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Cerebral Global Citizens

Neuroliberalism and the Future(s) of Global Citizenship Education

Audrey Bryan

The skillification of global citizenship education

The increasing emphasis on global citizenship within international educational policy making as a consequence of its identification as a specific target, and enabler of, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presents a useful opportunity to reflect on the original purpose and future direction of global citizenship education (GCE). This chapter contemplates the future(s) of GCE against the backdrop of a global educational governance landscape increasingly shaped by corporate interests, new (Tech-based) philanthropy, EdTech (Educational Technologies) and neoliberal (or more specifically *neuroliberal*) policies and funding infrastructures. More specifically, it considers the implications for GCE of the increasing alignment of SDG 4.7 (the SDG target that addresses sustainable development, global citizenship, etc.) with social-emotional learning (SEL), a movement concerned with cultivating social-emotional or ‘human-centric’ skills, attributes, competencies, values and traits deemed necessary for ‘life-effectiveness’ in the twenty-first century (CASEL 2016: 1). The recent proliferation of SEL curricula, platforms, assessment tools and services to cultivate and monitor specific social-emotional skills (SES) such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, initiative, conscientiousness, ‘grit’ (a combination of passion and perseverance), empathy, self-awareness and so on. is reflective of a growing enthusiasm for SEL within national educational systems, as well as among international policy actors, global corporations, businesses and ‘big’ philanthropists (Bryan 2022; IIEFG 2022; Mochizuki 2023; Williamson 2021).

This chapter’s primary contribution lies in advancing our currently limited understanding of the ways in which the goals, purposes, and values of GCE are being re-oriented towards neurocentric ‘cortex without context’ (Vidal and Ortega 2017: 129) style explanations for global problems which conceal the social and material determinants of – and solutions to – social and global injustice. It argues that GCE’s increasing alignment with SEL – (described here as the *selification* of GCE) has a major

depoliticizing effect on GCE. It considers these developments within a wider global educational governance landscape wherein humanistic understandings of education are being eroded and replaced with a *neuroliberal* imaginary, which operates primarily – if not exclusively – in the service of global corporations and big tech. In so doing, it interrogates the increasing co-articulation of GCE with SEL agenda which seeks to fulfil the needs of an increasingly digitized, ‘brain-based economy’ that places a premium on cerebral skills (Eyre et al. 2020).

The chapter’s significance lies in interrogating the ethical and political implications of GCE’s reconfiguration as a constellation of SES such as empathy, mindfulness, compassion and critical thinking for GCE’s original *raison d’être* as a radical emancipatory project that addresses the structural causes of poverty and injustice in the Global North and South (McCloskey, 2014). It argues that the intertwined logics of skillification and *neuroliberalism* – with their prioritization of specific SES necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – shift attention away from the substantive causes of global poverty and injustice and the need for widespread political engagement, collective action and a major overhaul of existing political-economic arrangements, norms, practices and ideologies.

The chapter begins by briefly outlining the conceptual framework for the study, which underpins the subsequent analysis of key actors, drivers and conditions that are shaping education as a set of SES and the depoliticization of global citizenship in an era of the SDGs. It then briefly considers some of the ways in which this *selification* agenda is manifest in the Irish context, with particular reference to recent developments within the formal educational system at primary and post-primary levels. The concluding section considers the implications for GCE, re-imagined as a set of neurologically inflected SES or competencies rather than a radical form of pedagogy that addresses the structural causes of poverty and injustice in the Global North and South. Highlighting what is being foreclosed by the framing of global citizenship in politically detached terms, it stresses the urgency of actively resisting global citizenship’s increasing alignment with a neurologically inflected skillification agenda in order to reclaim its radical, Freirean-inspired roots.

The neuroliberal imaginary

Theoretically, the chapter is underpinned by a number of interrelated perspectives and conceptual frameworks critical of neurocentric approaches in education, which posit the brain as the most appropriate level of analysis for conceptualizing and understanding teaching and learning as well as other functions of education (Satel and Lilienfeld 2013). Whereas the effects of neoliberalism on education have been extensively critiqued, the implications of a newer, related ideological framework known as *neuroliberalism* remain under-theorized. Neuroliberalism combines neoliberal ideas concerning the role of markets in addressing social problems with beliefs about human nature ostensibly grounded in the behavioural, psychological and neurological sciences (Whitehead et al. 2018). One aspect of neuroliberalism that is of particular relevance to the present analysis is that of ‘brainhood . . . the quality

or condition of being a brain' (Vidal 2009: 5), and associated calls to *reimagine* and *transform* education based on the 'learning sciences', especially neuroscience. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, has recently declared 'brain skills and brain health' an 'indispensable part of the knowledge economy', invoking 'brain capital' alongside 'human capital' (OECD 2023b).

This chapter critiques the logic of 'brainhood' underpinning neurologically inflected GCE (Vidal 2009: 5) and illuminates the political and ethical consequences of the growing epistemic authority of neuroscience in education (Choudhury and Wannyn 2022). It further invokes Vidal and Ortega's (2017) figure of 'the cerebral subject' in order to challenge the increasingly neurocentric nature of the discourse being deployed by international policy actors which discursively position children as learners who are, in effect, reducible to their brains. Having briefly outlined the conceptual underpinnings of the chapter, the next section focuses on the emergence of SEL as a global policy priority and identifies key actors, drivers and conditions which are 'transforming' education as a set of SES and accelerating the depoliticization of global citizenship in an era of the SDGs.

The *selification* of global citizenship education

SEL is an umbrella term that encompasses a diverse and ever-expanding list of 'non-cognitive' or 'human-centric' skills, attributes, competencies, values and traits which are deemed necessary for 'life-effectiveness' in the twenty-first century (CASEL 2016: 1). Originally concerned with the promotion of SES in order to boost individual academic performance and economic productivity, SEL has evolved to embrace a diverse set of other non-cognitive 'skills' and competencies such as perspective taking, empathy and compassion; openness to, and effective communication with, diverse others; tolerance of diverse opinions; social and cultural awareness and 'global mindedness' (OECD 2018: 17). These competencies are closely associated with a number of allied discourses such as mindfulness, well-being and subjective happiness, and a host of competencies that individuals need to thrive in competitive neoliberal economies, including capacities for learned optimism, personal agility, adaptability, resilience, positive thinking and other forms of 'adversity capital' (Pavlidis 2009). The deployment of SEL advocacy, evidence, and policy dialogue by bodies as diverse as the UN, the EU, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), UNICEF, the WEF, and the OECD, has contributed to the emergence of a global consensus about the value of SEL (Bryan 2022). In the interests of manageability, the next section focuses only on two of these institutions – the OECD and UNESCO – both of whom are major players in the advocacy of SEL and in (re)orienting global citizenship as a set of SES premised on tolerance, empathy, compassion, resilience and so on rather than an encounter with the root causes of global poverty and the complex workings of power, privilege and politics. This overview of the OECD and UNESCO's embrace of SEL-inflected versions of global citizenship paves the way for the concluding discussion of the implications for the enactment of global citizenship in schools.

The OECD's global Competencies Project: A new global imaginary

The OECD plays a major governance role in education globally, primarily as a result of its domination of large-scale global assessments of national education systems (Robertson 2021). In 2018, the OECD implemented a measure of 'global competencies' as part of its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), with a focus on capacities such as perspective taking, empathy, tolerance, 'global mindedness'. Moreover, in 2019, the OECD administered the first International Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) to ten-year-old and fifteen-year-old children from ten cities in nine countries to assess SES such as curiosity, tolerance, creativity, responsibility, empathy and optimism. Characterizing SES as 'indispensable for a peaceful and prosperous future, and for the cohesion of societies' and as a 'top priority for many countries' (OECD 2023a: 1), the OECD recently embarked on its second cycle of the SSES. The OECD's increasing interest in the assessment of the non-cognitive and global dimensions of learning affords the organization greater 'moral legitimacy' than that provided by its more traditional emphasis on literacy, numeracy and education as a driver of economic development (Auld and Morris 2020).

The OECD's global turn towards the non-cognitive, social-emotional aspects of learning can be further interpreted as an attempt to position itself as the primary agency with responsibility for measuring and monitoring progress on education-related SDGs (ibid.). The OECD's conceptualization of global competencies has been heavily criticized for undermining the wider UN conception of global citizenship, and its alignment with the SDGs has been interpreted as a superficial yet strategic move to position itself as the organization best placed to monitor progress towards SDG targets (Auld and Morris 2020). Tracing its ideational base to US corporate capital's interests, Robertson (2021: 179) argues that the OECD's global competencies agenda represents 'a new imaginary and social ontology – a way of belonging and being in a globally-competitive market society and economy'. As Robertson (2021: 179) elaborates, the global competencies ideational project 'is aimed at advancing US corporate capital's interests through the cultural production of the new worker citizen able to participate in the global economy, at the same time mediating capitalism's contradictory tendencies of undermining social cohesion and exposing interests'. Notwithstanding the widely acknowledged difficulties of the OECD's assessment of global competencies, this influential policy actor's newfound interest in the non-cognitive aspects of learning is likely to amplify the policy prioritization of SEL-inflected global competencies over the next decade. The next section briefly examines UNESCO's increasing alignment of SDG 4.7 – the SDG target that addresses global citizenship themes and issues, among others – with SEL.

UNESCO's instrumental humanism

As a global leader in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the agency with responsibility for monitoring SDG Target 4.7, UNESCO has a major role to play in defining and shaping how global citizenship is envisioned and enacted in schools and the wider society. Recent years have witnessed a major shift in emphasis away from

UNESCO's historical humanistic mandate and role as 'the conscience of humanity' towards a more instrumentalist, neurologically inflected version of humanism which, on close inspection, turns out to be profoundly antipathetic to the ideals of peace, sustainability and human rights (Mochizuki, Vickers, and Bryan 2022).

A complex constellation of intersecting conditions – too numerous to address in any detail here – have contributed to UNESCO's growing allegiance to a neoliberal imaginary profoundly at odds with its humanistic mandate (see Bryan 2022 for a more detailed analysis of UNESCO's neoliberal turn). As UNESCO's only research institute devoted to the issues encompassed by SDG 4.7, UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) has a major role in shaping the agency's overall approach to SDG 4 implementation and in influencing how global citizenship is imagined and practised in schools. Since 2016, MGIEP has formed strategic partnerships with, and received sponsorship from, private corporations such as Dell Technologies, Microsoft, Samsung and Hewlett Packard, and its governing board includes the Deputy Managing Director of Samsung India as well as the Managing Director for Microsoft Bangladesh. These partnerships have coincided with a reorientation of MGIEP's mission towards an exclusive focus on 'harnessing the power of digital technologies to facilitate quality education for the 21st century Global Citizen' (MGIEP 2020: 2) and the championing of digital learning, neuroscience and AI. MGIEP's digital turn has been steered by its inaugural director, Dr. Anantha Duraiappah – an economist trained in mathematical modelling whose quantitative (as well as personal) experience help to explain the privileging of psychology, behavioural economics and cognitive neuroscience as paradigmatic lenses informing the Institute's *oeuvre*.

Identifying as a 'thought leader' in SEL, the deployment of 'digital SEL' as a strategy for SDG 4.7 implementation has become central to the vision and mission of MGIEP, its commitment to which is encapsulated in the slogan 'SEL for SDGs' (Asah and Singh 2019: 54). Within this neoliberal framing of the SDGs, ESD and GCED are conceived of primarily in terms of 'evidence-based' learning interventions and digital pedagogies to promote emotional resilience and 'pro-social'/'pro-environmental' behaviour and as a means of 'building kinder brains' and 'neural networks for peace' (Mochizuki 2023). SES such as empathy, compassion, mindfulness and critical thinking are identified as having a major role to play in reducing major social, environmental, geo-political and economic problems and injustices, such as global warming and environmental degradation, conflict and violent extremism and economic hardship. From this vantagepoint, problems as intractable as violent extremism and hatred can be addressed through 're-directing,' 're-training' or 'rewiring' the brain through mindfulness programmes that focus on the 'biological roots of rage and aggression' and that cultivate compassion, empathy and well-being.

Whereas MGIEP may be UNESCO's most ardent proponent of SEL, it is by no means the only arm of the agency to embrace SEL and its wider neoliberal imaginary. The scope of UNESCO's SEL-based advocacy is evident in other UNESCO publications which state the need to 'mandate SEL skills for everyone all the time' (UNESCO 2020: 2) and in the ongoing development of guidelines to support a whole system approach to the mainstreaming of SEL in schools, in conjunction with MGIEP. As UNESCO

scales up and strengthens its relationship with the private sector in pursuit of the SDGs, and a multitude of other policy entrepreneurs, corporations and philanthropists increasingly prioritize SEL in an effort to bolster their legitimacy or increase their profits, the agency's focus on 'SEL for SDGs' is likely to intensify further.

The selification of global citizenship education on the island of Ireland

In an Irish context, there is also growing evidence of the *selification* of GCE, most notably within the context of the formal education system. While it is too early to say what the implications of the new primary curriculum framework for GCE will be (NCCA 2023), its framing around a number of 'key competencies', combined with the introduction of well-being as a new subject area at primary level are suggestive of a deepening of the responsabilization of citizenship that have already taken place in other jurisdictions and at post-primary level in Ireland. The alignment of citizenship education with well-being as part of a wider process of junior cycle reform has been interpreted as part of a wider move to shift or displace responsibility for ameliorating social and global problems from the state, international agencies and other entities such as corporations to the individual (Bryan 2020). Casting well-being as the effect of certain abilities and life choices (e.g. being physically active and eating healthily or being able to cope with adversity) renders certain forms of personhood more desirable and more valuable than others. This version of citizenship education has implications in terms of young people's preparedness to show solidarity with others and their sense of who is/who is not deserving of care, rights or responsibilities, ideas which are central to their practicing of citizenship. In the non-formal sector, initiatives such as Children in Crossfire's 'Educating the Heart' Programme, which is premised on the cultivation of SES such as compassion, empathy, resilience, emotional intelligence and a growth mindset (Children in Crossfire 2019) are further indicative of the *selification* of GCE on the island of Ireland, and how this sits alongside more critically oriented approaches.

Implications for the future(s) of global citizenship education

Global citizenship has long been recognized as a highly contested concept, or 'floating signifier', subject to diverse interpretations and encompassing competing objectives and agendas (e.g. Auld and Morris 2020). Whereas much of the existing literature has identified 'policy divergences' between the more instrumentalist rhetoric of organizations such as the OECD and more humanistic framing of the UN's vision of global citizenship, the foregoing analysis has identified considerable ideological convergence among these major actors in the education policy landscape.

The kind of global citizen being (re)imagined by both agencies can be described as a (economic) *global citizen with benefits* – in other words, an individual imbued with particular SES who engages in politically detached forms of service and action rather than politically engaged, self-reflexive global citizenship (Bryan and Mochizuki 2023). This twenty-first-century global citizen is deeply bound up with

inculcating habits of mind and ways of being which Adams et al. (2019: 191) refer to as ‘neoliberal selfways’, the core features of which include: a sense of radical abstraction from social and material context, an entrepreneurial approach to self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for individual growth and personal fulfilment, and an emphasis on affect regulation. Rather than cultivating global citizens committed to addressing political issues of resource allocation, recognition, and redistribution, this new global imaginary is preoccupied with subjective happiness, well-being and affect regulation in order to inculcate self-reliant, self-responsible, self-managing and resilient citizen subjects. As Evans and Reid (2013: 83) remark in relation to the cultivation of resilient citizens, ‘the resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world, and not a subject which can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility’. Furthermore, the alignment of SEL with ESD is incompatible with the pursuit of global justice because it implicitly frames certain people as deserving of care, rights or justice while positioning others as undeserving of the same treatment, thereby pre-empting the very relations that lie at the heart of global justice (Bryan 2020).

The reconfiguring of GCE, therefore, as a set of depoliticized SES or global competencies has profound implications for human and more-than-human lifeforms, and for the future of democracy in a world increasingly dominated by, *inter alia*, political capture and political rigging, media monopolies, disinformation, wealth inequality and ecological breakdown (Hickel 2016). This new global imaginary offers limited scope for students to question implicit beliefs, to embrace different ways of knowing, or to transform existing political-economic arrangements and injustices. Rather, it forestalls political dialogue and diverts energy away from the pursuit of global justice and equality. For education to be truly transformative, it needs to equip students with the capacity and commitment to critique the dominant norms, values, institutions and discourses of society; to contest power inequalities and vested economic interests; to make complex connections between intersecting local and global trends, crises and developments; to reflect critically on their role as *agents* in perpetuating and alleviating local and global injustices and to enhance their awareness of the complex intersection between individual actions and structural forces. As Westheimer (2020: 289) observes:

Without an analysis of power, politics, and one’s role in local and global political structures – and without showing students how they can work with others toward fundamental change – students will be unlikely to become effective citizens who can transform their communities and the world by addressing issues identified by the 2030 Agenda such as poverty, hunger, and inequality . . . Programmes that privilege individual acts of compassion and kindness often neglect the importance of social action, political engagement, and the pursuit of just and equitable policies. The vision promoted is one of citizenship without politics or collective action – a commitment to individual service, but not to social justice.

As educators concerned for the future of humanity and democracy, we must at once actively resist the ascendancy of neoliberalism in education and the corresponding

reimagining of global citizenship which is currently underway in order to reclaim GCE's radical roots.

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