

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Issue paper n°5

**“We know the extent of the problems.
So, now, what do we do?”**

The (not so) simple link between Global Citizenship Education and youth engagement

Enabel



Global Citizenship Education Centre of expertise

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) aims to transform learners into agents of social change, into workers for a more just and sustainable world. Yet, the narrative still seems to struggle when it comes to making the transition from educating, i.e. informing, raising awareness, opening the eyes of learners on the world, giving them the keys to understand the issues of international solidarity, and acting, i.e. pushing them to engage with the world to transform it. After all, engagement, action and social change are the stated aims of GCE. GCE is to show the range of possibilities, propose avenues of action and encourage engagement and should not make the next generation of young adults into hyper-anxious individuals who are made over-aware of serious global problems that threaten them and who worry about their future and the planet's but are totally paralysed and powerless to influence the course of affairs.

The problematic relation between GCE and engagement

There are, in my view, three reasons for the problematic relation between education and engagement.

Firstly, most GCE programmes assume that acquiring knowledge about today's global issues leads to engaging to solve them. The UNESCO's educational – knowledge-skills-attitudes – continuum is illustrative of this. And most GCE activities follow this pattern: offer knowledge (often dispensed in a playful manner and with attention for the complexity of issues), an emotional experience (for example, via a role-play, a site visit or a witness encounter) with a view to arousing engagement in a given area that is GCE-'labelled' (climate change, migration or inequalities, for example). In the framework of a longer GCE project learners can be prodded into action, e.g. start a produce garden at school, correspond with a school in the South or collect basic necessities for the poor. But that initiative often stops as the project ends. Or, as Wegimont (2020; 35) puts it, "the 'concepts, skills, attitudes' model, is [...] an unreflected model of education, transposed into the field of GE, without adequate reflection regarding the appropriateness or adequacy of such a model to the field". In reality, no one can confirm that there is a causal relationship between education, however transformative it intends to be, and engagement. Therefore, it is not self-evident for GCE, at least based on this education model, to be a gateway to youth engagement for a more just and sustainable world.

Secondly, GCE is largely based on an assumption regarding which kind of engagement is expected of young global citizens which is rarely made explicit but which keeps bewildering us; and while we know the extent of the problems, any answer to the question 'So, now, what do we do?' is complicated. In fact, the 'knowledge-skills-attitudes' continuum primarily focuses on the individual. GCE in this framework builds engagement on the idea that 1) education can change individuals, 2) this change is primarily about how individuals perceive the world, their identity in relation to the world and their place in the world, and 3) these inner changes should lead young people to adapt their behaviour and attitudes towards themselves, towards others and towards the planet. Engagement is thus understood primarily as a change in the behaviour of individuals who engage to act responsibly. In doing so, GCE mainly explores the ethical individual dimension of citizenship: it is about training individuals to act as 'responsible citizens', that is to say, to adopt a responsible attitude towards themselves (to take charge, to educate themselves, to make intelligent choices, etc.), towards others (to be tolerant and respectful, to be open, to be welcoming, to be supportive, etc.) and towards the planet (to consume responsibly, to recycle, to limit one's carbon footprint, etc.). Most GCE programmes do not address the collective dimension, the other aspect of citizenship, which aims at social change in the form of engagement in a shared action of a group gathered around a cause. So, GCE sees engagement in a way that may be at odds with what is most often thought of as engagement: visible group actions.

Thirdly, once young people open their eyes to the complexity of global issues and want to go beyond the simple idea of engagement as personal work and ask themselves what kind of group action can be undertaken to build a more just and sustainable world, the proposals made to them often revolve around the same forms of engagement: volunteering, charity or political commitment. However, as we know, such is not young people's engagement of choice any longer and their reticence may be viewed a failure of GCE to generate engagement. However, as has been said many times before, this lack of interest in traditional forms of engagement does not mean that young people have become disengaged and self-centred individuals, but rather that investing in formal and institutional structures is no longer the preferred route for youth engagement.

Engaging in an institutional framework means that action themes and topics as well as the means of action are determined by the institution, not by the young people. This means that they have to adapt to the norms and codes of the institution and not the other way around; that they are often subjected to a top-down policy and that they sometimes have to [limit themselves to cosmetic approaches to solving problems, the causes of which they would rather tackle](#). And this no longer suits many young people. Similarly, political engagement in the classical arena of democratic life is no longer a choice of preference for youth engagement either. The levels of trust young people have in the political system for solving problems that they find urgent are dramatically low ([ibid.](#)). Young people's engagement has become very multifaceted and it evolves over the course of a lifetime. It mostly involves a large share of informal engagement, which shows in a desire to become informed about societal issues, to convince one's networks to rally to a cause or practice, to carry out direct and concrete actions that can really change situations that are deemed unjust ([ibid.](#)). There is therefore often a gap between the forms of engagement that institutions can propose to young people in order to bring about a more just, supportive and sustainable world, and the practices of engagement that young people like, for example, involvement in counter-culture and experimental gatherings, in youth movements, occasional or regular activism, more or less radical demonstrations or marches, occupation of public places, posting a viewpoint on social media, support for the demands of oppressed people, etc.

Does this mean that GCE should lower its expectations and limit to just awareness-raising and information, without aiming in the long term at the engagement of the people it sensitises to build a more social and fair world? In my opinion, this rather means that GCE should redefine more clearly 1) what it expects from the young people that it targets with awareness raising on global issues and 2) how to engage them.

What does GCE expect from the young people it reaches?

While it is true that GCE has no control over what the young people that it targets do with the information they have received through workshops or GCE projects, it can at least be a little clearer about the kind of citizens it hopes they become. This means making explicit the various examples and practices of citizenship that young people can explore and the related forms of engagement.

GCE can expect individuals to project themselves into at least three forms of citizenship: citizenship as responsibility, citizenship as participation, and citizenship for social justice (Bryan 2012). Citizenship as responsibility is the form of citizenship that GCE has, consciously or not, developed and pursued mostly. This is the form described above, a form which is very strongly focused on the individual citizen and which empowers individuals to adopt behaviours deemed appropriate to the issues identified. Citizenship as participation focuses more strongly on the citizen in their relations with others: It is in fact about practising active citizenship, mostly understood in terms of volunteering, charity, but also political engagement in traditional institutions, or voting. Social justice citizenship focuses more strongly on shared citizenship, explores the causes of issues identified as critical and promotes forms of group action to address them and transform society. While the first two forms of citizenship described reinforce the neoliberal vision of the 'good society' and often leave the question of the root causes of inequality and injustice unaddressed (Brown 2018), the third form of citizenship is more critical and aims for deeper social change. [It is also more in line with the critical current of GCE, while the first two forms of citizenship are more aligned with the neoliberal and liberal currents of GCE](#). However, these three forms of citizenship are not mutually exclusive and the forms of engagement they offer are complementary. GCE would benefit from being more explicit about the different forms of citizenship that young people can explore and the related modes of engagement: personal and behavioural engagement; social engagement for others; (local and/or global) shared engagement around causes deemed to be of concern.

What can GCE do to create engagement?

GCE needs to consider how it can effectively encourage the various forms of youth engagement. To do this, it is necessary to look at the different ingredients that are known to promote engagement, whatever form that engagement may take, and to see to what extent GCE can reinforce any of these. There are at least four ingredients that GCE can enhance:

Firstly, any engagement requires **critical access to knowledge**: Engagement is born when a problem or an injustice has been identified and analysed, and mobilisation is always organised around a specific way of perceiving the problem, an estimate of its seriousness and the design of actions that need to be taken to put an end to it.

The fight for the environment, for example, has taken and continues to take different forms, depending on how scientific knowledge on the subject evolves, but also on the ideological currents to which people adhere and which help to bring about a variety of solutions to protect the environment, or solve the problem of climate change. Back to nature, degrowth, global justice approach, green business... (Jamison 2010): the knowledge, the way of understanding the complexity of the problems, of making connections, of tracing the causes in a systemic and critical perspective have a huge impact on the kind of actions people will consider needed to end the problem, and the solutions imagined. The role of GCE is to address today's main issues, but it must do so with a complex, educational and sound approach.

Secondly, any engagement requires individuals to believe in their ability to act and have an impact on the world and to have some knowledge of how they can act to make a difference: This could be called **self-efficacy**, defined as the faith an individual develops in his or her own abilities and chances of success (Heslin & Klehe 2006). No engagement can be born of a negative belief in oneself: No one would mobilise if their chances of success were absolutely zero from the start. It is therefore necessary to develop young people's self-esteem and confidence in their abilities but also to give them concrete tools that can contribute to the success of their actions ("[It is important to show us what we can do to get us involved](#)" Sophie, 15 years) : discuss past actions and see what contributed to their success and the achievement of their objectives, come up with concrete and realistic ways to solve a problem, make available the digital or physical tools needed for action, etc. As the study on youth engagement reveals, when young people get involved, they expect to have an impact and want to see the results of their actions. GCE can facilitate the achievement of an impact, by reinforcing young people's self-confidence, by showing concrete courses of action, by providing specific knowledge, for example, on the different ways of getting involved and possible places of involvement, on the factors that can increase their chance of success and their impact, etc.

Next, engagement is born in **fertile soil**: The family is of course important. But for young people, school or university are equally important places, as they spend most of their time there. This is where they can be made aware of the issues of our time, where they can strengthen their critical thinking, where they can discuss a shared challenge and where they can develop the skills to learn to act on the world. While it is difficult for GCE to reach families, it can reach places of learning. Hence the importance of advocating that today's complex debates are conducted in schools, equipping teachers to address them in the classroom, pushing schools to engage students with the world, to seek justice, to engage and to make space in the curriculum for this engagement.

Finally, engagement also originates from **networking**: "[When young people are engaged, they do it ideally collectively and in any case in a network](#)". Local or transnational networking is very important: Among other things, it allows young people to share knowledge and experiences that strengthen all actors, to know how actions are organised elsewhere, to know that concerns and challenges vary according to place, to keep one's motivation, to strengthen a collective identity in relation to a cause, to bring numbers to bear in order to enter into dialogue with institutions or to support advocacy, to facilitate campaigns and their dissemination, or to mobilise an international force in support of local actions (Hubbard & Williams 2021). GCE can help networking: by connecting people, schools, countries, by relaying initiatives, by opening informal platforms that are conducive to dialogue and bring together people around shared struggles.

Implications for practice

While GCE does not automatically lead to youth engagement (knowledge and socio-emotional experiences do not mathematically lead to engagement), it can be a launchpad for engagement: providing critical knowledge about the complexity of the world and global issues, building young people's confidence in their abilities and offering them concrete tools to improve the impact of their initiatives, promoting learning platforms to young people with tools and spaces to engage and connect and network with others.

To achieve this goal, GCE likely needs to be clearer about the kind of engagement and action it expects from learners: Is the global citizen only that very responsible individual with exemplary behaviour or is global citizenship also about the advent of a global civil society that takes action on issues that concern us all? GCE must also adapt to types of engagement and action that young people like, even if this means moving away from the type of engagement it traditionally offers them, engagement mediated by an institutionalised structure (volunteering in an NGO, for example), work on oneself to acquire more responsible behaviour, or one-shot school projects. Finally, GCE must move more decisively towards being a critical type of education that can address global issues in all their complexity and in a global justice approach.

[Read more about our study on youth engagement](#)

References

Brown EJ. 2018. "Practitioner perspectives on learning for social change through non-formal global citizenship education". *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*.13(1): 81-97.

Bryan A. 2012. "The placebo effect: Development education and the discursive construction of the 'good' citizen in neo-liberal times". Invited paper, Development Education Research Centre, Institute of Education, London, May 9.

Heslin PA. & Klehe U-C. 2006. "Self-Efficacy", in Rogelberg SG (ed.), *Encyclopedia of industrial/organizational psychology* Vol. 2, pp.705-708, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Heslin, P.A., & Klehe, U.C. (2006). Self-efficacy. In S. G. Rogelberg (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Industrial/Organizational Psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 705-708). Thousand Oaks: Sage

Hubbard A. & Williams R. 2021. "Who's missing from climate governance? : Global South youth participation and mobilization". *STG Policy Briefs*, European University Institute, 18.

Jamison A. 2010. "Climate change knowledge and social movement theory". *Wires Climate change*, 1(6): 811-823.

Wegimont L. 2020. "Global Education in Europe: From Genesis to Theory and a New Model for Critical Transformation" in Bourn D. (ed), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Global Education and Learning*, UK: Bloomsbury.

