

# Unpacking the Call to Action in Early Years Education: Teaching Global Citizenship Through a Critical Lens

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## Abstract

*Global Citizenship Education in its noblest terms is a commitment made by educators to provide students with opportunities to situate themselves as citizens within a global community. This article addresses the lay of the land for global citizenship and Human Rights Education in early years spaces. Drawing upon the context of a classroom teacher's experience educating through school-based, divisional, and provincial mandates, this article addresses the dearth of resources for holistic citizenship education in early years classrooms. The discussion is intended to emphasize the need for a vibrant discourse on the placement of social justice resources in early years education.*

Take every penny you have set aside in aid for Tanzania and spend it explaining to people the facts and causes of poverty. (Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, as cited in The Inter-Council Network, 2015, "Good Practices")

It is a normal human impulse to want to help those caught in the wake of natural and human-constructed disasters. Compassion impels us to act, which "binds us together as human beings" (Nutt, 2011, p. 123). However, when responsive acts of humanity are not interconnected with accurate knowledge of the locale-specific economic, political, and social systems at work, there is a cost attached to the urge to do good (Nutt, 2011). When people act without an awareness of the full context of those charitable acts, they risk perpetuating the very issues that they are attempting to address. To construct an informed praxis, teachers must acquire a theoretical basis in order to equip students with the widest possible scope for each one's role in bringing about social justice. Such an approach requires that teachers first probe for meaning in the discourse around Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Educators have divisional, provincial, national, and international mandates to teach students human rights; it is through the space of actual classroom practice, then, that a critical lens is applied in the body of this text. This article articulates key terms, reviews the mandate of GCE in early years' spaces, assesses past practices, and synthesizes opportunities for improved praxis to apply in early years education.

## Conceptualizing Key Terms

We underscore the political implications of education for democracy and suggest that the narrow and often ideologically conservative conceptions of citizenship embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects [*sic*] not arbitrary choices but rather political choices with political consequences.

(Westheimer & Kahne, 2003, p. 47)

The ideological framework from which teachers work when establishing their own GCE theory and pedagogy affects the learning experiences that they offer to their students. These experiences, in turn, will shape the actions that students take when they seek opportunities to help others. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to understand the potential action-oriented responses associated with various terms utilized in the field of global citizenship and rights-based instruction. Unpacking the diverse terminology in the debate surrounding GCE is a complex process fraught with tension. As the field has developed in recent years, new theories have become available that enable educators to transform educational programming moving

forward. Sorting out the terms, content, and purpose of some of the diverse perspectives on GCE is a helpful way to begin.

## **Global Citizenship**

Educators in Manitoba must frame their practice within the context of the provincial government's terminology. Social studies teaching is constructed with citizenship as a foundational concept in which global citizenship is identified as "an ethos motivated by concern for humanity, society, the planet and the future and is activated by self-empowerment" (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, "Citizenship," p. 2). Individual character building may be a starting point; however, transformative education requires students to have critically informed understandings of power relationships regarding rights, privilege, access, and equity in order to inform their actions (Shultz & Hamdon, n.d.). In situating students within the context of a global whole, teachers encourage the emergence of a sense of identity, place, and lived experience. As such, holistic global citizenship educators must strive to position their students as informed practitioners of reflective inquiry and critical dialogue. Indeed, some may suggest that early years students are merely emergent learners; however, this educator believes that they possess the aptitude and ability to extend their knowledge of social justice issues when given the opportunity to do so. Global citizenship requires that praxis moves beyond an awareness of the issues into spaces of empowerment that afford learners the individual and collective claiming of rights and freedoms while respecting, upholding, and when possible standing in solidarity with marginalized groups working to achieve their inalienable human rights (Struthers, 2015).

There are several tensions regarding global citizenship terminology. For one, citizenship may be applied to local notions of allegiance to community and nation-state, which isolates the responsibility of citizenship from a more outward, global perspective; it is within this framework of narrow perspective that the "us" and "other" discourse remains entrenched. Varied practitioners of GCE and Human Rights Education (HRE) have adopted the vernacular of "Global North" and "Global South" instead of the more divisive and politically coded "us" and "other" (Eidoo, Ingram, MacDonald, Nabavi, Pashby, & Stille, 2011, p. 61; Renner, Brown, Stiens, & Burton, 2010, p. 42; Starkey, 2005, as cited in Osler and Starkey, 2010, p. 93). Further, global citizenship, per se, does not necessarily incorporate human rights-based education. Students need to know what human rights are if they are to be expected to recognize when these rights are being impeded. As well, it is necessary to expose learners to the realities faced by marginalized groups denied fair and equitable access to their human rights. The failure to infuse rights-based teaching within the GCE model is a direct denial of the rights of the students to access HRE (Struthers, 2015). Finally, current models of GCE prescribed to early years teachers do not provide the tools necessary to enable an informed discourse through which students are empowered to challenge government policy and practice (Osler & Starkey, 2010).

## **Types of Citizenship**

Citizenship education should spark a call to action – a desire to engage in charitable acts or to challenge the power and policy that impede social justice. Citizenship education may elicit local action, while GCE should create an international response. Action and activism are diverse responses to need, which arise from an individual's sense of social, political, and economic rights and responsibilities to self and others. Westheimer and Kahne (2003) coined a conceptualization of citizenship that portrays in clear and identifiable measures the effectiveness of citizenship education.

The three types of citizenship discussed by Westheimer and Kahne (2003) are the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen (see

Appendix for a full explanation of the types of citizens). Only one of these categories has citizens who are actively engaged in challenging the systems and policies that create inequality and injustice. The aim of GCE should be to create a justice-oriented citizen, yet the education of early years students as critical thinkers and rights-based, social activists is the exception rather than the norm. There is clearly a dearth of supports and resources geared for use in the early years classroom (J. Hamilton, Executive Director, Manitoba Council for International Cooperation, personal communication, August 4, 2015; L. Schaefer, Director, Facing History and Ourselves, personal communication, July 14, 2015). Educators of early years students must make a personal commitment to ply for resources that develop citizenship beyond the personally responsible or participatory citizen into active spaces where students can strive for ways to embrace justice-oriented citizenship practices.

## **Charity**

Charity is an immediate response to a human need. Charity represents a reaction to the effects of marginalization and oppression. Acts of charity are usually individual initiatives that neither address nor challenge politics or the economic, political, or social factors that perpetuate injustice; rather, charity focuses on the effects and symptoms of injustice (Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis, n.d.). In the global context, aid agencies categorize charity as relief for “the short-term emergency initiatives concentrating primarily on food, health care, water, and shelter” (Nutt, 2011, p. 13). Charity appeases one’s conscience and affords the provider a sense of goodwill, but does nothing to address the causal factors that created the need for charity in the first place. Furthermore, without an understanding of neoliberal ideology and entrenched systems of power and privilege that lead to the denial of human rights for marginalized people, acts of charity do not, and can not, build the momentum for change. A deeper discourse must transpire to redress a social structure founded on principles of justice and reciprocal global education to move students beyond acts of charity when responding to the needs of others (Renner et al., 2010).

## **Social Justice**

Social justice refers to relationships based on human dignity in all arenas and includes active participation through enabling the full agency of all citizens locally and globally (Shultz & Abdi, 2007). The globalized world is one fraught with inequality of goods and burdens (Shultz & Hamdon, n.d.). In response, social justice practitioners engage in critical dialogue about the issues that create the obstruction for rights fulfillment. Social justice activists become allies in solidarity-based actions and initiatives that are transformative to all stakeholders in the equation (Renner et al., 2010). Social justice compels people to look beyond what is to what ought to be in terms of the universal opportunity for people to claim and apply their human rights without impingement or repercussion of any kind. Justice-based action demands responsive social change to address the legacy of colonization as manifest through the institutions, structures, and frameworks that marginalize and oppress members of society. Further, Social Justice Education (SJE) provides the means for citizens to examine and question issues of power and privilege and builds competency for all members of society, locally, nationally, and globally in order to take informed, transformative action.

The underpinning for SJE lies within the text of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which situates as truth that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations, 2015, “Preamble,” p. 1). It behooves educators to infuse and instill HRE in all facets of learning, to inform students as to the inalienable rights for all human beings. Additionally, students must come to understand that these rights should not require effort in claiming; the UDHR states that “all human beings are born free and equal in

dignity and rights” (United Nations, 2015, “Article 1”). Without this baseline of understanding, there is no platform upon which to build a solidified call to the universal claiming of these rights. With knowledge comes power. In the context of GCE, the desire is to create a reciprocal relationship built on the belief of a global ethic of care and universal entitlement to human dignity. It is this relationship, forged through rights-based justice-oriented GCE, that holds great transformative potential.

### **Global Citizenship Education Mandates**

In a world where the local is informing and influencing the global and vice versa, or as it is now known as a glocalized world, the kind of citizenship that schools establish should be locally deep and responsible, but also globally aware and inclusive. (Shultz & Abdi, 2007, p. 9)

Early years educators follow teaching mandates to construct the foundational parameters through which students learn to situate themselves in relation to the world around them. Global citizenship is the second goal identified in Brandon School Division’s (2014) current strategic plan. The school division codifies global citizenship into three categories, digital citizenship, personal growth, and ethical citizenship. At face value, it would appear that the specific competencies of respect, community involvement, volunteerism, and global awareness would embrace GCE; however, these learning opportunities focus on individual, locally based acts of charity. A critique of the programming would suggest that this initiative falls short of moving beyond charity-based actions.

Manitoba’s early years social studies curriculum dedicates one cluster in grade three for HRE (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015). The flaws in this initiative are multifaceted. For one, students’ exposure to citizenship education is through teaching and learning practices that are exclusively charity and service based. This narrow perspective fails the students by denying them the opportunity to begin creating an understanding of critical discourse about the economic, social, and political institutions that favour positions of power and privilege. Holistic GCE entails an involvement with political questions, which includes consumerism and the distribution of wealth and resources – p values and practices that schools unequivocally hesitate to challenge. Moreover, students have an opportunity to consider the global “other,” but exclusively through the lens of service and aid. In addition, the development of critical literacy and transformative learning is placed solely in the trust of those educators who personally embrace deliberative inquiry and emancipatory literacy; a dearth of available teaching resources in this area has meant that not all educators have been able to gain the wider perspective that the subject demands. Furthermore, there is no requisite HRE program for grade four students, effectively denying these students their right to this learning. This void, in fact, falls far short of what the United Nations and all its conventions and teaching instruments would profess obligatory, rights-affirming practice (Osler & Starky, 2010; Struthers, 2015).

When viewed through a critical lens, divisional and provincial mandates prove to support citizenship learning individualized in focus and narrow in scope; as such, students can not access rights-based and justice-oriented GCE. This is, indeed, a travesty. The critical thinking that goes along with the idea of giving to others in need must be introduced in these first years of school in order for students to begin to form ways to approach the problems of inequity in all its forms. Teachers must be able to accompany their students beyond the notion of charity, despite evoking the feeling that giving satisfies an emotional desire for a connection to others. They must move, together, beyond merely investigating service providers that assist people in accessing their human rights, toward critiquing public policy and frameworks that require support in order to claim those rights. The effort to expand the focus of social justice education in this way is challenging but so important; it is crucial work to bring to the early years sphere.

## Past Practice

In terms of an educational agenda, we understand GCE as pushing beyond an exclusively national perspective of world affairs, avoiding reducing civics and global studies to social studies topics, and breaking from tokenizing and exoticizing foreign places and people. (Eidoo et al., 2011, p. 61)

There is a dearth of critical pedagogy for holistic GCE in early years classrooms. This teacher's past practice was narrow in scope and focus as a direct result of the lack of resources to introduce, inform, and support transformative praxis. By exclusively using divisional and provincial mandates, this educator provided instruction that was charity-based and service-focused, which effectively denied students the means to forge individual and collective understandings and the desire to challenge for change. Students were not provided the opportunity to think deeply or reflect critically about the institutions and policies that affect the equitable claiming of rights by local, national, and global citizens.

Reflecting on past practices created a crisis of conscience for me; on many occasions I embraced and celebrated students' acts of charity. I recognized and commended students as they engaged in food, clothing, and coin collections with the noble desire to do their part to make the world a better place. Through nominating a grade three student for the provincial teacher association's Young Humanitarian Award, I participated in the validation of exclusively charity-based actions. When the student won the award, her peers elevated her to a position of heroism and a model of citizenship that they believed they should emulate. At no point did I challenge the students to ply for deeper meaning. In hindsight, a celebration of activism could have led to an exploration of the social, political, and economic forces that impede children in Africa from attending schools financed and constructed by their governments and their communities. The opportunity for me to apply critical literacy and transformative pedagogy to the act of raising money for donation has passed. This was, indeed, a missed opportunity for creating foundations that might provoke the lifelong desire for one, or all, of those students to apply deliberative dialogue and critical interrogation throughout all of the spaces within their lives (Eidoo et al., 2011).

Moving forward, it is incumbent upon me to revisit the knowledge amassed through academic research and personal discovery about rights-based, social justice activism and infuse it as informative praxis into the classroom, the school community, and the wider society within which she lives. Making meaning about GCE includes the development of praxis to guide and mentor others toward an informed space in which to interrogate, deconstruct, and resist the ideologies and practices of injustice and oppression that position one group over another (Kelly & Brandes, 2010). This must surely be an act of solidarity in and of itself. The opportunity to learn with students about transformative, reciprocal, solidarity-based calls to action begins with the new school year and a new group of grade three and four learners.

## Informed Praxis

The type of schools that would achieve reliable regimes of citizenship rights and social justice would have the capacity, in their teaching and social relations perspectives, to achieve a more universal ethical understanding of the rights of citizenship which will definitely enhance the lives of current and future generations. (Shultz & Abdi, 2007, p. 10)

There is an urgent need for equity-minded educators to develop critical literacy and transformative pedagogy in all grade levels. Positioning students in an informed space where they can claim collective agency empowers them to address critically the troubling issues of the deteriorating Canadian Human Rights record (Neve, July 10, 2015). There are, at present,

insufficient pedagogical tools to support social justice learning in early years classrooms. This is not from a lack of need, to be sure, as early years students deserve exposure to more critical ways in which to view the world and their place in it. The current scarcity of discursive, rights-based resources offered by school, division, and provincial mandates leaves individual educators with a passion for rights-based GCE teaching within a void.

There are models of praxis for social justice and HRE that early years educators, administrators, and policy-makers can adapt for use within early years spaces (Eidoo et al., 2011; Kelly & Brandes, 2010; Soares & Wood). In classrooms focused on justice learning, the teacher acts as facilitator to guide the students to acquire and develop the skills to think critically and reflectively as they become informed and socially responsive active agents for change (Tinkler, Hannah, Tinkler, & Miller, 2014). The social justice educator is one who creates a sense of agency in students (Kelly, 2007). Addressing structures that create power imbalance and marginalization begins within the spaces of the classroom and school community. Approaching the teaching and learning arena as a dynamic forum with reciprocal relationships enables all participants to move fluidly between the roles of teacher, facilitator, and student. Students skilled in justice-oriented citizenship have multiple opportunities to work collectively in meaningful ways to apply a critical lens to local, national, and global issues of equity, opportunity, and justice. Together, teacher and students navigate learning activities that demystify and critically analyze institutional and social injustice, and the roles that privilege and power have in creating inequity. Students become empowered to address and challenge why some members within the global community are unable to claim their human rights (Kelly & Brandes, 2010). Teachers can, and should, infuse GCE across the curriculum. Isolating citizenship and HRE into an exclusively social studies sphere does not provide the full context or learning space for the deliberative discourse required to challenge for change.

Moving forward, this educator will ensure that the classroom becomes a safe learning environment that nurtures and expects critical inquiry and discursive dialogue on issues and events that hold authentic meaning to the students. Together, the teacher and students will explore local and global issues of oppression, marginalization, and injustice. In recognition of the recent release of The Truth and Reconciliation Report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), and to stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples and their call to reconcile, this teacher will take an active role in facilitating students' engagement with issues of tension around our shared past. Students may critically interact with the causes and effects of marginalization, power imbalances, and resource exploitation through the exploration of personal narratives from those who bear the burden of injustice. Further, any request for acts of charity will be countered with participatory learning methods that engage the learners in holistic GCE while enriching students' confidence, self-esteem, and their critical thinking, communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution abilities (The Inter-Council Network, 2015). For educators to impart a skill set relevant for the 21st century, all stakeholders directing this learning must focus on education steeped in rights-based, justice-oriented GCE.

## Conclusion

The glorified neo-liberal agenda, which portends a global connectedness has, ironically, if predictably, resulted in further oppression, marginalization, and dehumanization for a vast majority of the world. (Renner et al., 2010, p. 42)

Justice-based GCE uses discursive pedagogy to apply a critical lens to the indoctrinated practices by those who hold positions of power and privilege. Teachers and their students probe for informed understandings upon which to draw as they work toward acquiring a global perspective of ethics, rights, and responsibilities through GCE. Critically informed students, empowered as effective change agents, will be the ones to challenge local, national, and global oppression and inequality. However, at present divisional and provincial resources for

citizenship education fail to provide the tools necessary to scaffold knowledge beyond acts of charity and service learning. Early years educators need to approach GCE from an informed position that creates relationships that embrace reciprocity and global intersection. To be clear, early years teachers have a limited repertoire of teaching and learning support material from which to draw. The responsibility to unpack action-based GCE belongs exclusively to those whose personal ideologies call for more meaningful interface with rights-based, social justice—policy-makers lag behind in this mission. Currently, it is a lonely landscape for early years global citizenship educators.

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## **Appendix Kinds of Citizen**

Westheimer and Kahne (2003) proposed a model of citizenship that aligns citizens' actions with their level of commitment to solidarity-based activism. The three types of citizens are, the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. A brief adaptation and synthesis of each category follows.

### **The Personally Responsible Citizen**

The personally responsible citizen acts responsibly in the community by following rules and prescribed expectations for behaviour. These citizens respond to the call to action through actively engaging in volunteerism with charitable contributions and sheltered service. The personally responsible citizen embraces honesty, integrity, self-discipline, hard work, and compliance as platforms for building character, responding to civic duty, and when situating a relationships with others. (It is interesting to note that the ethos intrinsic to this category of citizenship mirrors the doctrines of most classrooms where teachers enforce prescribed formulations for student behaviour). Additionally, students in classrooms that embrace an "us" and "other" worldview learn to see volunteerism as a compassionate response to the needs of others. A classroom which fuels a discourse of "haves" and "have-nots" creates citizens who further perpetuate the notion of duty to care—using their point of privilege, to provide for those in need—specifically the "deficient recipient" (Shultz, 2013, p. 3).

## **The Participatory Citizen**

The participatory citizen actively responds to the call to action through civic duty and social action at the community, provincial, and national level. Entrenched in the evaluative frameworks of the participatory citizen is the requirement to improve society and solve social problems through leadership and active participation within the normative justice and service constructs. The classroom pedagogy that develops the participatory citizen focuses on the structure and function of local and national institutions, such as church, state, and service agencies that help others claim their human rights. The actions and reactions of the participatory citizenry further perpetuate the ideologies of neocolonialism in which the “haves” provide for the “have-nots.” Internationally, the participatory citizen believes it is the role of the charitable giver from the “developed” world to respond to the intellectual, political, social, economic, cultural and educational deficits of the needy “other” in “underdeveloped” parts of the world (Shultz, 2013, p. 3; J. Hamilton, Executive Director, Manitoba Council for International Cooperation, personal communication July 15, 2015).

## **The Justice-Oriented Citizen**

Rights-based GCE practitioners seek to build justice-oriented citizens in an engaged public. The justice-oriented citizen has been educated with informative inquiry and critical literacy that enables a well-versed critique of policy and practice entrenched in local, national, and global institutions. The justice-oriented citizen probes for the causal agents of injustice and once informed mobilizes to address inequity through campaigns and social movements. Social justice-oriented citizens provoke an on-going challenge to entrenched social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate inequity and deny marginalized people the space to claim their human rights. Justice-oriented citizens use the knowledge they have gained to advocate for change for marginalized members of society.

## ***About the Author***

*Lynn Nicol is a second year student in Brandon University's graduate studies in education program. She has an avid interest in equity programming for traditionally marginalized students. Her perspective is formulated around teaching in the early years classroom as well as from personal anecdotes gleaned from the experiences of her multicultural family.*