



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

**Lynn Nicol**

*Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this conference. It was a privilege to present, and an honour to represent my family and Brandon School Division. I am currently working toward a Master of Education in curriculum and instruction. It is my pleasure to share with you the thinking behind my presentation, based on an article that has been published in the BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education (Nicol, 2016a) and in The MERN Journal (Nicol, 2016b).*

This is a topic that I am passionate about. I believe that all ages would benefit from a discourse in Human Rights Education (HRE) in global citizenship discussions – inside and outside of formal educational spheres. In actuality, on a recent trip abroad, I engaged in a conversation with a young man who wanted to know my purpose for travelling. When I told him about presenting at a human rights conference, he asked “What are human rights?” Through the course of conversation, I learned that his family lives in Sweden, relocated as refugees from Argentina. Further, it turns out he was a guest on a Canadian radio program this past February. He was discussing the Canadian government commitment of sponsoring 25 000 refugees from Syria in a span of four months, relative to the Swedish commitment of 25 000 people per month. As a freelance journalist, he had professional and personal expertise in this topic, yet he asked me, “What are human rights?” This confirms the urgency in situating rights-based, social justice edification in all the spheres of influence each of us holds. In my school division, if students are exposed to citizenship education, it is exclusively through the lens of the personally responsible citizen “doing good” because it “feels good.” It is my goal to support educators in adopting praxis to guide students in engaging citizenship education that moves beyond this ideology, to that whereby students have the critical literacy to probe and respond to the causal agents of injustice. To this end, our division has but one course in grade 12, and it is an optional course at that. In early years education, it is a lonely landscape. I believe that this work must attend all educational spaces, at all grade levels and across all curriculums, which is indeed a challenge.

Global Citizenship Education (GCE), in its noblest terms, is a commitment made by educators to provide students with opportunities to situate themselves as citizens within a global community. My presentation addressed the lay of the land for global citizenship and human rights education in early years spaces. Drawing upon the context of my experience educating through school-based, divisional, and provincial mandates, my work exposed that Manitoba educators face a dearth of resources for holistic citizenship education in early years classrooms. The discussion emphasized the need for a vibrant discourse on the placement of social justice resources in early years to inform and support educational experiences that move beyond acts of charity. Only through disruptive pedagogies that challenge structures of power and privilege are requisite spaces of interrogation created. This is crucial to the deliberative discourse necessary for education that moves beyond charity to actions of solidarity around equity and social justice – locally, nationally, and globally. It has become clear that I must keep one important aim close at hand: that is, to unpack the exclusively charitable response that attends much classroom instruction.

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## **GRADUATE STUDENT, EDUCATOR, PARTNER, & PARENT**

I would like to provide you with a bit of background to situate the internal development of this topic. I bring to this discussion personal, familial, occupational, and academic perspectives on the topic of human rights. I come from a small, strongly conservative, agricultural community in the heart of the prairies. When I graduated from high school in 1980, I had worked with my father since childhood, attending to farm chores. I loved the dairy, and would later introduce beef, sheep, and poultry production to this operation. In 1983, a bit of a bombshell hit – not predicated on any situation or circumstance – it just happened. I was driving into our community of 45,000 people when I was struck by the desire to get out into the big wide world that existed beyond “Life on the Farm.” I started travelling in 1985 and never looked back. For example, I backpacked solo through Israel and Europe for ten months. I also lived and worked on a Kibbutz in Israel, and I participated in international Work Camps in Belgium and the former countries of Czechoslovakia and East Germany. At that point, travel and solidarity work became forever entwined.

In 1986, I spent three weeks as a Witness for Peace in Nicaragua during the Contra-Revolution War, staying with villagers in areas targeted by the Contra forces – with the aim that an international presence may spare their village and its inhabitants from attack. In 1987, I went to Libya on an “all expenses paid trip” that turned out to be absconded student funds used as a propaganda campaign to mark the first anniversary of the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi by the “American fleet.”

In 1988, I graduated from university with a Diploma in Agriculture, and I found myself caught between a passion for farming and a yearning for development work. I farmed with my parents for seven months and then accepted a ten-month volunteer position with Canadian Crossroads International. This took me to St. Vincent and the Grenadines in the Caribbean, where I met and married my husband. We have three children – two sons and a daughter – and we maintain very close ties with our “West Indian” (oops – colonial vernacular) Caribbean culture.

After welcoming our children, we connected with the larger world through local development initiative organizations, and welcomed many world citizens into our home. We of course travel to the Caribbean when we can afford to do so. We were (are) somewhat of an exception, and a most radical departure from normative Eurocentric patterns of awareness and behaviour as they are expressed in our western Manitoba community.

## THE GENESIS: “FAMILY” RIGHTS

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- × Ethnolinguistic & colour/culture prejudices
- × Family bias – too white to be black & too black to be white
- × Conservative, gender-striated world of agriculture

My family has felt the expression of prejudice and bias, in both Canada and in the Caribbean. My husband won a human rights case for discrimination from employment based on colour – and he refused to begin a second case just a few years ago when vying for work in the oil industry. Last year, I challenged the linguistic department at my school and in our division, that people from the Caribbean are “NOT” language learners. Their first language is English (or French) – the issue of an accent is that of the listener, not the speaker. It is curious to me that the white “British” accent educator in our school is not considered a language learner, but the children of colour are. This remains a very hot topic in our home!

As a family, we learned quite quickly that ethnic bias holds family spaces. My children were too white to be black in my husband’s country, and too black to be white in mine. I taught my children to self-identify as “brown” – a category that exists only in the vernacular of those working to strike spaces for identity affirmation. Come on! Is Obama really a “Black” president? I am bothered to share that this summer while she was at work, some random white, older man came up to my beautiful daughter and told her that she was “what was wrong with the world.” Shocked, she asked, “Why – because I am brown?” After sharing this loaded comment, the man just walked away. Yes, really – racism exists in Brandon.

In 2008, the myth of the “family farm” became debunked for me, and I hung up the last of the milking machines and took up my teaching degree. I have been a teacher in the public school system for the last 6 years, teaching grades one to six (6-12 year olds). I am now a “recovering farmer” after leaving the farm in 2013 when it became blatantly obvious that intergenerational transfer would never happen, because I was the wrong gender and because I married someone from outside of our culture. The farm now rests in estate status, soon to be sold to the highest bidder.

I mention these things to reinforce that I have personal ties with issues of equity and social justice, which is important formative knowledge when working to provide equity and rights-affirming education in my classroom teaching practice. My background experience and commitment to global citizenship are somewhat rare in our school division, and there are few foundations of support for those less intimately connected who would wish to try.

## **EDUCATIONAL SPHERES OF INFLUENCE**

- × **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)**

The ideological framework and lived experiences from which teachers work when establishing their own GCE theory and pedagogy affect the learning experiences that they offer to their students. These experiences, in turn, 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. Embedded in this document are the “Kinds of Citizens” as conceptualized by Westheimer and Kahne (2003). This representation of the varied kinds of citizens, actions, and core assumptions associated with each category are foundational concepts that guide me in creating learning events that are rooted in justice oriented/rights-based citizenship.

Educators in Manitoba must frame their practice within the context of the Government of Manitoba’s terminology. Social studies teaching is constructed with citizenship as a foundational concept, with global citizenship 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). However, the guiding documents offer very few opportunities to construct spaces for learner empowerment that affords the individual and collective claiming of rights and freedoms while respecting, upholding, and when possible standing in solidarity with marginalized groups working to claim and achieve their inalienable human rights. The educational scaffolding simply does not exist!

## **EDUCATION MANDATES**

***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)***

Early years educators must follow teaching mandates to construct the foundational parameters through which students learn to situate themselves in relation to the world around them. Given the school, divisional, and provincial policies guiding early years’ instruction, it is no wonder that early years educators are reluctant to engage in critical, deliberative dialogue with their students.



## GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP – GRADE 3/4

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- ❖ **Manitoba Government: “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).**
  
  - × **Brandon School Division Strategic Plan - Global Citizenship Ethical Citizenship –**
    - \*respect for diversity/cultural competency
    - \*sense of community involvement
    - \*volunteerism
    - \*global awareness
  
  - ❖ **Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning**
    - \*Grade 3 Cluster 2 Communities of the World
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Global citizenship is the second goal identified in Brandon School Division’s current strategic plan that codifies global citizenship into three categories, including 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 3 for HRE. 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 initiate 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, including consumerism and the distribution of wealth and resources – 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 (like me) personally embrace deliberative inquiry and emancipatory literacy. A dearth of available teaching resources in this area has meant that not all educators have acquired the wider perspective that the subject demands. In addition, there is no requisite HRE program for grade 4 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 as obligatory, rights-affirming practice (Osler & Starky, 2010; Struthers, 2015).

When viewed through a critical lens, divisional and provincial mandates support citizenship learning that is individualized in focus and narrow in scope; 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 of its forms. Teachers must 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 critically important. It is crucial work to bring to the early years sphere, because it is critically informed students, empowered as effective change agents, who will challenge local, national, and global oppression and inequality.

**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")



In the final paragraphs of this article, I would like to share with you several key ideas that have been pillars for my work in informing myself in ways to support students in the probe for informed understandings upon which to draw as they work toward acquiring a global perspective of ethics, rights, and responsibilities through GCE.

The responsibility to unpack action-based GCE belongs exclusively to those whose personal ideologies call for more meaningful interface with rights-based, social justice. Policymakers lag behind in this mission. Currently, it is a lonely landscape for early years global citizenship educators. Digesting the discourse presented through the work of Westheimer and Kahne (2003) has transformed the dialogue that I construct around equity and justice education. Westheimer and Kahne identified three kinds of citizens, which I offer for your review. Where does your instructional capacity guide children?

## KINDS OF CITIZENS

Personally Responsible	Participatory	Justice Oriented
Acts responsibly in community	Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts	Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures
Works and pays taxes	Promotes economic development	Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice
Obeys laws	Organizes community efforts to care for those in need	Knows about social movements and how to effect systematic change
Recycles, Gives blood	Cleans up environment	
Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis	Knows how government agencies work	
	Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks	
<b>Where would a refugee</b>	<b>sponsorship group fit?</b>	

## SAMPLE ACTION

Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Justice Oriented Citizen
Contributes food to a food drive	Helps to organize a food drive	Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes

## CORE ASSUMPTIONS

Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Justice Oriented Citizen
To solve social problem and improve society, citizens must <b>have</b> good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community	To solve social problem and improve society, citizens must <b>actively</b> participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures <small>Source: Adapted from Westheimer &amp; Kahne, 2003, p.52</small>	To solve social problem and improve society, citizens must <b>question</b> and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time

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. 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.

There are very real costs attached when citizens “do good because it feels good.” Let us move with our students beyond acts that are exclusively charitable, to those that challenge and address the inequities and injustices created by the social constructs of power and privilege.

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### **About the Presenter**

*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.*