tropes of the 'White man's burden' may find new expression in the practice of GCE.

GCE 'topics'

The goals of GCE are not only problematic, but engaging in GCE necessitates exploration of what can only be considered as traumatising topics. While there does not exist a definitive curriculum for GCE in any educational sphere, there is a collective agreement that GCE includes an exploration of topics related to justice such as gender, poverty, forced migration, human rights, climate change, and others. The knowledge set within GCE is sometimes referred to as 'difficult

knowledge', a term coined by Britzman (1998) to denote the process of engaging with what makes us uncomfortable (Dadvand, Cahill and Zembylas, 2022). Engaging with difficult knowledge in education is inescapably intertwined with trauma, including exposure to the trauma of others, or unearthing personal and collective trauma. As Bryan (2020) highlights, difficult knowledge is not only difficult in the extent to which learners must grapple with complex and contested knowledge, but is also difficult in a psycho-affective sense. Crucially, it must be acknowledged that these traumas are experienced differently by people from dominant and marginalised groups, which adds an additional layer that educators may not always recognise or address, and therefore may struggle to support within the education space whether with learners, between colleagues, or within the wider school community. Engaging with difficult knowledge relates not only to the traumatic nature of the knowledge itself, but also the 'learning encounters that are cognitively, psychologically and emotionally destabilising for the learner' (Ibid.: 15). This article posits that the destabilising impact of engaging with traumatising knowledge also extends to the educator facilitating that space for and with learners.

Acknowledgement of poverty as a form of structural violence - as opposed to the 'soft' GCE approach (Andreotti, 2006) that presents poverty as an unfortunate fact of life - is often described as a shocking, and even traumatic experience by teachers and student-teachers when they first engage with critical GCE. Far from being 'natural' or inevitable, poverty is political. It is frequently the product of overt violence, war and conflict, but more often produced through the banality of policies and regulations such as those governing trade, the imposition of odious debt, or the wholesale diversion of tax revenue away from the public purse and into private corporate pockets (Adekeye and Donnelly, 2023). Fanon (2004: 54) pointed to colonial violence that included, 'Deportation, massacres, forced labor, and slavery [as] the primary methods used by capitalism to increase its gold and diamond reserves, and establish its wealth and power'. However, while direct colonial rule may have ended (in most, but still not all places) the ongoing exploitation of the global South continues through neo-colonial means, including through the application of financial power by former colonisers to impoverish 'developing countries' (Nkrumah, 1965; Andrews, 2021; Hickel et al, 2022). Whether we recognise and acknowledge it or not, to teach about 'poverty' is to describe the legacy and ongoing consequences of structural

violence and deeply entrenched colonial abuses in which the oppression of women and racialised groups, and the transgression of the Earth's boundaries are all permitted, and even required, to maintain endless economic growth for the benefit of the very few.

Instead, we are often taught, and then go on to teach others, that poverty is an unfortunate fact of life (such as the outcome of an unfortunate climate or poor land), or the result of some deficit on the part of the poor (lack of education, for example), and where the burden falls on the 'lucky' ones to right the wrongs of the world. Andreotti (2006) cautions that teaching about poverty in these ahistoric and apolitical terms will necessarily reproduce the status quo, and in that sense, educators run the risk of bolstering systems that inflict profound trauma and suffering on billions of people around the world. There is a potential for harm both in preparation for and teaching about injustice as educators rarely have robust support structures or frameworks to draw on as they engage in these processes. It is a complex task for educators to navigate this space in safe, age-appropriate ways which honour the complexity of the topics, while simultaneously being mindful of the psychological safety of all those involved in the learning process. Furthermore, this challenge can be compounded by the risk of trauma to the teacher, as the facilitator of difficult knowledge in the education space.

Complexities of context

The challenges listed so far are intensified for educators, both in the practical contexts in which GCE work takes place, which are subjected to the same neoliberal pressures of ever-increasing productivity with ever dwindling supports, as well as in their daily lives, which for many younger teachers in particular, is characterised by ever greater struggles to secure their basic needs for housing, energy, and food. It is common for educators in all sectors to find themselves with limited time and space to work with students on GCE topics. Many educators find themselves fighting for a slot on a programme or module, or engaging in intensive recruitment for participants. This can result in limited time to prepare, pause, think, and feel our way through the emotions involved in GCE work before needing to jump into facilitation and supporting others. When we get time with learners, it is often too short for them to reflect, placing additional pressure on educators to facilitate a space to navigate emotional responses in

responsible, meaningful ways. This pressurised context for teaching and learning - which is itself, arguably, also a product of neoliberal policies - can put additional pressure back on educators to demonstrate what goals they have managed to achieve within a one- or two-hour session, and how those goals stack up against the ambitious aims of GCE itself.

While many challenges remain across a range of sectors to access sufficient time to engage authentically with GCE, the reality is that within formal education, strides are being made in mainstreaming GCE work. This is a result hard-fought-for and rightfully celebrated, with achievements such as the inclusion of GCE as a core element of initial teacher education programmes within The Teaching Council Céim's (2020) standards for initial teacher education, and the inclusion of 'being an active citizen' as a core competency within the new primary curriculum framework (NCCA, 2023). However, in its mainstreaming we face additional challenges. We must consider what potential harm could be done to (and potentially by) well-meaning, but under-resourced, and under-trained educators aiming to bring global justice topics into classrooms, and meet the goal of making the world a fairer, more just place for all. Without giving sufficient time to reflexivity, self-awareness, further education, and training, and ensuring strategies to protect educators' psychological safety are in place, we may risk losing potential GCE champions to burn out and despair before they have a chance to blossom and develop.

Indeed, there may be an additional need for reflexivity amongst the teaching community given that in the Irish context over ninety-eight per cent of new entrants to teaching in Ireland identify as White, Irish and settled (Keane, Heinz and McDaid, 2023) and in excess of ninety per cent of entrants into initial teacher education identify as Roman Catholic, which is ten per cent higher than the general population (Heinz and Keane, 2018). Consequently, an uncritical foregrounding of protection from psychological pain must be considered carefully to avoid promoting a pedagogy that cushions and evades questions of systemic power and privilege, in which they may be invested. A willingness, and even an expectation, that discomfort will inevitably be a part of any educational process with such lofty ambitions as GCE could be considered a prerequisite for being a 'global teacher'. However, we wish to make it clear that we are neither calling for

educators to toughen themselves to face these challenges, nor to suggest that more time, resources, spaces for reflection, and training would, in themselves, function as correctives for the deeper challenge of educating to 'change the world'. We are interested in the potential harms caused to educators and to learners, on whom GCE confers responsibility to 'change the world', and how these harms might be discussed and addressed.

What is the underlying message to educators, and to learners, when the most urgent challenges facing humanity, and other beings, are pushed onto those with the least power to address them? In this 'upside down world', teachers working with young people are obligated (but not resourced in any meaningful way) to tackle urgent problems such as mounting far-right racism, the crisis of forced migration, or runaway climate change. In this way, GCE's ambitious 'action dimension' may be mobilised by those in power to evade responsibility for action by dispersing that responsibility to 'everyone' - after all, we are all global citizens with responsibility to change the world. This undoubtedly carries with it the risk of cognitive dissonance that stems from observing the feigned helplessness of those in (decidedly well-resourced) national and global leadership roles, in their abdication of responsibility to address existential threats to educators and children.

The potential traumas described above do not stem solely from close encounters with difficult knowledge about the world as it is, nor is the problem only about being under-resourced to do so. Acknowledgment that these inequalities are expressions and forms of actual violence is a necessary element in confronting the lack of awareness that Dabiri (2021) addresses. Any approach to global education that imparts/conveys knowledge about global poverty as a 'just so' story, without exploring the levers and ruthless mechanisms by which that poverty is created and inflicted, further reifies and compounds global inequalities. To teach against this system - or even to name the system - is a confrontation with power, and carries with it a range of risks to the educator, from isolation, to burnout, to attacks. Addressing these contextual obstacles, challenges and limitations is not an argument against GCE, but rather a necessary process in realising the radically transformative potential of GCE.

A comment on action as a mitigating strategy

The call to action is a core component of GCE for good reason. This field aims not just to observe the world, but to be part of the solutions to the challenges we face. A common argument for mitigating the potential harm caused by engaging in GCE is the call to action. Engaging with action can support learners struggling with despair to be proactive and use their knowledge, skills, social capital, and energy to contribute to change. What is rarely discussed however, is the pressure implied within this task. It can feel overwhelmingly intimidating. While acknowledging that the implication is not that this is an individual responsibility, the pressure on individual educators to explore solutions to complex, contested challenges in the isolation of their own teaching and learning spaces remains a daunting requirement of GCE.

Crucially, a further layer of potential trauma for teachers and learners alike may stem from the unspoken but nonetheless powerful assertion that 'actions' will be limited to reforms of the existing neoliberal capitalist system, despite that system being responsible for existential threats. Although we acknowledge the importance and potential benefits of GCE's 'action dimension', to educators and learners alike, consideration is surely also needed of the kinds of action being undertaken, and on what terms. First and foremost, any sense of genuine hope will be short-lived, if our visions for change are limited to reforms of a system that is built on inequality and consumption of the Earth's 'resources' (Andreotti and Suša, 2018). However, imagining alternatives is, in itself, a profoundly daunting prospect. In fact, even recognising the possibility of such imaginings is constrained. Neoliberalism promotes internalisation of the message that 'There Is No Alternative', and so, as Emma Dabiri (2021: 138) points out, the 'grave danger' of today's activism is precisely the lack of awareness that the terms of engagement for change, operate within the very frameworks of white supremacy, Eurocentric logic, and colonialism 'that we need to dissolve'. The stifling of educators' freedom and agency to hold space in the classroom to imagine worlds and counter-hegemonic ways of being can be observed in the often-violent backlash even against the most modest acknowledgement of human flourishing beyond the strictly policed gender binary.

Furthermore, with its emphasis on individualism, neoliberalism favours feel-good narratives about the impact that 'just one person' can have on issues as complex as poverty or climate change, but the elevation of the 'power of one' also carries with it the dangers of isolation, and the potential for exhaustion and burnout. There are numerous examples within the GCE community of initiatives to counter this with ongoing and concerted efforts to promote whole-school approaches and to build communities of practice, and these are going some way to support educators and GCE practitioners to combat isolation and to share and build on their collective practice.

Further mitigation strategies

Many strategies and programmes have been designed to support educators to navigate these uncomfortable spaces. Although rarely designed to support the educator themselves, the silence to which this article speaks, they can offer suggestions and starting points for educators feeling overwhelmed or intimidated by many of the competing pressures outlined in this article. The following are just some examples of attempts to mitigate the inherent pressures within GCE.

The 'Educating the Heart' initiative from Children in Crossfire uses cognitively-based compassion training to offer avenues for building the 'emotional capacity to work for change, without giving in to despair, anger, or burnout' (Murphy et al., 2014: 64). Alternatively, affective pedagogies advocate for 'embracing – rather than glossing over' the range of emotions involved in engaging with difficult knowledge (Bryan, 2020). The toolkit for affective pedagogies presented by Bryan (Ibid.) emphasises the need to position learners, and we propose also educators, as 'implicated subjects' to enable criticality and reflexivity around proximity to, and responsibility for climate related harm. We argue that this toolkit could be extended to also support educators engaging with other injustices encountered through GCE. Other examples include Freire's idea of 'critical hope' or Giroux's conceptualisation of 'educated hope', both of which are drawn on by Bourn and Tarozzi (2023) in their edited book, *A Pedagogy of Hope for Global Social Justice*. In the introduction, Tarozzi (2023: 2) implores us to consider how we can ensure education is imbued with hope in order to 'think otherwise and to lay the foundations for a new transformative pedagogy'. While earlier in this article we cautioned against simplistic hope, the

pedagogy proposed here is one grounded in collective liberation, deeply rooted in a critical transformative stance, and unapologetically political.

Additionally, the EarthCARE Global Justice framework considers how teaching, learning, and action might venture beyond reform of the current systems, and seek 'to expand possibilities in terms of what we consider to be real, ideal, legible and relevant' (Andreotti and Suša, 2018: 3). Finally, the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective (Andreotti et al., 2020) developed the 'Global (Citizenship) Education Otherwise' study guide for educators working on global citizenship education in Europe. This guide offers a variety of cartographies, pedagogical experiments, and frameworks to compare amongst other themes, 'different theories of change and orientations of hope' (Andreotti et al., 2021: 7), and a series of group-study questions venturing off the path of the familiar towards consideration of the 'difficulties/ impossibilities' of imagining and reimagining otherwise.

While no pedagogy or programme can offer all the answers within an inherently broken system, those outlined here each offer their own opportunities for hopeful reflection. These examples invariably require educators to commit to being open to discomfort, to imagine alternatives, to embrace uncomfortable and strong emotional responses, and to consider responsibility and proximity to justice issues.

Conclusions

This article has aimed to draw attention to and comment on the silences around the trauma and competing pressures which can often underpin GCE and impact both on its practical implementation and on its potential impact for society. The complexities and pressures that this article has aimed to shed light on are daunting and often overwhelming both for us as individual educators, and collectively as a sector aiming to navigate them. Yet, it may be that by shifting into those (potentially) uncomfortable spaces, that educators get to experience a more meaningful antidote to overwhelm and doom, in that the possibility of taking action to tackle the foundational beliefs of neoliberalism - individualism, competition, self-interest and a lack of care for people or the earth - creates hope for alternatives grounded in collective liberation and planetary survival.

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