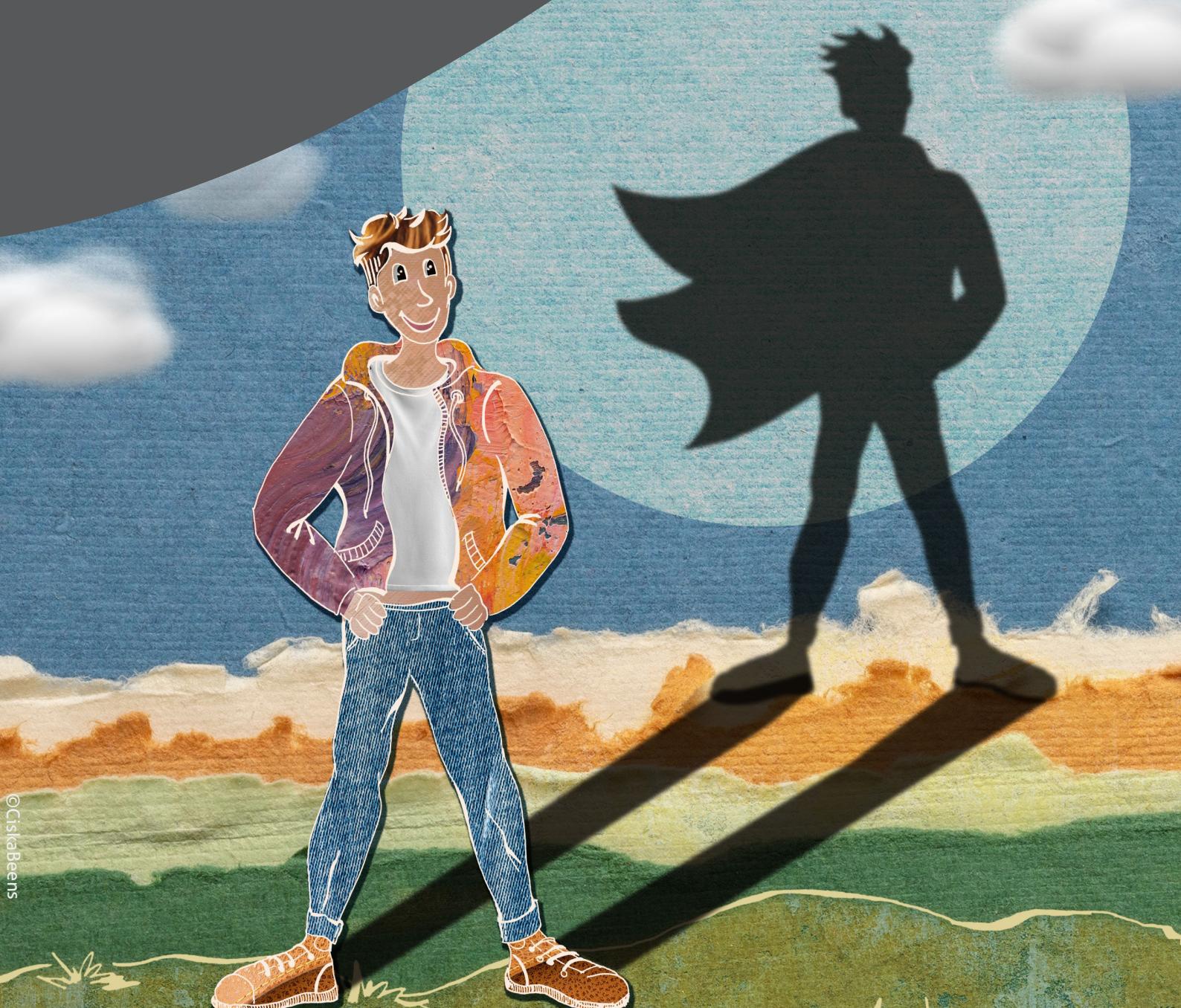


# GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Issue paper n°7



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How GCE can encourage youth engagement  
by developing self-efficacy

Enabel 

Global Citizenship Education Centre of expertise

In the [5th issue paper](#) of Enabel's Center of Expertise on Global Citizenship Education (GCE), we discussed the relationship between GCE and engagement. We argued that providing knowledge about GCE-topics was not in itself enough to create engagement or to push young people to act, but that other practices need to be fostered such as attention to the complexity of the GCE-topics, the development of self-efficacy; the provision of supportive environments; and networking of trained youth.

This year, we explore each of these factors that can better equip GCE to foster engagement. This 7th issue paper focusses on the role of GCE in developing learners' political and civic agency.

## Does knowledge lead to engagement?

This question guided the reflections of our last issue papers. Most GCE activities in Belgium consist of informing and raising awareness in civil society, especially among young people, about international solidarity and global challenges.

The main objective is to push people to engage in society and in public or political debate, to imagine alternatives and to act for a more just and sustainable global society. As highlighted in [issue paper 5](#), this methodology is based on the idea that *knowing* means *wanting* change and *being able* to change: for example, if I *know* that intensive agricultural models are harmful to humans, the planet and animals, then I will *want* to consume differently, or join in advocacy against these models, or join initiatives proposing alternative models, etc., and I will *be able* to carry out and keep these commitments.

Knowledge is therefore considered to be a decisive element in triggering action. However, research has shown that knowledge is not the best predictor of commitment. Although it is an important element (no one can commit to a cause if he or she is uninformed), it is the faith that individuals have in their ability to act towards a result (Bandura 2009) that best predicts the commitment (Solhaug 2006). This is called self-efficacy.

## Reinforcing a sense of self-efficacy to promote engagement

By providing complex knowledge on global issues and international solidarity, GCE contributes to creating 'informed and enlightened citizens'.

But an informed citizen is not necessarily a committed citizen, motivated for change, capable of setting goals and taking actions to change oneself or society. For engagement, these three elements (knowledge, motivation, and action) must be supported by individuals' belief in their ability to: 1. understand and articulate information to define what change is needed; 2. determine the actions for change; and 3. carry out the actions to achieve the desired goals. In this sense, engagement is open to learning processes, as self-efficacy needs to be nourished by certain experiences (Bandura 1997):

1. **Having already experienced success:** self-efficacy is built on positive personal experiences that have proven one's ability to mobilize resources and act successfully. The more difficult the accomplished tasks, the higher the sense of self-efficacy (Betz 2000).
2. **Drawing on others' experience:** self-efficacy is also built on observing resource mobilization and achievements by others. This dimension is even more important when individuals can identify with others that face similar challenges, contexts or difficulties to be overcome (Maddux et al. 2012).
3. **Being encouraged:** The sense of self-efficacy can increase through encouragement, especially from people recognized as experts or as being reliable and trustworthy. Being perceived as capable of succeeding at a reasonable and achievable task, increases the feeling of self-efficacy.
4. **Emotional and physical well-being:** the sense of self-efficacy increases when individuals feel good, safe and confident while they act.

## How GCE can enhance political and civic self-efficacy

Research in the civic and political domain (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Bandura 1997; Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Morrell 2003; Pateman 1971, Eidhof and de Ruyter 2022) has also long shown how political and civic engagement is largely correlated with individuals' sense of confidence in their abilities to act individually and collectively for societal change (otherwise referred to as internal political efficacy) (Sohl 2011). This feeling is particularly built during adolescence (Beaumont 2010), which is the privileged age target group of GCE.

Based on the elements that build self-efficacy, GCE could intensify its actions to strengthen learners' political and civic self-efficacy:

1. Regarding experiencing success, GCE's 'project approach' can allow for a step-by-step construction of a sense of success that helps to strengthen individuals' belief in their abilities to accomplish goals. GCE can do this by encouraging young people to join civic and political projects that mobilize knowledge, develop problem-solving skills, set goals and take action. This helps build their confidence to act on the course of things and the world. The next step is to consider long-term processes that are progressively difficult, as the feeling of competence is built through repetition and grows according to the complexity of the successfully completed tasks.

2. In terms of sharing the experience of others, GCE would benefit from showing how the mobilization of individuals has made it possible to advance causes and bring about political change. Instead of simply urging youth to get involved, GCE should show how to get involved, for what purposes, and with what results. It is important to show young people figures that they can relate to, and to explain how results were achieved.

3. GCE provides many incentives for learners, provided they can understand complex political/economic/social situations and if the pedagogical approaches are adequate. GCE is also based on the belief that everyone can make a difference if he or she decides to act.

However, balance should be found between exhortations to youth to get involved, which reflect our confidence in them to make a difference; and the recognition that the task is enormous, the challenges numerous, and that it is therefore unreasonable to place unrealistic expectations on youth to solve global problems.

To raise the level of self-efficacy, encouragement must be directed at tasks that are deemed achievable, realistic, and attainable. By exhorting youth to engage, generally, globally, and without showing them how, towards what achievable goal, with what chance of success, GCE can act counterproductively, when youth engagement does not produce the desired outcome. The sense of incompetence and powerlessness that comes with failure can drive youth to despair, anxiety or renunciation. GCE facilitators should therefore show confidence in learners by encouraging them to accomplish tasks and goals that are challenging but within their reach.

4. Finally, the issue of physical and mental well-being should remind GCE-facilitators, especially in schools, that the trainings and workshops they provide must obey other rules than those that govern normal school life: sharing experiences, creating and imagining

together should ideally be done in safe spaces, places where dialogue, respect, horizontality, listening and trust are the order of the day. The activities and tasks should be accompanied by a positive and pleasant feeling.

## Implications for practice

Finally, the ambition of GCE is to contribute to the political and civic agency of individuals, that is, their capacity to take part in the struggles that define community life (Marchetti 2013), as a prerequisite to engagement. But agency does not only depend on an individual's degree of knowledge: it also depends on other elements, of which self-efficacy is a central one. GCE is well placed to work on this aspect of learners' political and civic agency, for example:

**1. By providing spaces to experiment with civic and political participation** (in and out of school): this means spaces where critical thinking and reasoning can be developed; spaces to learn about engagement possibilities, the types of action to take, the achieved outcomes; spaces where young people's investment is accompanied so that they experience the impact of their actions and understand their potential.

**2. By sharing inspiring and concrete stories of engagement:** showing how victories have been achieved in the past or in other places to let youth learn from the achievements of others.

**3. By considering young people as serious and capable actors:** by sharing complex knowledge with them and believing that they can understand this, by trusting them on their capacity to innovate, to mobilize, to imagine solutions to the problems of our time, while offering resources that are accessible to the adult world (money or expertise for example) to facilitate their actions.

There are already GCE initiatives that go in this direction: for example, the [Dezobeyi game](#) developed by Quinoa and the "[Actors of change](#)"-workshop of RCN Justice and Democracy aim to show how social mobilizations and civil disobedience have been useful in the past, and what actions can be taken to influence political life and societal choices. Quinoa also organizes meetings between young people and committed actors around a common commitment.

By intensifying this dimension, by working to build the perception of political self-efficacy of young people, GCE can allow the 'yes we can' to become more than just a slogan, but a reality, based on the positive perception that young people have of their individual and collective capacities to build another world.

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