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Global citizenship, plurilingualism, and teacher education: the need for conceptual differentiation

Abstract

The study investigates to what extent discourses promoting global citizenship education (GCE) and plurilingual education (PE) are embraced by teachers in practice. Through questionnaires and interviews, it explores how 123 international teachers of various disciplines and 12 teacher educators conceptualise and promote GCE and PE. Results show that participants employ a variety of educational practices, but tend to conceptualise GCE and PE through more familiar notions (e.g., intercultural education) and/or to rely on vague definitions. This highlights the importance of conceptual clarity and differentiation and, thus, the role of scholars in and their responsibility towards teacher education and educational change.

Keywords

Global citizenship education; Plurilingual education; Teacher education; Teacher cognition; Scholarship and teaching.

1. *Introduction*

Over the past decade, the concepts of 'global citizen education' (GCE) and 'plurilingual education' (PE) have animated international debate on education (e.g., Council of Europe 2020, UNESCO 2015). While the driving forces for the increasing interest in these can be traced to different discourses (§2), they *seem* to be increasingly influencing (language) education in practice (e.g., Council of Europe 2016, Lütge et al. 2023). This study aims to ascertain whether this impression is confirmed. More precisely, via questionnaires and interviews, it explores how 123 international teachers of various disciplines in secondary education (foreign language, history, maths, science, etc.) as well as 12 teacher educators conceptualise GCE and PE, and promote either (or both) in their professional practice.

2. *Conceptual framework*

2.1 Locating 'global citizenship education'

As usually happens when 'new' concepts and labels become popular,[1] GCE is not defined consistently by the many organizations and educational institutions striving to promote it worldwide. It is not possible here to summarise the debate dedicated to GCE; rather, two key definitions are commented on.

According to UNESCO (2015: 14), "global citizenship refers to a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity. It emphasises political, economic, social and cultural interdependency and interconnectedness between the local, the national and the global". This means that "globally competent individuals *can examine* local, global and *intercultural issues*, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and *take responsible action* toward *sustainability and collective well-being*" (OECD 2018: 4).[2]

This (partial) picture already gives rise to some reflections. It seems that GCE includes intercultural learning (Lütge et al. 2023), as an individual should explore *intercultural issues*, understand different perspectives, and interact successfully with Otherness. However, two main features seem to distinguish GCE from intercultural learning, i.e. the development of intercultural competence (IC) (Byram 2021). First, especially from a "critical" (rather than a "soft") perspective (Andreotti 2014), GCE attaches greater importance to critical literacy, as learners must analyse the origins of their own assumptions, when *examining* local or global issues, since all knowledge is partial, influenced by power relations, and often a justification of positions of privilege. Second, the notion of GCE includes a stronger "sense of responsibility to act" (*take responsible action*) as well as a firmer endeavour to promote social justice (*sustainability and collective well-being*) (Reysen & Katzarska-Miller 2013).

It is worth stressing that these are open questions rather than statements; it is still unclear what the theoretical relationships between GCE and intercultural education are. However, to respond to critiques of excessive abstraction (Davies 2006) or emptiness (Pais & Costa 2020) of the concept of GCE and to strengthen its impact, research in education should tackle the following conceptual issues.

- What is the relation between GCE and other orientations prominent in education for years (e.g., intercultural education and its IC key construct; Byram 2021) or now spreading among scholars and practitioners, such as those of education for 'intercultural citizenship' (Byram et al. 2016) and 'democratic citizenship' (Council of Europe 2018)?
- What *precise* conceptual convergences can be found in GCE and in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015), which has been shaping how national educational systems around the world pursue citizenship education (e.g., for Italy: MIUR 2020)?

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[1] The closely related concept of 'intercultural competence' is another example.
[2] Emphasis added.

- What role do language, language mastery and plurilingualism play in GCE? For example, can a global citizen be monolingual, or what added value does plurilingualism bring to citizenship?

2.2 Defining 'plurilingual education'

Although it is evident that plurilingualism and plurilingual education are not limited to the European context, discussions around these phenomena have increased significantly, throughout Europe and beyond, since the publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001). This key document, together with more recently released guidelines and frameworks, highlight that "plurilingualism is the capacity of an individual to use several languages receptively and/or productively, *whatever level of competence they have in each of them*" (Council of Europe 2018: 76). Every plurilingual repertoire thus has its own dignity, regardless of how proficient in a language a person is compared to the 'ideal native speaker'. Moreover, as long posited (e.g., Cook 1995), languages are not separated from each other in an individual's mind; quite the opposite, they are interrelated and interconnected, and all (languages of schooling, regional/minority and migration languages, modern or classical languages, etc.; Council of Europe 2016) contribute to further (language) learning. Therefore, in education, it is fundamental to make learners aware of the benefits of plurilingualism, valuing their own repertoires, allowing them to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, and encouraging comparison between languages (Council of Europe 2016, 2020).

Given the features of the study (§3), a couple of additional considerations are in order here. First, the Council of Europe distinguishes between 'plurilingualism' (the individual's ability to use more than one language) and 'multilingualism' (i.e., "the presence of several languages in a given geographical area", which "does not necessarily imply that people in that area can use several of them" (Council of Europe 2016: 20). However, many scholars as well as EU institutions (e.g., Council of the European Union 2018) use 'multilingualism' with both meanings,[3] mainly to avoid translation problems in some languages (e.g., German) where the distinction is not present or immediate. Regardless of the reasons, it has been noted that this terminological instability may prove detrimental to the dissemination of the principles of plurilingual education (Piccardo 2019). Second, interestingly, no mention is made of 'global citizenship' in the overall Council of Europe documentation, which rather highlights the importance of complementing plurilingualism with pluriculturality (the ability to participate in different cultures) and interculturality (the capacity "to experience otherness and diversity, analyse that experience and derive benefit from it" (Council of Europe 2016: 20).

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[3] This is also the case of the EU project which frames the present study (§3).

3. *The study*

This study aims to explore the practices and beliefs of teachers in secondary education regarding GCE and PE, both when these are pursued as separate educational aims and when they share integrated objectives. While research dedicated to how teachers conceive and foster either GCE (e.g., Goren & Yemini 2017, Rapoport 2010) or PE (e.g., Sordella 2015) is rapidly increasing worldwide, little is known about how teachers understand the relationship between the two and whether (and how) they pursue them jointly in their classrooms.

This investigation is part of a larger research endeavour conducted within the frame of GCMC (*The global citizenship and multilingual competences toolkit*; https://gcmc.global/), an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships project co-funded by the European Commission between 2020 and 2023. The overall project developed a set of training resources for secondary school teachers to help them promote GCE and PE in an integrated way across the curriculum, which is an approach seldom or never addressed by teacher education initiatives (Mairi et al. 2023). The study represents one of the project's preliminary research phases; it aims to help develop useful training resources based as much as possible on and consistent with teachers' existing practices and expectations.

Two collection tools were developed: an online questionnaire for teachers, and a protocol for in-depth semi-structured interviews for teacher educators. The questionnaire consists of 16 (12 closed + 4 open) questions in English, organised in four sections: 'Personal information', 'Professional qualifications and experience', 'Multilingual practices in your teaching', 'Global citizenship objectives in your teaching'. To help respondents – and to avoid potential misunderstandings which may have compromised the study, GCE and PE are defined at the beginning of the respective sections as follows: 'Global citizenship education refers to activities that empower young people to be active and engaged citizens in global issues'; 'Multilingual practices refer to any use of more than one language in class (whether in foreign language education or in the teaching of any other subject), regardless of level of proficiency'. Besides separate questions dedicated to GCE and PE, some focused on both (e.g., 'What facilitates or hinders you teaching global citizenship and/or multilingual pedagogies in your practice?'). The interview protocol comprises 22 questions in English, accompanied by additional prompts. It has four sections ('Background', 'Your training sessions', 'Teachers' needs and materials', 'Key issues of your training), and focuses on how teacher educators make sense of their student teachers' assumptions, expectations, and professional needs regarding GCE and PE.

Both groups were approached by email. Overall, 123 secondary school teachers and 12 teacher educators agreed to take part in the study. Most teachers work in Austria (52) or in Italy (45), with fewer in the Netherlands (5), UK (4), Germany and Greece (3 each), Slovenia and Tukey (2 each), Belgium, Finland, Switzerland, Iran, and Isle of Man, Japan, and Peru (1 each). 49 are second/foreign language teachers, 47 are from another discipline (history, mathematics, chemistry, etc.), and

27 have responsibility for both language and subject teaching. Of the teacher educators, half work in Austria (6) and the remaining in Italy, UK, and the Netherlands (2 each). 7 are expert in GCE and 5 in PE; no participant had expertise in both. Each participated in a videoed online interview which lasted approximately 1 hour.

Data collected through the open questions in the questionnaire as well as the interview transcripts were analysed thematically (e.g., Braun & Clarke 2006) by means of *NVivo* and, when relevant, compared against the information collected by means of the closed questions in the survey. The analysis relied on research dedicated to (language) teacher cognition, namely what teachers think, know, and believe, and on the relationship between their opinions, knowledge and beliefs and the practices they adopt in the classroom (Borg 2015). Even though the study – which does not include observational data – clearly did not aim to compare what teachers think with what they do, these conceptual and methodological reflections helped identify the various objects of cognition in the participants' discourses (for example, "about teaching, teachers, learners, learning, subject matter, curricula, materials, activities, self, colleagues") as well as discern the teachers' psychological constructs (including "beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, assumptions, conceptions") (Borg 2015: 333).

4. *Results*

4.1 A wealth of teaching practices

The analysis showed that teachers employ many teaching practices oriented in some way toward GCE or PE. The vast majority described their teaching activities in detail. Most of these examples are original, yet in line with recent developments in (language) education. For example, some of the tasks reported by the respondents invite students to "propose action for and become agents of positive change" (UNESCO, 2015: 31), while others encourage students to embrace plurilingualism in various ways (Council of Europe 2020), going beyond visions valuing only native competence in a language. A few teachers also reported on their attempts to promote GCE and PE together. Overall, the number and types of teaching practices described confirm that teachers are eager to enrich their teaching with GCE (Goren & Yemini 2017) and PE (Sordella 2015) objectives.

4.2 Between qualified expertise and conceptual overlapping

4.2.1 Global citizenship education

Moving from practice to cognition, a very varied pattern of results emerges. Regarding GCE, the most consistent and coherent thread is that of teachers identifying GCE with the promotion of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015) (*Extract 1*). However, many also appear to think that pursuing GCE corresponds to discussing current affairs in the classroom (*Extract 2*) or offer practices

commonly associated with internationalisation and internationalisation at home (e.g., Beelen & Jones 2015) (*Extract 3*).

> **Extract 1**
> pros and cons of globalisation, sustainable development goals, protect our environment, plant trees (project for UNESCO), equality – Inequality, civil rights movement, fair trade, a just world [T54_Austria_Geography]

> **Extract 2**
> I frequent link content to what's going on in the world, locally and globally, also with historical references. [T60_Italy_German]

> **Extract 3**
> Before covid I used to do students exchanges. Italian students host their foreign twin for one or two weeks. [...] Now I still try to make my students feel citizens of the word though Etwinning projects [T2_Italy_Spanish]

While these practices are obviously all valuable, their being mentioned in this context indicates some conceptual overlapping with educational orientations other than GCE. This is also evident from several teachers' accounts that clearly refer to cultural or intercultural education (*Extracts 4*), interpreted in various ways, though mainly essentialist (Borghetti 2022).

> **Extract 4**
> Talking about languages my pupils are able to speak, about how people live in different parts of the world, singing songs in different languages, learning about folk music and international musicians [...] [T77_Austria_Geography]

4.2.2 Plurilingual education

Results regarding PE show a polarisation between language teachers and others, despite considerable professional knowledge in both cases.

Among language teachers, the belief that adopting and promoting plurilingualism is important for language learning seems to be well established (*Extract 5*), although some resistance persists (*Extract 6*).

> **Extract 5**
> [...] sometimes I ask my students to translate something in their mother tongue (Italian) double check if everybody understands. Moreover I often refer to German and French (languages studied at school) to compare grammar structures or vocabulary asking my students to explain similarities and differences. [T74_Italy_English]

> **Extract 6**
> Obviously when I teach English I speak English [...] [T15_Austria_English]

Quite diverse results emerge from disciplinary teachers' accounts. Here, plurilingualism is mainly understood to be synonymous with CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*). Other shared beliefs see PE as limited to the incidental use of

English in the classroom (*Extract 7*) or as a compensatory tool to help those who do not understand the language of schooling (*Extract 8*).

Extract 7
I use sometimes english materials such as videoclips, books internet sites [T107_Italy_Maths]

Extract 8
teaching students with multilingual background [T41_Austria_Geography]

As with GCE, the respondents' accounts overall show awareness of a range of current educational issues and trends related to PE (the importance of plurilingualism, going beyond the native-speaker model, integrating content and language learning). Considering the terminology used by the teachers as well as how their self-reported practices are grounded in recent theories, it seems that teacher education initiatives – as well as experience – have contributed significantly to shaping the respondents' conceptions, in their own professional sphere.

4.3 A problem with vagueness in teacher education

A final result worth reporting is the vagueness often employed by respondents when talking about GCE and PE (*Extract 9*).

Extract 9
I think, every topics can be universal and can promote the global citizenship [...] [T106_Italy_L2Italian]

In general, in simply stating that GCE and PE can be promoted in many ways, teachers are in fact saying little of their practices and understanding. At least with respect to GCE, this result confirms impressions in previous studies (Rapoport 2010) and reviews (Goren & Yemini 2017) about teachers' vague notions of global citizenship.

What is new here is that, interestingly, considerations put forward by the teacher educators interviewed are also vague and abstract (Davies 2006); as shown in *Extract 10*, trainers somehow struggle to get into the specifics of teaching procedures and materials, despite the interviewers' questions and prompts.

Extract 10
I am pretty sure it is present in the classroom to a certain extent. So I's probably more about embracing it and making it visible. And also empower these multilingual kids so that they are really, you know, proud of the resources they have. And maybe support them, you know, in one way or the other, maybe they need more support in their L1. [TE1_PE]

5. *Discussion and conclusions: enhancing teacher education*

The study provides evidence that teachers have definite opinions, knowledge, and beliefs about how to promote global citizenship and plurilingualism in their classes, even if their cognition aligns only in part with academic and institutional discourses

around GCE and PE. Interestingly, no major differences emerged among teachers working in different national educational systems; quite the opposite, there appears to be a *transnational culture of teaching*, according to which diverse perspectives coexist within the same national context and educational trends are transnational (e.g., that distinguishing language from subject teachers).

Most participants show they are very aware of recent educational orientations (for example, UN Sustainable Development Goals, internationalisation practices, and CLIL). While it is arguable that their answers may be influenced by the title of the project and the questions in the questionnaire (both insisting on GCE and PE) and thus be subjected to social desirability bias, it is difficult not to attribute – at least in part – the teachers' informed statements to the numerous teacher education initiatives taking place internationally. However, even accepting that training programmes have proven effective in general terms, the question remains how to enhance those specifically dedicated to GCE and PE, as – in both areas – the study confirms that teachers tend to conceptualise unfamiliar concepts through more familiar notions and/or to rely on vague, abstract meanings and representations (Rapoport 2010).

Before considering how teacher education dedicated to GCE and PE could be improved, some preliminary reflections are necessary. Lack of conceptual definition and terminological consistency are features which characterise – and often undermine – not only these specific fields (Goren & Yemini 2017), but scholarship in (language) education and social sciences in general. While it is true that concept (re)definition is critical to the functioning and evolution of research, new labels are constantly appearing, and the relevant social actors, such as educational institutions and teachers, can struggle to keep pace with these. What is more, academics seldom specify how new concepts differ from existing ones in order to justify a new term. This "obsession with terminological innovation" risks reducing impact, since it generates (unnecessary) confusion and limits communication with actors beyond academia (Borghetti in preparation). In short, the responsibility for ensuring that GCE and PE principles are pursued in education lies not so much with the teachers or their trainers, but starts upstream, where concepts should be clearly defined and, above all, differentiated from neighbouring concepts (Gerring 1999). If the theoretical framework for GCE and PE is clear (beyond of course its legitimate inherent complexity), according to this study, teachers seem ready to embrace it; both their practices and cognition demonstrate considerable openness toward developments in educational thinking in GCE and PE and more generally. The challenge is rather to provide precise and concrete opportunities for further professional development, starting by repositioning what teachers already know, do and deem right within the new educational orientations.

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