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# **Global Citizenship Education for Equitable, Sustainable and Inclusive Education**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, Global Citizenship Education (GCED) has increasingly emerged as a key topic in the international debate on the futures of education, both in international education policies and in academia. However, its practical implementation, especially within schools, is less visible and, in fact, struggles to produce coherent practices.

GCED can be viewed as an innovative perspective that allows us to understand, reconceptualize, and integrate well-known educational themes—such as interculturality, sustainability, human rights, social justice, and peace—within a new educational framework capable of giving new meaning to the challenges of citizenship in global, plural, and heterogeneous societies. In this direction, in the last decade, the United Nations and UNESCO, in particular, have made a clear push to introduce GCED into formal and non-formal education.

In recent decades, the issue of intercultural education has been at the core of the educational debate, especially in school settings marked by growing cultural plurality. For over twenty-five years, I have been engaged in this field, investigating in particular how schools can manage cultural differences: how to integrate students with migrant backgrounds, how to transform that diversity from a social problem to an educational resource.

An intercultural approach remains crucial today. However, over time, some limitations and new perspectives have also emerged. On the one hand, a certain culturalist drift has sometimes hardened differences, turning them into barriers rather than opportunities for dialogue. On the other hand, it has become increasingly clear that intercultural issues cannot be understood solely in terms of relations between cultural groups: they are intertwined with social inequalities, global power relations, colonial legacies, and economic dynamics.

It is in this context that Global Citizenship Education (GCED) comes into play. GCED does not replace intercultural education, but represents a development and expansion of it. It allows us to reframe the question of difference within a broader and more complex framework, capable of bringing together social, environmental, political, and economic dimensions.

## **Polycrisis as an Educational Challenge**

To understand the meaning of the GCED, it is useful to begin with the concept of 'polycrisis'. The term polycrisis, now widely used, especially in the economic sphere, was introduced in the 1990s by Edgar Morin to describe a situation in which multiple challenges produce different shocks that interact with each other, generating an overall effect more severe and complex than the simple sum of its individual parts.

In the current scenario, this condition emerges through a variety of interconnected phenomena: the expansion and intensification of conflicts, accompanied by the weakening of international law and the affirmation of the logic of the strongest; the increase in extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change; growing social and political polarization; and the spread of disinformation and misinformation, fostered by technological transformations.

Added to these elements is a widespread sense of social fragmentation, particularly evident in Western countries. In this context, inequalities emerge as the most central risk, or, more precisely, as a form of systemic injustice that plays a crucial role both in triggering and being fueled by other risks. Indeed, global inequalities contribute to weakening trust and eroding the shared sense of common values.

Even in the environmental sphere, the term polycrisis prevails over other reductive explanations: the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has introduced the concept of a "triple planetary crisis": climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Therefore, it is not just the danger, albeit real, of the effects of climate change, but a set of phenomena that are inseparable, but mutually reinforcing. Likewise, global inequalities emerge as the central node connecting many of these crises.

Polycrisis, therefore, requires a change in perspective: it is no longer sufficient to address problems one by one. It is necessary to develop a systemic understanding that recognizes the interdependencies between different phenomena. And this is precisely where education plays a crucial role.

## **Hope as a Pedagogical Device**

Faced with the complexity of global crises, it is easy to fall into pessimism. Numerous studies show that, especially in Europe and North America, younger generations tend to perceive the future negatively.

Globally, however, the opposite trend is observed: the number of people reporting distress has fallen to 7%, a figure that matches the lowest level recorded since 2007. Conversely, in Western countries (especially North America and Western Europe), a tendency toward pessimism is observed, especially among younger generations. In the United States, for example, a Gallup survey reports that the percentage of individuals declaring themselves "very satisfied" with their lives has reached an all-time low. Similarly, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2025, only 30% of Americans say they are optimistic about the future.

These data suggest that pessimism is particularly widespread in Western societies today. For this reason, today more than ever, a reflection on hope and the ways to cultivate it is necessary. My argument is that hope and global citizenship education are ontologically interconnected.

Hope can be understood as a fundamental political virtue: it enables us to imagine possible worlds alternative to the scenarios imposed by neoliberal fatalism and lies the foundation for the emergence of a transformative education. From this perspective, cultivating a truly global vision of education requires an ethos inspired by hope.

GCED is, in fact, intrinsically transformative, as it presupposes a profound cultural shift. It does not simply introduce new content, but also serves as a horizon of change and an organizing principle for rethinking the curriculum in different educational contexts.

In this sense, adopting a global perspective in education implies the ability to imagine the present differently and lay the foundations for new forms of learning and coexistence. For this reason, it becomes necessary to develop what has been called a true "philosophy of the future" (Robertson, 2022), capable of guiding education towards unexplored but necessary possibilities.

Without the capacity to envision alternative futures, education loses its deepest meaning. In this framework, GCED can be understood as an educational device that not only analyzes crises but also contributes to shaping pathways for transformation.

## **Rethinking Education: A New Social Contract**

This need aligns with some of the main directions along which the international community is moving. In particular, a few years ago, UNESCO published its third global report on education, an authoritative document that the organization produces approximately every ten years. Previous reports outlined the prospects for life skills and the need for profound, almost revolutionary, change in education systems.

The latest report, significantly titled "Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education," presents the plural of "futures", and proposes the construction of a new social contract for education. It seeks to invite reflection on how knowledge and educational processes can shape the future of the planet and humanity, guiding them toward more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

While it is not possible to delve into the document's details here, it is worth highlighting it as a fundamental reference for understanding contemporary challenges and the role education can play in addressing them. From this perspective, education is called upon to assume a restorative function, a form of healing for the wounds inflicted on the global community as a whole over the course of the 20th century: (1) social and gender inequalities, through which to counter inequalities and asymmetries of power; (2) fractures in the relationship between humans and the environment, redefining this relationship beyond the anthropocentrism that has marked Western history; (3) emerging tensions in the relationship between humanity and technology, rethinking the role of technology and establishing the concept of digital citizenship.

This is a broad and particularly relevant area of reflection, oriented towards the future and the redefinition of collective responsibilities. To enable this transformation, a new social contract for education must be established that redefines its purposes, tools, and horizons.

The topic of GCED fits within this framework. It is therefore appropriate to briefly explore the meaning of this term.

## **What is Global Citizenship Education?**

GCED, as defined by UNESCO, is a broad and complex concept, presented in deliberately inclusive and open terms to adapt to the complexity of ongoing transformations. However, precisely for this reason, it is also an ambiguous and highly inclusive term, difficult to be univocally defined.

According to the UNESCO definition, global citizenship is not a legal status, but an ethical and educational orientation. It is based on a sense of belonging to a broader community and an awareness of the interdependencies between local, national, and global dimensions.

It is a concept that lacks any legal or political significance—citizenships are national by definition—but rich in educational meaning. However, GCED is not a new school subject, another discipline added to an already overcrowded curriculum, but rather a "framing paradigm": a way of giving new meaning and reorganizing knowledge. It does not introduce entirely new content, but offers a perspective that connects with existing knowledge.

It is, therefore, a transversal skill that involves the ability to recognize connections, interpret complex phenomena, and integrate different dimensions of reality.

From this perspective, GCED can be interpreted as a life skill, a soft skill. The inclusion of citizenship competences—particularly those related to global citizenship—within the European framework of transversal skills is currently the subject of a significant and ongoing debate.

The idea is to recognize them not as limited disciplinary fields, but as transversal skills, relevant to all educational paths. It is with this in mind that these skills were also introduced into my university environment through a transversal course on global citizenship aimed at the entire student population of the University of Bologna. The goal was to offer all students, regardless of their degree program—be it educational sciences, sociology, political science, or philosophy—a set of common interpretative tools. This is, in fact, a fundamental transversal skill: the ability to connect different knowledge, connect distinct disciplinary fields, and construct new perspectives of meaning. In this sense, GCED enables the development of a perspective capable of grasping the interconnections between complex phenomena, offering innovative and integrated interpretations of contemporary reality.

## **From Fragmentation to Integration**

Connections between what dimensions, then? From this perspective, GCED, as a framing paradigm, provides an interpretative framework capable of reorganizing and connecting pre-existing knowledge and educational practices.

One of the most innovative elements of this approach lies in overcoming traditional educational fragmentation. Historically, areas such as intercultural education, environmental education, human rights education, gender education, and peace education have been developed and addressed separately, according to distinct disciplinary approaches and pedagogies.

GCED, instead, proposes an integrated perspective in which these dimensions are seen as profoundly interconnected. From this perspective, complex phenomena such as global migration cannot be adequately understood without a perspective that simultaneously brings together multiple levels of analysis and experience—such as education on climate change or economic inequality, geopolitical conflicts, and colonial history—and highlights their connections and interconnections.

This type of integration represents one of the main contemporary pedagogical challenges: bridging the gap between the social sphere and the biosphere, between environmental and social issues.

## **The "Global Turn" in Education**

Since 2012, attention to GCED has grown significantly, following the launch of the “Global Education First Initiative” by then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The initiative set three educational priorities for the new millennium, including the promotion of global citizenship. Since then, a progressive and widespread process has been underway: supranational organizations, regional institutions, and national governments have begun to question the meaning of this perspective and how to integrate it into educational systems. In particular, attention was focused on introducing this priority within formal education, later extending to non-formal and informal learning.

A few years later, this approach received further and decisive recognition with its inclusion among the Sustainable Development Goals, thus consolidating its position as a shared global priority and a strategic reference for contemporary education policies. Specifically, Target 4.7 explicitly recognizes the importance of GCED and education for sustainable development as fundamental components of

transformative education. UNESCO considers GCED and education for sustainable development to be essentially synonymous, or, more precisely, two sides of the same coin, profoundly complementary.

In fact, despite their different emphases, these perspectives converge toward a common vision: on the one hand, education for sustainable development emphasizes the dimensions related to the biosphere and environmental balance; on the other hand, GCED places social, cultural, and political dynamics at the center. However, regardless of the point of entry, whether environmental or social, both lead to a necessarily integrated approach.

A genuinely transformative form of education is defined precisely by this integration: an education that aims to develop a systemic understanding of reality and promote ways of thinking that grasp the interconnections between the different dimensions of human life and the planet.

## **Approaches and Tensions in Global Citizenship**

What, then, are the issues that fall within the scope of the GCED and require an integrated approach? While numerous theoretical models and classification frameworks exist, the key point is not to engage in a detailed examination of these taxonomies, but rather to grasp the underlying principle: an integrated, and to some extent holistic, perspective..

For a long time, in fact, many educational fields such as environmental education, intercultural education, human rights education, gender education, and peace education have been addressed in a fragmented manner. They have been placed within specific disciplines, entrusted to the sensibilities of certain teachers, and often excluded from an overall curricular vision. This has resulted in a segmentation of knowledge and educational practices that has limited the ability to understand the complexity of contemporary phenomena.

GCED proposes instead to reconcile this fragmentation by promoting an integrated vision. For example, it is impossible to address intercultural education without considering issues such as equality, social justice, and the dynamics of discrimination that underlie conflicts over cultural diversity. Likewise, it is increasingly clear today that these issues cannot be separated from questions of environmental sustainability. This very transition—the integration of the social and ecological dimensions—represents one of the most complex and, at the same time, most necessary challenges. From this perspective, environmental and social issues must be understood as profoundly interconnected. They require not only systemic awareness, but also equally integrated forms of responsibility and action, both individual and collective. A prime example of this interconnection is climate migration. The topic of migration, which has historically been one of the main drivers of the introduction of intercultural education, especially between the late 1980s and early 1990s, when European schools became increasingly multicultural, today clearly demonstrates how social, economic, and environmental factors are intertwined. It is significant to note how educational attention to these issues has often emerged in response to situations perceived as emergencies, rather than as the result of preventive and systemic reflection.

But it is important to emphasize, in conclusion, that this integrated perspective is not ethically neutral and that GCED cannot be reduced to a single perspective. Different approaches exist in the literature, sometimes conflicting with each other:

- a neoliberal vision, oriented towards the development of global skills, often aimed at elites, for the global labor market
- a liberal vision, based on human rights and universalist cosmopolitanism
- a critical vision, emphasizing social justice, inequalities, and post-colonial perspectives.

It is essential to be aware of this plurality, which requires an explicit positioning: there is not a single global citizenship, but many possible interpretations.

### **Conclusion: Educating for Complexity**

Ultimately, GCED represents a paradigm shift. It is not about adding new content, but about transforming the educational perspective.

Educating for global citizenship means:

- recognizing the interconnections between phenomena
- developing a systemic vision of reality
- integrating social, environmental, and political dimensions
- cultivating hope as a prerequisite for educational action

In a world marked by polycrises, education cannot be confined to the mere transmission of knowledge: it must contribute to empowering individuals capable of understanding complexity and of imagining and building alternative futures.

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