Framing the Pandemic Within Global Citizenship Education

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Abstract:

The coronavirus pandemic has presented an opportunity to rethink how social studies education is framed. Using global citizenship education to teach about the pandemic properly places global health within the purview of all people and builds an onramp for teachers and students to make this kind of theoretical framing a mainstream part of social studies instruction. Drawing on the practice of one experienced secondary social studies teacher, this paper discusses the potential of issues-centered dialogue about the pandemic to narrow the gap between what people *know* about global health issues and what they *do* about them.

Key words: global citizenship education, issues-centered education, coronavirus pandemic

Introduction

As my colleagues and I hugged good-bye, I wondered if we both instantly regretted our lack of social distancing. Yet there wasn't much time to overthink things as we hustled out the front door on the last day of in-person teaching at Global Tech, a high school in New York. We were now contemplating our uncertain futures dictated by the coronavirus.

At this site and others where I coach pre- and in-service social studies teachers, the mysteries that lay ahead were both practical and existential. We would have to become proficient in things like ZOOM and Google Classroom as well as empathically engage adolescents facing their own challenges at home. We would also contemplate how to adjust planned-for content curriculum to find time to meaningfully talk about the pandemic.

As one of my colleagues put it, many teachers had hoped to teach about the crisis remotely but wound up doing more crisis teaching, remotely. They wanted to discuss the pandemic in-depth but wound up doing little, if any, discussion of the topic. Stress from the abrupt transition surely contributed to this outcome. Uncertainties of where and how to teach it also influenced it being taught as a curricular add-on, if at all. However, discussing the pandemic in a limited, disjointed fashion (which is often how a "current event" is treated) does not have to be the default approach, and it shouldn't be.

The pandemic has presented an opportunity to rethink how social studies education is framed. Teaching the coronavirus as stand-alone instruction decontextualizes the issue and is likely to generate limited understanding. Also, this strategy sets up the pandemic to be replaced by the next current issue, rendering these topics as curiosities or "flavors of the month" instead of perennial issues worthy of ongoing analysis. As we learn through the practice of an experienced secondary social studies teacher, framing one's classroom through global citizenship education (GCE) helps to streamline dialogue about world events like the pandemic. This dialogue may also provide opportunities for participants to narrow the gap between what they *know* about global health issues and what they *do* about them.

Teaching the Pandemic as Global Citizenship Education

Because of their transcendent nature, pandemics should be taught within a broader approach of GCE. Doing so properly places global health within the purview of all people and builds an onramp for teachers and students to make this kind of theoretical framing a mainstream part of social studies instruction. Rethinking classrooms through a GCE lens prepares teachers and students to see world issues as challenges and responsibilities arising from membership in a world community—not as curricular tangents.

GCE is a necessary way to frame the current pandemic (as well as many other world issues) because it acknowledges that nation-states are poorly suited to solve such global problems on their own (Gaudelli, 2003, 2016). Also, it extends the ideas of rights and responsibilities beyond the limits of one's local community (Pashby, 2016, 2018). A goal of GCE is to increase the range of schooling to "imagine new forms of identity, nationhood and citizenship" (Soong, 2018, p. 173). Indeed, issues like public health (and others, like climate change) are matters of collective responsibility that require rethinking one's place in national and global communities.

Reassessing responsibilities beyond the laws of one's state or country can be challenging and unfamiliar, but it represents a necessary opportunity to "unlearn" one's mindset on global issues

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(Curley, Rhee, Subedi, & Subreenduth, 2018). Also described as a "decolonisation of the mind" (wa Thingo'o, 1986), "unlearning" in GCE presses students to see beyond constrained political structures and toward a more interconnected, interdependent world. Thus, instruction seeks a sort of "destabilization" of a constituency's inward gaze (Gaudelli & Schmidt, 2018). As such, teaching about the pandemic through GCE challenges the tendency to limit responsibilities for public health to local jurisdictions.

An ethical rethinking of one's relationship to the world is a hallmark of GCE. Humans are a part of a global community that demands morally and legally obligated actions (Banks, 2004; Byrd, 2012; Misco, 2018). Yet, GCE researchers concede the futility of agreeing on what a global theory of morality or common humanity could look like (Dill, 2013; Peterson, 2011). Indeed, determining ethical specifics associated with rethinking one's relationship with the world is no small instructional task (e.g., Selby & Kagawa, 2014), especially given President Trump's recent announcement to remove the United States from the World Health Organization.

Despite global interconnectedness and interdependence's profound influence on humanity, GCE remains a minor topic in schools, if it is included at all (Myers, 2020). Contributing to its marginalization is a school curriculum dominated by a nationalistic orientation (Gaudelli, 2009; Rapoport, 2019). Research suggests that introducing GCE as a course-wide theme (or one of several) may be the best approach to adequately contextualize world issues in the social studies classroom (Shuttleworth, 2015); however, many teachers I talked to were unsure how to fully address and properly contextualize the pandemic.

GCE and the Pandemic: Bridging Theory and Practice

Insights from one experienced secondary social studies teacher's pedagogy reveals how a GCE framework can be used to facilitate more seamless discussions about the pandemic. James (a pseudonym), a nine-year veteran of the New York State public school system, is participating in an ongoing study with me on how global issues are taught in the social studies classroom. Drawing upon three years of observations and collaborative discussions, I briefly share here how James outlined two components to teaching about the pandemic through a GCE framework. James's process could work in orienting teachers or students who are interested in global issues but are unfamiliar with GCE. The first step involves unpacking one's conceptions of citizenship and responsibilities to others. Second, participants create and participate in issues-centered dialogue about GCE-themed questions.

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Unpacking Citizenship and Self

James nodded to the important first step of deconstructing one's present stance on citizenship and civic duties. He said,

> I think the first thing is that they need to unpack their own learning first before they think about global citizenship education. There are certain concepts that develop over time that are latent, that teachers themselves might not be aware of. For example, what is their schema for citizenship? And then we can move into global citizenship and some of the theories behind it. But before we are able to unpack their own ideas, I don't think we can get to global citizenship.

For James, "unlearning" long-held assumptions about citizenship, presumably rooted in nationalism and/or ethnocentrism, was a critical first step. He also admitted that many Americans might be reluctant to critically self-examine:

> I think it's hard when you live in a country that only has two countries that border it and one which is very much like it… I don't think you need to leave the country to be a global citizen. But you need to be aware of your mindset, and I think that can be hard for people who don't know how to do that.

Here, one wonders how students transfer classroom lessons into their own lives, and if classroom experiences are similarly transformative as personal ones (Harshman, 2015). Embedded in this perspective is also the understanding that some students already see themselves as part of a world community (e.g., Josić, 2018). Even then, as James admits, "… students could think of themselves as global citizens, but their mindset is still nationalistic, individualistic." Thus, an ongoing challenge is how to develop empathy for other people's health, particularly of those one might never meet.

James argued that rethinking one's conception of citizenship and responsibilities started with reevaluating how more familiar and personal things fit into a larger, global construct. He said, "I think people need to see it in practice, through stories, case examples, through the community; they need to experience it for themselves." Examples of such opportunities could include analyzing how travel affects public health or how civic duty transcends political preferences.

Global Citizenship as Issues-centered Education

James anticipated that organizing his upcoming world history course through GCE allowed teaching for more seamless dialogue about the pandemic. For example, he foresaw an issues-centered approach to GCE utilizing the course-long overarching question, "What does it mean to be a global citizen?" Through a variety of themes and content areas, he planned to raise this question to get students to think about responsibilities associated with topics like colonialism, imperialism, climate change, and pandemics. For each of these (and other) topics, the above question is complemented by additional issues-centered questions.

An issues-centered question is one about which well-informed individuals may disagree (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996; Ochoa-Becker, 1996). For example, a question I anticipate arising in James's fall instruction is: "What does it mean to be responsible for other people's health?" On this topic, James said, "I do think that there are certain issues in the pandemic that are coming up, especially masks, which have caused me to think about issues of citizenship." Thus, an objective of dialoguing about this kind of question is how to narrow the gap between what people know about public health issues and what they are willing to do about them (e.g., wearing a mask to prevent possible (asymptomatic) transmission of the virus to others).

When crafting these kinds of issues-centered questions, locating the appropriate controversy within GCE broadly—and pandemics specifically—is a critical matter. For James, it was implicit that, for the above questions, one *should* behave like a global citizen and *should* safeguard public health. The topic worthy of an issues-centered dialogue was what such behavior actually looked like. James has been clear: Meeting one's needs should not infringe upon others' ability to do the same. How and why one accomplishes such a sustainable (and globally-minded) outlook *was* a topic open to dialogue and discussion.

Just because some people disagree with wearing a mask as a matter of (global) civic duty does not make the topic a controversial issue. For a topic to be legitimately controversial, it must be something about which the field's most informed scholars disagree, and that is not the case here (Saey, 2020). Thus, the presence of disagreement with a settled position, like the efficacy of mask wearing, does not change its closed status (Hess, 2009; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) and affirms James's stance.

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Conclusion

Teaching the pandemic through GCE treats such world issues as perennial matters and not as passing "current events." James emphasized this point when he said,

> …If you talk about COVID or climate change as a current event, it's like, well, on to the next thing, without understanding the underlying themes that are within climate change and COVID-19… Climate change isn't a current event. It's been around for decades now. The same with pandemics… We are moving toward a globalized way of seeing the world…

But what about teachers who might be reluctant to build GCE into their upcoming social studies course(s)?

The good news is that formally introducing GCE as a course's overarching theme is not as alien as some might think. For example, in one study, social studies teachers reported unfamiliarity with GCE and did not explicitly use the term "global citizenship" with students, yet many of them still taught global citizenship-related themes in their classes (Rapoport, 2015). Such themes include habits like "knowledge of global interconnectedness, inquiry into global issues, skills and perspectives consciousness, open-mindedness, recognition of bias, stereotypes and exotica, and intercultural experiences and intercultural competence" (Merryfield, Lo, Po, & Kasai, 2008, p. 8).

Of course, much work remains to introduce a critical perspective of global citizenship, even if half of U.S. state social studies standards mention the term (Rapoport, 2020). Yet teaching about the present pandemic as a global issue represents an important step for social studies education. Teachers have a duty to frame global health as a moral imperative, especially if dialogue about the topic might bridge the gulf between what people know about public health issues and what action they are willing to take on behalf of others.

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