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Curbing Ignorance and Apathy (Across the Political Spectrum) Through Global Citizenship Education

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What's the difference between ignorance and apathy?
I don't know, and I don't care.

—Jimmy Buffett

Whether we know that snarky response as a Jimmy Buffett lyric or the punchline to a quintessential dad joke, “I don't know, and I don't care” captures the disunity that defines the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. We know or care very little about our ideological mirrors to the extent that the “United” States, our voting patterns, and our reactions to them have become a curiosity for the other 95% of the world's population. Our new national pastime of navel-gazing about an election that many pundits call inexplicable follows a campaign filled with rancorous rhetoric that revealed globalization as a springboard for the social unease that propelled Donald Trump into the Oval Office.

Many voters chose their candidate based on perceptions of his business bona fides. Those voters either did not know or did not care that multiple bankruptcies do not align with such perceptions. Many voters used their ballots in protest, seeking an outsider whose expertise came from beyond the Capital Beltway. Those voters either did not know or did not care that public policy experience often predicts one's ability to govern. Disheartened members of the political left continue to reproach the president and his supporters for what they see as a barrage of racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and Islamophobia. But Trump opponents either do not know or do not care that packaging all 46% of the electorate as racists, misogynists, xenophobes, homophobes, and Islamophobes is inherently misguided. Instead, Pehme (2016) counsels crestfallen liberals to engage right-leaning family members around the dinner table, suggesting that despite “a depressing number of them that deserve these characterizations, to brush aside the more than 61 million Americans who cast their ballots for Trump as mere hateful idiots is to perpetuate the liberal elitism that helped fuel Trump's success” (para. 11).

Regardless of what your 2016 ballot looked like, choosing to neither know nor care about the perspectives of nearly half your country's citizens exhausts any chance to win the hearts and minds of your ideological mirrors. Ideas lose transferability, if not meaning, once we squander opportunities for dialogue. As someone who has cast votes

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for both major U.S. political parties, but who also counts himself among those who believe that two people can disagree while both being right, I recommend that we stop wringing our hands and cease asking how our country could have elected a reality TV personality with a professor-emeritus-length CV of un-presidential behaviors. Instead, as the Serenity Prayer instructs, we must “accept the things [we] cannot change,” summon the “courage to change the things we can,” and find the “wisdom to know the difference” (Niebuhr, 1943). Taking the latter tack, we should begin by accepting that no one wins minds by calling others ignorant. No one wins hearts by calling others cold. Instead, we must examine something that nearly none of our public schools taught us to know or care about: global citizenship education (GCE). Summoning the courage to change the things we can, I propose we emphasize GCE, a concept that too many education decision-makers overlook regardless of their political persuasion.

In a world beset by the opportunities and challenges of globalization, GCE can instill the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions to live, learn, and work. In one of many global citizenship conceptualizations, Oxley and Morris (2013) present four cosmopolitan dimensions—political, moral, economic, and cultural—and four advocacy dimensions—critical, social, environmental, and spiritual. With so many dimensions to navigate, one might readily recognize why GCE can prompt students’ critical thinking about the world they inhabit (Henderson, Nunez-Rodriguez, & Casari, 2011; Maguire, Donovan, Mishook, de Gaillande, & Garcia, 2012). Given climate change, wealth inequality, permeable borders, and complex geopolitical conflicts, it seems logical that GCE would be offered as a public-school standard. Unfortunately, though, the travesty of inequitable opportunities to learn relegates GCE to boutique status. By one measure, less than 1.5% of U.S. public schools offer GCE to their K–12 students (Thier, 2016). Even in the rare places that offer GCE, access favors students who are university-bound, white, and from affluent backgrounds (Perna et al., 2013). Several additional challenges thwart efforts to scale up GCE: Its literature base is diffuse (Marshall, 2011), its definitions remain hotly contested (Davies, 2006; Myers, 2016), and empirical studies are rare (Kerkhoff, 2016). Still, this burgeoning area of interdisciplinary research and practice links GCE to several desirable outcomes, such as increasing empathy within and across cultures, as well as fostering engagement with and understanding of complex international affairs (Goren & Yemini, 2017).

Since Election Day 2016, pundits have clutched at myriad factors in their attempts to explain results. Some have zeroed in on a core component of GCE: attitudes toward globalization (e.g., Lakshmanan, 2016). Many Americans’ exceptionally tepid attitudes toward the rest of the world are not surprising given the bubble our nationally focused schools have propagated. After World War II claimed the lives of as many as 85 million humans, or about 4% of the world’s population at the time, many policymakers and educators pleaded for U.S. education to globalize students’ experiences (Scott, 2005). Instead, policies continue to compel elementary and secondary educators to address a narrow range of curricular goals, typically those that can be tested easily, such as basic skills in literacy and numeracy (Zhao, 2015). Focusing on local and national priorities, our secondary schools do not mandate that students learn about the world. Students simply do not receive the type of intentional GCE that would help them gain critical self-awareness, mutual respect, and a sense of reciprocity (Dolby, 2008), all of which are

traits that would be beneficial if distributed widely across our electorate and our society at large.

For example, the Education Commission of the States (2007) compiled graduation requirement data for all 50 states and Washington, DC. Less than half of those 51 jurisdictions required students to take as much as a half unit of globally focused social studies coursework (e.g., world geography, world history, or even European history). Only eight jurisdictions required students to spend one or more years learning a language other than English. Only three jurisdictions—Michigan, Washington, DC, and West Virginia—required students to do both. By contrast, nearly all students were compelled to take three or more years of English, mathematics, and science each. With such little priority accorded to curriculum with explicitly global themes, one could imagine how infrequently schools might integrate GCE across various curricula ranging from the humanities to the sciences, an approach that Heilman (2008) casts as a remedy for a “single-nation curriculum” (p. 30).

Some readers might wonder what, if any, are the costs to our domestic focus. As one seemingly innocuous example, we join Burma and Liberia as the only three countries on the planet that do not use the metric system, denying us the ability to collaborate seamlessly in a common language of measurement with nearly 200 other countries. Of greater severity, perhaps the kinds of global perspectives that one could develop through intentional, well-integrated GCE would have helped the electorate think deeply about the ramifications of nationalist agendas, of the economic variety or otherwise. Sadly, the world is witnessing a rising tide of nationalism. *The Economist* (“Trump’s World,” 2016) likened the U.S. Republican Party’s gravitation toward nationalism to the rise of alternative populist parties in Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*), France (*Front National*), Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*), Hungary (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*), India (*Bharatiya Janata Party*), the Netherlands (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), Poland (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), Sweden (*Sverigedemokraterna*), and Turkey (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*). These parties all reject globalization, refugees, and immigrants, particularly those who are Muslim. Given the U.S. history of an inward-facing educational agenda (Gaudelli & Fernekas, 2004), we must abandon the practice of disregarding our globalizing world.

Inside the bubble of our U.S.-first educational system, we learn to know and care very little about the rest of the world (Rapoport, 2009; Summit, 2013). Surrounded by 3,000 miles of ocean on either side, our historic bouts of isolationism align well with our recent potential to reignite that practice. But if we want education to be a mechanism that mitigates ignorance and apathy for future generations of American voters (both the half that goes to the polls in a presidential year and the half that does not²), we must embrace GCE in K–12 classrooms. GCE can pierce the bubbles that interfere with our knowing or caring about the diversity that our communities, country, and world display.

In his first speech to a joint session of Congress, President Trump (“Text of President Trump,” 2017) called education the “civil rights issue of our time.” Among several unspecified aspects of that claim, I wonder what U.S. education will do to make our citizens civil toward one another. To what extent will education lead students to approach

² Presidential year voter turnout in the U.S. has fluctuated 49–58% since 1964.

each other with humility and mutual responsibility, regardless of how their counterparts look, how they choose to pray or not, the language(s) they speak, their national affiliation(s), or any other demographic separators that would be better pitched as catalysts of intellectual curiosity? By allegedly putting American citizens first, Trump's aim to rediscover some nebulous moment of greatness is intellectually suspect, if not dishonest. In fact, GCE would lead to a greater society, one in which citizens possess global views that make them less inclined to endorse border wars, trade wars, or wars of any kind.

As exit-polling data in Table 1 show, perceptions about globalization were powerful drivers in the 2016 U.S. presidential election results. Voters who cared most about foreign policy or the economy—issues that are often framed to require examinations of forces outside the country—opted for Clinton. Voters who cared most about terrorism and immigration—issues that are often framed to generate protectionist or isolationist sentiments—endorsed Trump. Voters who viewed international trade as a job producer or as job neutral endorsed one candidate. Voters who viewed international trade as a job robber endorsed another. Overwhelmingly, anti-immigrant sentiments guided a considerable segment of the electorate. In the wake of the June 2016 U.K. Brexit vote, University of Oxford sociologist Alexander Betts made similar observations during the TEDSummit (McManus, 2016). Betts argued that political lines no longer divide as right and left, as tax and spend. Instead, an unexamined fault line divides “those that embrace globalization and those that fear globalization” (para. 4).

Table 1
2016 U.S. Presidential Election Exit Polling Data by Percentage

Polling Item	Clinton	Trump
Most important issue: Foreign policy	60	34
Most important issue: Economy	52	42
Most important issue: Terrorism	39	57
Most important issue: Immigration	32	64
Trade with other countries: Creates jobs	59	35
Trade with other countries: Does not affect jobs	54	39
Trade with other countries: Costs jobs	31	65
Handling illegal immigrants working in U.S.: Deportation	14	84
Support building wall along U.S.-Mexico border	10	86

Note. Data from Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, and Lai (2016).

To unite this divide in our age of truthiness, all students need GCE—an education that defines success using metrics other than standardized tests of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Schools should not be judged by their ability to place students on conveyor belts that move them through a requisite number of Carnegie units. Instead, success should produce active citizens who know how to sift through a universe of information to dissect sense from nonsense, a core experience of GCE. Success should mean graduates who engage in transformative, purposive action in their local communities and the wider world, so they can combat intolerance (Bajaj, 2011; Catalano, 2013; Woolley, 2008). At a minimum, successful graduates should be discerning voters who recognize that neither CNN, nor Fox News, nor the Daily Kos, nor Breitbart is painting a comprehensive picture of their community, country, or world. As Thomas Friedman, who made *globalization* a household word through his book, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, notes in a 2010 op-ed, “When widely followed public figures feel free to say anything, without any fact-checking, it becomes impossible for a democracy to think intelligently about big issues” (para. 10). Until we embrace education models that align with GCE, too large a swath of our electorate will remain ill-equipped to know or care. As long as we fail in that regard, we will get the leadership that we deserve.

Author Biography

Michael Thier, a research associate jointly appointed to the Educational Policy Improvement Center and the Center for Equity Promotion at the University of Oregon, is a candidate for a concurrent PhD (in Educational Leadership, with specialization in quantitative research methods) and MPA. He collaborates with researchers in 10 countries on mixed-methods studies that focus on (a) global citizenship education and (b) opportunities and challenges for students in rural and remote schools. His previous degrees come from New York University (BA in Journalism) and Stony Brook University (MAT in English). Most importantly, he is the proud father of two daughters.

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