



Mobility, belonging, and the importance of context: Personal reflections in response to the vignettes

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Abstract

The author begins by addressing the conceptual complexities surrounding the field of GCE, with its hegemonic and critical aspects, and the various forms in which it has been designed and implemented in education over the past decade. Engaging with the vignettes in this special issue and drawing on her own personal experience as a migrant in different countries, the author explores the aspects of belonging, mobility, and context, and the significance of the opportunities and limitations of these in the act of education. Ultimately, she shows, GCE must remain an open-ended and authentic exploration of context.

It is not often that a scholar gets the chance to reflect on his/her own writings on a given topic; and the opportunity to engage directly with practice-oriented work offered in this special issue is even rarer in academic writing. Such an engagement, at a time when the world is dealing with a global pandemic that both transcends and also reinforces borders, is all the more challenging when the topic of focus is Global Citizenship Education.

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is a concept that gained popularity during the last decade when it was incorporated into UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework and subsequently into state curricula in many countries (Ghosn-Chelala, 2020). GCE is also echoed in the 'global competencies' chapter in the OECD's latest PISA release (2018) and resonates in the work of various non-governmental organizations (Gardinier, 2021). While widespread and generally accepted, GCE has been subject to severe criticism from academia and beyond, accused

of being an empty signifier, a sign of Global North privilege and neo-coloniality, an inapplicable concept, decontextualized from real-life teaching/learning opportunities and, importantly, conceptualized differently at various policy levels and in classrooms.

On top of the problematic conceptualization of GCE within various domains, educators and academics have expressed concerns over the assessment of GCE as promoted by intergovernmental organizations and national governments. The main argument against large-scale assessments involves the unique context-related relevance of GCE to various communities and populations (Auld & Morris, 2019; Engel, Rutkowski & Thompson, 2019). Thus, a uniform assessment might hinder differences in the ways young people live their lives and perceive the potential of GCE as relevant to their surroundings. Moreover, widespread and often unchallenged incorporation of GCE into obligatory curricula in many countries prompts discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of these mandatory contents and their applicability to the lives of youth, especially in a post-COVID-19 era. A key issue in our understanding of GCE is related to the presumed capacity of being mobile or having intentions for mobility in the future. This notion is also being challenged by scholars, questioning the link between mobility and GCE (Goren, Maxwell & Yemini, 2019). In this commentary, I aim to briefly present the state-of-the-art research on GCE, incorporating some personal accounts of my own on the intersection between mobility, GCE and privilege as well as engaging with the vignettes delivered by the scholars and practitioners in this special issue.

A global turn in education that has become prominent over recent decades includes the shift in the notion of citizenship as depicted within classrooms worldwide, from a focus on the construction of a unitary national identity to the introduction (at least in theory) of cosmopolitan ideas (Bromley, 2009). In particular, while traditionally schools were mostly entrusted with the responsibility socializing students with the nation-state, a greater number of schools nowadays are adopting a cosmopolitan narrative, aimed at preparing students for global competition, global problem solving, and, broadly, the changing nature of modern society (Goren, Yemini, Maxwell & Blumenfeld-Lieberthal, 2020). These globally oriented contents are often grouped under the title of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) (Davies, 2008). Broadly stated, GCE can be described as curricular contents aimed at preparing students to function in a global society through the development of an understanding of global issues, empathy for people of different origins, multicultural appreciation, and global skill-sets (Dill, 2013). GCE-related contents can be diverse and may include, among other issues, knowledge of other cultures (Veugelers, 2011), education towards proactivity for protection of human rights and environmental awareness (Davies, 2006), development of global responsibility and empathy (Schattle, 2008), and a rethinking

of existing hegemonies and conceptions (Pashby, da Costa, Stein & Andreotti, 2020). The inclusion of contents associated with GCE is often described as a direct response by education systems to the modern, globalized workforce. Many countries now promote GCE as a goal of schooling in general and specifically of subjects such as Civics and Social Studies; many others offer variants of GC, such as the ‘Global Dimension,’ ‘Global Competencies,’ and ‘Global Awareness’ (Oxley & Morris, 2013). GCE has been also subject to criticism as a neo-colonial endeavour (Pashby et al., 2020), and critical scholarship has outlined the shortcomings of GCE in relation to decontextualization and lack of proactivity concerning broader hegemonic power structures. Central to this criticism is the link between (assumed and required) mobility and GCE. In the following, I will address the definitions and implications of GCE, engaging with the vignettes and my personal history as scholar involved in GCE research.

As Natasha Robinson suggests in the first vignette, there is a strong argument for engaging with GCE through the lens of belonging. Arguably, belonging is a component part of coping with various spatial and social mobilities. I would like to reflect on the notion of belonging, using my personal background and experiences. I was born and raised in Ukraine, which back in the 1980s was part of the Soviet Union. Since the early 1990s I have been living in Tel Aviv, London, and Berlin, with periods in the US as well. I don’t really feel that I belong anywhere, but certainly do apply my capacity for feeling at home shortly after arrival to a new place. I am deeply aware of my own privilege in being a white academic, working in a tenured position in a globally recognized institution, able to travel widely and frequently for work-related and leisure purposes. I also acknowledge my marginal position as a woman, an immigrant from a financially poor family, with cultural assets that have been devalued in the new country. As Heather Kertyzia suggests in this issue, one’s mobility – or more precisely, one’s motility as the potential to be mobile (Kaufmann, Dubois & Ravalet, 2018) – is closely related to the hegemonic and highly criticized nature of GCE. Questions regarding the possible meanings of the ‘global’ elements of GCE, and whether one has to experience mobility in order to be a global citizen, are vital, especially among youth. While Prof. Kertyzia’s students preferred locally oriented contents when engaging with GCE, her mobile experience was certainly an asset in inspiring broader understandings of GCE and their applicability in various contexts.

Returning to my own personal history, as I described in my co-authored book with Prof. Claire Maxwell, I have a distinct memory of the first time I was on a plane. It was on December 20th 1990, after two days of travel, first by a shuttle bus and then in a sleeping wagon of a slow-moving train. We had arrived at the capital city of Ukraine, Kiev, which was completely covered in snow. Our group included myself, eleven-and-a-half years old (almost the exact same age of my twins today), confused

and excited; my parents, both thirty-eight (almost the same age I am when writing these lines); my maternal grandparents; and eight huge suitcases, containing all the things that we believed would be vital for our absorption into the new country that we were heading to. Waiting for us was what used to be called a ‘historical motherhood’ – a safe, heaven-like place, with a history that we barely knew anything about. With tickets purchased by the Jewish Agency on behalf of the state, my parents returned their passports to the Soviet authorities as requested and all of us felt excitement and maybe a bit of hysteria in the frozen air of Kiev.

The plane, crowded with dozens more new-immigrant families, finally took off. I remember being amazed by the food trays that were generously distributed by the crew, containing the usual ‘airplane food,’ but from our Soviet perspective were full of luxury ingredients and, more importantly, three or four plastic pots and cups (which my father, like the other passengers on the flight, immediately collected up and hid in our carry-on bags). I can imagine the disgust of the crew regarding these ‘dirty Russians’ (a phrase that I became used to hearing in the next few years in Israel), who were aroused by western commodities.

Ultimately, it was an uneventful flight, which landed at Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv. Years later, I would read that in that month a record number of flights arrived through the torn iron curtain, bringing to this country several thousand immigrants every day, eventually transforming Israel into a totally different country with a Russian-speaking population of over a million (out of nine million residents in total). Much can be said nostalgically about this flight and what happened afterwards: the aroma of orange trees, fresh and inviting, which will always be linked in my mind to that evening when my life changed forever; the sights of Russian nature suddenly being substituted by the palm trees arranged in lines like in some sort of parade, waiting for us upon our arrival on an overly warm Israeli December evening. That uneventful flight was meaningful. It crossed the imagined line of before and after, of there and here, and in many ways, it shaped my identity personally and professionally.

My second time on a plane occurred exactly eight years afterwards, when my boyfriend back then (now my partner and the father of my children) took me to Paris for a romantic weekend. It was a different type of experience. I tried as much as I could to act as a cosmopolitan creature, trying hard to erase any sense of my real experience of growing up in a small town, located in the deep periphery of Israel populated by a homogeneous kind of people, all of them unfortunate in an array of different ways.

I invite the readers to engage with the meanings of GCE and mobilities. As a comparative education scholar interested in mobility and identity formation, and a mother who travels frequently with and without her children, I have always been

curious about the movement of people. Mobility is a broad term used to describe movement from place to place but also movements up and down the social ladder. Spatial mobility can be of a person or of a family or even a whole community. It can be for the purposes of work or recreation. It can be in the search for an opportunity or as a necessity. It can be classified as short- or long-term, permanent or temporary. Mobility, and specifically international mobility can involve travel across a long or short distance. It can bring us to very similar or very different places from the ones we left behind.

Mobility at a personal level has implications for our feelings of belonging to the old and the new places, and sometimes mobility can affect our sense of identity and self-definition. Mobility tends to be romanticized, like in stories of Columbus' discoveries of far-away foreign lands or the tales told by elders describing in detail their memories of how it was 'there,' some decades later. When my children were very young – perhaps when they were three years old and old enough to sleep in a 'proper' bed – I hung a world map on the bedroom wall. I used to show them the lines of my journeys, repeating again and again the names of the cities and places that I would be visiting to attend various academic conferences. Later, we used to plan the journeys we would undertake together, discussing the places we had been and those we would like to visit next. I used to show them the tiny spot of Israel and the huge map of Russia. Later, while living in London, we learned the awkward lines of the island and the scattered mini-islands surrounding it. And now we are located in Berlin; yet another city full of images. Here my grandfather fought the Germans, helping to conquer Berlin during that spring of 1945. Here, the stumbling stones scattered on the pavements remind me every day what happened to my people; and each time I wonder whether this could happen again – to us or to others.

Looking at the world flat on the wall makes it seem easier to move, to be mobile. Nevertheless, mobility and thus the sense of belonging can be restricted or even denied. My kids are always very curious about the places that forbid entry to anyone with an Israeli passport. They like to count the people in the 'EU passports only' queue at the border control. As Kaufmann and colleagues (2018) suggest, mobility happens when the person's motility is high and desirable, in other words when one possesses skills (to be mobile e.g., language, navigation skills), access (roads, resources) and plans (desirability) to be mobile.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020, while reflecting on the vignettes that were written during summer 2019 before the complete halt of all international travel, my view of mobility was transformed as well. Even before the global pandemic put a stop to air travel, I was slowly developing a paralyzing flight phobia, which increasingly shaped my travel experiences and, together with environmental concerns, brought about my decision to stop traveling by air. I am not yet sure how

long I plan to abstain from air travel and what effect this decision may have on my professional and personal life, but I am certain that exploring mobility as a scholar was therapeutic to my own sense of mobility, and I argue that the interface between the global and local, and the immobile and mobile, should be further explored in the ever-expanding domain of GCE. Echoing Lance Levenson's vignette in this issue, I argue that mobility should be considered not only for people involved in the act of education (e.g. for teachers, students, and parents) but also in terms of mobility for policies, rituals, and identities, as we see practiced in a Scottish school serving the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish populations of Jaffa, as depicted in Levenson's case study.

While the links between mobility and GCE are important, the second issue that I would like to raise here is that of context and its implications for the teaching/learning of GCE. In most of the vignettes, the authors point out the irrelevance of GCE to specific, impoverished, under-privileged Global South populations. I question the assumption that GCE provides relevant content only to Global North students and suggest instead that GCE may and should be re-invented from the bottom-up for each community and context. In this vein, as Jennifer Riggan rightly observes in her vignette, both teachers and students often perceive the content taught in Ethiopian schools as irrelevant and detached from the daily reality. Moreover, I suggest that frequently marginalized communities are actually *more* exposed to the diversity of religions, ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and traditions than are those in more homogeneous classrooms in better-off neighborhoods.

Taking the example of Israel, in a study that examined the way GCE is perceived by teachers from schools located in the different sectors of the Israeli education system, Claire Maxwell, Heela Goren and I show the importance of context and bottom-up agency in designing specific meanings for GCE (Goren et al., 2019). Our findings indicate that religious affiliation and connections to others or perceived status within a country can yield very different perceptions of the notion of GCE, as well as shape the extent to which GCE is perceived as a threat or an opportunity to national school systems. Ultimately, our findings revealed three rationales for GCE: GCE for the promotion of individual as well as national interests; GCE as an alternative to national belonging (which is seen in the Palestinian Arab sector as an opportunity and in the religious Jewish sector as a threat); and religion as a platform for GCE.

We found that teachers from each sector (Arab, Jewish religious, and Jewish secular) form very different views of GCE, usually based on the way they see the needs of students and their futures. Accordingly, most of the Jewish religious teachers developed a depiction of GCE as a threat, feeling the need to protect their collective identity – particularly to counter processes of perceived increasing globalization. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Arab teachers associated the term mostly with making

available to their marginalized students a sense of belonging and opportunities for greater social and geographic mobility, usually through moving abroad. The secular Jewish teachers saw the development of GCE provision as a positive, necessary extension to the curriculum to advance their students' ability to navigate global society and promote Israel's 'start-up nation' status. In other words, the relevance and meanings of GCE may and should be altered to allow students and educators to relate to this concept while, simultaneously, GCE should be constantly problematized by teachers, learners and policy makers.

To conclude, and importantly to engage with the aims of this special issue, I would like to commend the editors and the authors on their brave and humble engagement with emic research work in further developing the concept of GCE. As I have shown in this commentary, the continuous and authentic work of those involved in the act of education is required to make sense of GCE, and this work must be accompanied by authentic exploration of the context in which GCE is being incorporated.

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