Global citizenship education: reflections and practical guidance from UNESCO

Within the global education community, the current understanding of quality education includes developing knowledge and skills for global citizenship and sustainable development. What exactly does global citizenship education entail? UNESCO has released curriculum guidance and a background report to answer this question.

The Sustainable Development Goals have brought a global level of attention to a range of educational quality issues that extend far beyond just literacy and numeracy. Target 4.7 of the SDGs calls for ensuring “that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

While some countries already incorporate these objectives into their educational plans and curricula, for many others this global target may contain unfamiliar ideas and raise a number of questions. Anticipating these concerns, UNESCO began in 2013 to host a series of international consultations on what global citizenship education entails and how it can be implemented. These consultations resulted in a report, Global Citizenship Education: Preparing Learners for the Challenges of the 21st Century, and more recently in a field-tested curricular guidance document, Global Citizenship Education Topics and Learning Objectives.

The curricular guidance defines global citizenship as “a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity,” emphasizing “political, economic, social and cultural interdependency and interconnectedness between the local, the national and the global.” Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in turn “aims to be transformative, building the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners need to be able to contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world.”
UNESCO’s curricular guidance defines three key learning outcomes in the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural domains, and describes three corresponding learner attributes that GCE should aim to develop. These are further developed into nine suggested topic areas, as follows:


The curriculum guidance document further specifies the learning objectives to be attained under each of these topics, at each level of the basic education system (from pre-primary to upper secondary), and details the key themes to be covered at each level.

Together with the earlier report, this UNESCO guidance covers a range of fundamental questions that education planners may have about GCE. Responses to some of these questions are summarized below:

**Does GCE reflect our national values?**

Global citizenship education is based on values that are increasingly being considered essential on the international stage. Nonetheless, the UNESCO report recognizes that there continues to be debates and points of tension around this idea. Some of the issues the report identifies include: differing views regarding whether to promote global solidarity or global competition, reconciling local and global identities and interests and the extent to which education is allowed to
become a means for challenging the status quo. The reflections on these issues contained in the report can be helpful in thinking through the deeper value considerations that must go into designing approaches to GCE within a specific national context.

How can we find room in our curriculum for a new course on GCE?

The UNESCO report states that “GCE is not a separate subject. Rather, it is a learning process focusing not only on what students learn but also how they learn.” Certainly, GCE may be offered as a stand-alone subject. But the UNESCO guidance also highlights many other possibilities, including influencing school-wide priorities and the overall school ethos with global citizenship values and practices; integrating GCE within existing subjects such as “civics, social studies, environmental studies, geography, history, religious education, science, music and arts”; promoting GCE through cross-disciplinary collaborations between teachers of different subjects; using information and communications technology to help connect students with their peers in other parts of the world; using sports and the arts; and promoting youth-led and community-based initiatives that take action to address certain citizenship and sustainable development concerns.

What does GCE look like in practice?

The UNESCO report and curricular guidance both cite numerous examples of educational initiatives around the world that incorporate elements of GCE. Although these examples are not very detailed, educators may gain an understanding of what an effective GCE lesson or experience looks like. The report acknowledges that in most countries there is a dearth of pedagogical materials—such as textbooks, supplementary reading materials, multimedia, and other learning tools—that are specifically designed to support teachers in implementing global citizenship education. The guidance document states that “UNESCO would welcome suggestions and examples of research and practice for future editions.”

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