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# Spaces between importance and enactment: building from teachers' everyday understanding of, and capacity for, global citizenship education

M. Barry , B. Mallon , A. Bourke , J. Usher  and A. Daly

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## ABSTRACT

Radical primary level curriculum reform is underway in Ireland. Many significant changes and additions include, for the first time, an explicit reference to global citizenship at primary level, an active citizen competency and several global learning themes. Research indicates that oftentimes, policy curriculum aspirations fail to materialise in the classroom due to insufficient attention to implementation and teacher ownership. Drawing on a mixed methods study comprising a national survey of Irish primary teachers ( $n=288$ ), this paper identifies important insights into teachers' understandings of and capacity for GCE. The findings indicate highly positive teacher attitudes towards GCE, specifically its importance for pupils' learning. The results also reveal that teachers' understandings are multifaceted and nuanced, and informed by everyday experiences and contexts, as opposed to international or national frameworks. Significantly, we find a substantial proportion of teachers do not associate GCE with sustainability or behavioural dimensions and they rate their pedagogical skills low in the latter. The paper considers the implications of these findings within a policy context that inextricably connects GCE to action and sustainable development and in light of persistent challenges in extending the reach of GCE in schools.

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Global citizenship education; primary teachers; teacher understanding; teacher attitudes; teacher capacity; action

## Introduction

Curriculum reform is complex, and teachers and school leaders are central to the translation of policy ambition into classroom practice (Porcenałuk, O'Neachtain, and Connolly 2023; Walsh 2016). Walsh (2016) argues that policy development is the least complex step in the process and that amongst the most difficult is changing the 'attitudes, motivation, philosophies, beliefs and practices of teachers' (2016, 12). In Ireland, the most extensive national curriculum reform in 25 years is underway across all levels and curriculum areas of primary education. Overall, it has been argued that the proposed

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changes signal a definitive move towards twenty-first century learning and life (Gleasure and Parkinson 2023). Specifically, two new features of primary curricular reform in Ireland connect explicitly with Global Citizenship Education (GCE). First, 'being an active citizen' is one of seven central competences in the new primary curriculum framework, which recognises the wider societal context in which pupils learn and the importance of certain skills and dispositions in the context of 'climate change, conflict, and growing inequalities' (NCCA 2023, 9). Second, the proposed new curriculum includes the first ever reference to 'global citizenship' in an Irish primary curriculum document and several global learning themes (sustainable development, human rights, democracy, equity and social justice) feature in the draft specification for a new curriculum area, Social and Environmental Education (SEE) (NCCA 2024). These developments are important and serve to readdress previous omissions related to peace, democracy and social justice (Walsh 2016).

To a large degree, these reforms mirror international policy that frequently positions schools and teachers as linchpins in supporting pupils to thrive as global citizens (UNESCO 2021). Global Citizenship Education is often recognised as a relatively new umbrella term for a multidisciplinary field, and is informed by a range of adjectival educations, such as development education, intercultural education and environmental education, whose own histories, traditions and debates stretch much further back (Barry, Waldron, and Bryan 2024; Dillon et al. 2024; Mannion et al. 2011). An increasing body of research has interrogated how GCE has been conceptualised within practice, policy and theory. Cannon (2024) found that within the Irish context, educators took pragmatic, agnostic or indeed sceptical positions in relation to the concept of global citizenship. Meanwhile, Pashby et al. (2020) illustrate three discursive orientations of GCE, as neoliberal (broadly being individualistic, competitive, market-driven), liberal (as democratic, universalised, cosmopolitan) and critical (as transformative, challenging Eurocentricity and modernisation, whilst acknowledging and addressing social injustices). Pashby et al. (2020) recognise that these orientations are often framed and restricted by colonial metanarratives but also note possible interfaces between them, where points of commonality can be found. Whilst neoliberal GCE represents an approach so tied to dominant violent paradigms that it is incapable of addressing global challenges, Pashby et al. (2020) view liberal approaches 'as possible spaces for negotiation but also for possible slippage into neoliberal and neoconservative approaches' (2020, 161). Critical GCE appears as a space where systems and structures might be transformed or indeed created anew. These conceptual explorations are an important feature of GCE scholarship and practice, and they frame our considerations in this paper. In addition, certain policy formulations (Government of Ireland 2021; UNESCO 2015) were utilised to develop the teacher survey and analyse findings. These policies were chosen to support the validity of the study and to reflect the importance of policy to teacher's contexts.

Given its complex, dynamic and contested nature, and the significant ambitions of its more critical conceptualisations, it is unsurprising that GCE can be challenging work for teachers (Aleksiak, Kuleta-Hulboj, and Zielińska 2023; Kavanagh, Waldron, and Mallon 2021). Furthermore, limited opportunities for GCE in teacher education constrain teacher confidence and classroom practice (Tarozzi and Mallon 2019). Beyond the classroom, protracted conflicts are ongoing in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and South Sudan, and

the varying effects of the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are impacting our everyday lives. We are also witnessing the increased influence of the ‘far right’ (Wondreys and Mudde 2022) and the spread and influence of misinformation and disinformation (Culloty and Suiter 2021). In the classroom, teachers are faced with the immediacy of supporting their pupils to understand these complex, emotive and controversial issues in developmentally appropriate ways, whilst at the same time supporting pupils for whom these issues are part of their lived reality. Yet, we know that many teachers are openly disposed to GCE, oftentimes connecting it to their core purpose, and despite significant challenges, finding spaces to explore GCE-related topics in the classroom (Aleksiak, Kuleta-Hulboj, and Zielińska 2023; Goren and Yemini 2017).

Indeed, research pertaining specifically to GCE in the Irish context highlights relative strengths (Tarozzi and Inguaggiato 2018). For example, the current primary curriculum (NCCA 1999) has been characterised as holistic, child-centred and open to the potential for active, participatory and transformative teaching and learning (Mallon 2021; Waldron et al. 2020), with possible ‘windows of opportunity’ for the incorporation of GCE into classroom practice (Dillon, Ruane, and Kavanagh 2010; Mallon 2018). In addition, there exist primary school curricula and programmes, for example, Learn Together (Educate Together 2022) and Goodness Me, Goodness You (Education and Training Boards Ireland 2018) that have strands on social justice, sustainability and global justice. The recent inclusion of GCE within Ireland’s standards for initial teacher education (Teaching Council 2020) also represents a significant development, albeit the impact of such developments remains, yet unknown.

An examination of previous curriculum reform has found that oftentimes an insufficient focus on implementation and teacher ownership dilutes the aspirations of curriculum policy (Gleasure and Parkinson 2023; Walsh 2016). The impending curriculum reforms in Ireland raise important and oftentimes perennial questions about how to enact curriculum change that are relevant to education systems globally. With the many pressing societal crises that we are experiencing globally, there is an urgent need for further insight into teachers’ everyday understanding of, and capacity for, GCE, and the factors which shape their practices. This article seeks to contribute to this understanding. More specifically, it aims to examine Irish primary school teachers’ knowledge, attitudes and capacity for GCE and consider the implications of this for realising current curricular ambitions. This is an important study given the centrality of teachers’ competence and confidence in supporting pupils’ engagement with global issues and preparing pupils to thrive as global citizens.

## Teachers’ understandings of GCE

Internationally, it is well established that teachers’ understandings of the purpose and substance of GCE are informed by their local and wider contexts (Leduc 2013; Yamashita 2006; Yemini 2018; Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren 2019). Indeed Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren (2019) argue that GCE is perpetually shaped by its wider context, depending on factors such as levels of diversity within a school and what significant events are occurring at any given time (e.g. war, migration). One of the most frequent associations that teachers have with GCE relates to the broad area of cultural diversity, empathy and understanding (Palmer 2022), whilst some associate GCE with sustainability and

human rights related education (Larsten, Upchurch, and Christina 2022; Poursalim, Arefi, and Vajargah 2020; van Werven et al. 2021). A number of previous studies have also established that some teacher conceptualisations of GCE are futures-oriented (Li 2022; van Werven et al. 2021) and include a cosmopolitan perspective that identifies a connection between local and global issues (Palmer 2018). However, some studies argue that local to global connections in GCE are often underdeveloped by teachers (Niens and Reilly 2014), which may be unsurprising considering this is often seen as the most challenging aspect of GCE (Shah and Brett 2021).

Regarding the relationship between GCE and action, a small number of studies indicate that, for some teachers, the field is oriented towards empowering and supporting students to act and to contribute to their local and wider communities (Palmer 2016; van Werven et al. 2021). However, Waldron et al. (2019, 906) identify a prevalent form of ‘constrained action’ in their study of teachers’ understandings, and one that is characterised by personal responsibility and a ‘learn-now-act-later’ attitude that positions pupils as future, as opposed to current, citizens. A national survey of Human Rights Education (HRE) among Irish primary school teachers ( $n = 152$ ) in 2011 found that teachers had a greater understanding of human rights than HRE and a limited familiarity with human rights instruments or HRE programmes (Waldron et al. 2011). Drawing on the same data, Waldron and Oberman (2016) argue that teacher knowledge of human rights and HRE is more because of common sense and informal, everyday contexts, as opposed to professional learning. They found that teachers were overwhelmingly in favour of pupils engaging with HRE, but teachers also frequently conceived pupils as duty-bearers with responsibility towards others, rather than pupils as rights-holders and rights-advocates (Waldron and Oberman 2016).

### **Existing confidence and capacity amongst teachers for GCE**

In general, conceptualisations of professional competence in teaching are multidimensional and include cognitive (professional knowledge) and dynamic-affective (professional beliefs and motivational orientations/confidence) domains (Baumert and Kunter 2013). Specifically related to GCE, research shows that even experienced teachers need ongoing expert and peer support both to meet the challenges and changes of GCE subject content and, to gain the pedagogical skills required (Poursalim, Arefi, and Vajargah 2020; Tarozzi and Mallon 2019; Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren 2019). Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren (2019) highlight a common complaint reported by teachers who feel they lack the tools and understanding to teach GCE, despite having experienced some form of professional development. As an example, they draw on a study by Webber and Miller (2016) which indicates that teachers, within the context of teacher education, can become frustrated over time when theory and practice are disconnected. This finding supports the argument in other studies that given the demands GCE places on teachers, ongoing reflection and discussion is required as a form of professional development for teachers in GCE (Niens and Reilly 2014; Tarozzi and Mallon 2019; Yamashita 2006).

Shah and Brett’s (2021) study of Nepalese teachers’ perceptions and practices found 50% of teachers identified a lack of professional learning as an obstacle to their effective teaching of GCE. Teachers were over-reliant on textbooks and lacked the skills and

pedagogical content knowledge to teach students about social justice, environmental and human rights dimensions (Shah and Brett 2021). Other studies identify a range of skills that GCE demands of teachers. These include content knowledge and teacher positionality awareness, methodological skills, and curriculum design and planning (van Werven et al. 2021), navigating challenging classroom conversations and avoiding bias (Patrick, Gulayets, and Peck 2017), and planning and resourcing (Pak and Lee 2018). In an Irish context, Usher (2021) found a general lack of opportunities for professional learning for primary teachers due to policy prioritisation of other areas. For example, Usher (2019) reported how previous Department of Education policies and circulars advised teachers to redirect time ‘away from desirable, but ultimately less important’ curricular areas in favour of literacy and numeracy (DE 2011, 15).

Research on teachers’ confidence in the context of GCE is nuanced. Some studies highlight teachers’ confidence (e.g. Křepelková, Činčera, and Kroufek 2019), while other research has highlighted an apprehension or lack of confidence and the need specifically to further develop teacher subject confidence (e.g. Menzie-Ballantyne and Ham 2022; Patrick, Gulayets, and Peck 2017; Strachan 2020). Menzie-Ballantyne and Ham (2022) suggest that teachers may lack the confidence to plan for integrated approaches to GCE and require professional development opportunities to do so. Most commonly, previous research has identified a link between teachers’ levels of confidence and the perceived sensitivity or controversial nature of the issue (Niens and Reilly 2014; Yamashita 2006). At primary level, questions also arise as to the developmentally appropriate nature of the area given the age range of the students (Yamashita 2006). Research with student teachers in the context of history education argues that confidence is not necessarily a positive position, and that teacher confidence can be expressed across a continuum. This includes various expressions of confidence that range from, for example, untested assumptions or naïve reflection through to nuanced understanding or classroom experience (Harris and Clarke 2011).

The current paper draws on data collected as part of the national survey of primary teachers’ perceptions of Global Citizenship Education (Barry et al. 2023). Barry et al. (2023) identified factors that support or hinder GCE in the classroom, the most common being resources, followed by teachers (e.g. their knowledge and attitudes), students’ engagement, and school ethos. The study explored teachers’ understandings, attitudes, knowledge, confidence, and skills pertaining to GCE, while this paper endeavours to contextualise these findings within the broader international literature on GCE and within the context of curriculum reform in Ireland. The first two research questions we set out to address were: What are primary teachers’ knowledge of and attitudes to (perceived importance) GCE topics (RQ1)? How do teachers rate their confidence and skills related to teaching GCE (RQ2)? We also wanted to examine the amount of time teachers spent teaching GCE on a weekly basis and to explore whether there are any variables that predict time spent teaching GCE (RQ3). The aim of this question is to explore what may cause teachers to spend more time teaching GCE in a given week and, therefore, what areas might be focused on in policy or teacher professional development. Our final research question set out to explore how teachers understand GCE and whether there are similarities between teachers’ understandings of GCE and how GCE is conceptualised at a policy level (e.g. UNESCO 2015) (RQ4).

## Methodology

A mixed method, cross-sectional self-report design was employed to critically examine the research questions. Data were collected through an online survey emailed to individual primary school teachers and to all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. In order to adequately address the research questions a combination of closed (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions were asked. The study received ethical approval from the DCU's research ethics committee, reference number DCUREC/2022/068. Participant consent was obtained via the online link, ahead of the survey instrument.

## Participants

The sample consisted of 288 participants. Participants must have completed at least 20% of the survey to be included in the study. All participants reported working as a teacher, principal or deputy principal within an English language-medium or Irish language-medium primary school in Ireland. [Table 1](#) below sets out the demographic variables related to age, gender, teaching experience, qualification, teaching responsibility, classes taught, school information and language of instruction. Participants included teachers (66.66%), deputy principals (8.33%) and principals (25%). Participants were working in urban (71.88%) or rural (28.13%) schools and most had experience teaching at least four primary-level age ranges (80.84%). Almost 30 percent had experience teaching all primary-level classes. Just over half (55.21%) of principals and deputy principals participating reported also having a class assigned to them to teach. A slight majority of participants (59%) reported never attending a professional development course in Global Citizenship Education (GCE) since they began teaching. Thirty-four per cent reported attending a course in the last five years.

## Materials and procedure

A self-report, online survey consisting of fixed response and open-ended questions was used in the study. The survey examined GCE understanding, knowledge, skills, confidence, and time spent teaching GCE in the classroom. Given that no existing measures exist, the survey was created by the authors using existing literature and GCE definitions drawn from Irish Aid (GoI 2021) and UNESCO (2015) to guide questions related to GCE knowledge, competence and pedagogical skills. Specific GCE-related concepts listed in the survey (i.e. sustainable development, sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence, global citizenship and cultural diversity) were derived from the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically target 4.7 of Goal 4 (Quality Education). The survey consisted of three subscales: a Demographic subscale, an Education Experience subscale and a Current Teaching subscale. All participants completed the Demographic and Education subscales. Only participants who were teaching a class at the time of the study completed the Current Teaching subscale. The Education subscale addressed general attitudes towards (perceived importance), knowledge of, and confidence levels around GCE-related topics and the Current Teaching subscale addressed more specific issues related to GCE within a classroom setting. The variables examined and corresponding items are

**Table 1.** Characteristics of study participants (N = 288).

Characteristics of study participants (N = 288)	Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	235	81.60%
Male	52	18.06%
Rather not say	1	0.35%
<b>Age</b>		
20–29 years	58	20.14%
30–39 years	86	29.86%
40–49 years	76	26.39%
50–59 years	55	19.10%
60+ years	13	4.51%
<b>Years experience (n = 287)</b>		
0–5 years	58	20.21%
6–10 years	41	14.29%
11–29 years	98	34.15%
20+ years	90	31.36%
<b>Teaching qualification (n = 284)</b>		
Primary degree in Education (Bachelor of Ed.)	155	54.58%
Professional Masters in Ed. (Primary teaching)	119	41.90%
Other	10	3.52%
<b>Additional responsibility</b>		
Principal	72	25.00%
Deputy Principal	24	8.33%
Assistant Principal	49	17.01%
Other responsibility post holder	11	3.82%
No additional responsibility	132	45.83%
<b>Number of teachers in school</b>		
1–3	23	7.99%
4–8	45	15.63%
9–12	40	13.89%
Above 12	180	62.50%
<b>School location</b>		
Urban	207	71.88%
Rural	81	28.13%
<b>Type of school</b>		
Junior school	33	11.46%
Senior school	20	6.94%
Vertical school (all classes)	235	81.60%
<b>Gender taught in school</b>		
Girls only	17	5.90%
Boys only	13	4.51%
Mixed gender	258	89.59%
<b>Language of instruction (n = 287)</b>		
English	264	91.99%
Irish: Gaelscoil	17	5.92%
Irish: Scoil sa Ghaeltacht	6	2.09%
<b>DEIS school status</b>		
Yes	115	39.93%
No	173	60.07%
<b>Last continued professional learning in GCE (n = 287)</b>		
0–5 years ago	98	34.15%
6–10 years ago	11	3.83%
Over 10 years ago	10	3.48%
Never attended a prof. dev. course in GCE	168	58.54%

presented in Table 2. The following definition of GCE was provided ahead of the attitudes, knowledge, and confidence questions, and after the question on GCE understanding – ‘Irish Aid defines Global Citizenship Education (GCE) as a lifelong educational process, which aims to increase public awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, inter-dependent and unequal world in which we live’. The survey was administered

**Table 2.** Survey variables and response types.

Variable	Survey question	Response	Research question
Understanding of GCE	There are many different definitions of Global Citizenship Education. How would you define GCE	Open-ended	RQ3
Knowledge of GCE	How would you rate your own knowledge in relation to the following GCE areas? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable Development</li> <li>• Sustainable Lifestyles</li> <li>• Human Rights</li> <li>• Gender Equality</li> <li>• Peace and Non-Violence</li> <li>• Global Citizenship</li> <li>• Cultural Diversity</li> </ul>	Each category was rated on a five point Likert scale from 1 = very low knowledge 5 = very high knowledge	RQ1
Perceived importance of GCE	Please rate how important do you think it is for students in your school to learn about these issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable Development</li> <li>• Sustainable Lifestyles</li> <li>• Human Rights</li> <li>• Gender Equality</li> <li>• Peace and Non-Violence</li> <li>• Global Citizenship</li> <li>• Cultural Diversity</li> </ul>	Each category was rated on a five point Likert scale from 1 = not important 5 = very important	RQ1
Confidence teaching GCE	Please rate your confidence in relation to the following; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching Global Citizenship Education</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils to become active promoters of inclusive and sustainable societies</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils in engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges</li> <li>• Developing your pupils' critical thinking skills when engaging with GCE topics</li> <li>• Developing your pupils' enquiry based skills on topics related to GCE</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils' empathetic responses to global issues</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils' emotional responses to global issues</li> </ul>	Each category was rated on a five point Likert scale from 1 = not confident 5 = very confident	RQ2
Pedagogical skills	Supporting your pupils' considerations of interdependence and solidarity Please rate your pedagogical skills in the following areas; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching Global Citizenship Education</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils to become active promoters of inclusive and sustainable societies</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils in engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges</li> <li>• Developing your pupils' critical thinking skills when engaging with GCE topics</li> </ul>	Each category was rated on a five point Likert scale from 1 = limited skills 5 = excellent skills	RQ2

*(Continued)*

**Table 2.** Continued.

Variable	Survey question	Response	Research question
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing your pupils' enquiry based skills on topics related to GCE</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils' empathetic responses to global issues</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils' emotional responses to global issues</li> <li>• Supporting your pupils' considerations of interdependence and solidarity</li> </ul>		
Time teaching GCE	How much time per week do you spend teaching GCE?	Open-ended	RQ4

online using the Qualtrics platform and data were collected between May and October 2022.

### **Analytic plan**

All quantitative data analyses were completed using Python 3. Research questions one and two were based on fixed-response answers and analysed quantitatively. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and prevalence) were calculated for participants' responses to Likert-style questions relating to knowledge of and perceived importance of GCE, and skills and confidence in teaching GCE. Alkharusi's (2022) approach to interpreting Likert scale descriptive data was employed. Scores falling into the interval of 1–2.33 was deemed 'Low level of Perceived Knowledge/Comfort', scores falling into the interval of 2.34–3.67 was deemed a 'Moderate level of Perceived Knowledge/Comfort' and scores falling into the interval of 3.68–5.00 was deemed a 'High level of Perceived Knowledge/Comfort'.

To address research question three – what factors are associated with time spent teaching GCE in the classroom? – a multiple-linear regression analysis was conducted with the outcome variable of 'time spent teaching GCE'. We examined the following predictor variables: teaching qualification, teaching experience, school gender, DEIS status, knowledge of GCE-related topics, perceived importance of GCE-related topics, confidence teaching GCE-related topics and pedagogical skills in GCE-related topics. As the question relating to the amount of time spent teaching GCE was an open-ended question, answers were coded into time groupings, for example, 1–60 min. Some answers did not give a directly quantifiable answer (e.g. 'it depends') and they were excluded from the analysis.

For research question four, responses to the open-ended question, participants' understanding of GCE, were coded using a deductive, codebook approach (Braun and Clarke 2021). Four coders independently coded the open-ended responses of the first 20 participants. These codes were then compared and the ten most similar codes across the four coders were then selected for use in the final analysis. They included: 'Teacher as facilitator', 'Diversity', 'Transformative', 'Responsibility', 'Rights', 'Sustainability', 'Local', 'Global', 'Cosmopolitan' and 'Problem-based'. In this context, 'Cosmopolitan' relates to a worldview that references a shared humanity or community, as opposed to 'Global' which refers to issues that occur at a global level. Following the development

of the codes, the same four coders then independently coded 25 percent of the sample each. Each coder determined whether the chosen codes were present in individual participant responses, adding analytical memos for further elaboration and thematic discussion where necessary. The prevalence of each code across all participants was then calculated by counting the number of participants who included each individual code.

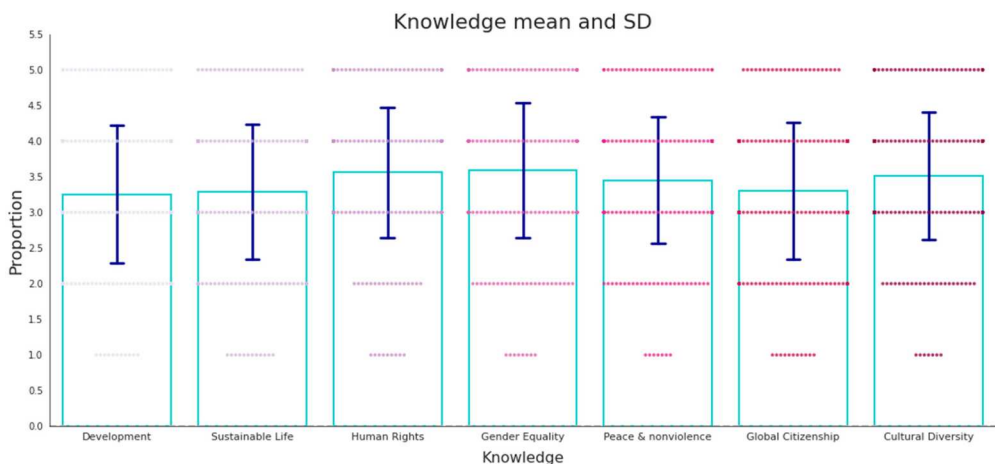
We also wanted to examine how participants' responses corresponded with UNESCO's policy conceptualisations of GCE. To do this, we analysed the data for the prevalence of three codes based on UNESCO's (2015) core dimensions of GCE: Cognitive, Socio-emotional, and Behavioural. The same four coders coded the data for the prevalence of these three dimensions. A Chi-square Goodness of Fit test was used to examine whether teacher understanding of GCE aligned with the UNESCO dimensions of GCE. This was carried out by comparing the inclusion frequency of each UNESCO dimension across participants to determine if each of the three categories were cited an equal number of times.

In addition, we chose to examine two linkages between concepts evident in GCE policy iterations (UNESCO 2015); one being the linkage between Rights and Responsibility, and the second being the linkage between Local and Global. In order to test whether teachers also associate rights with responsibility or local with global, Chi-Square Tests of Independence were carried out to examine the relationship between the two sets of codes: 'rights' and 'responsibility', and 'local' and 'global'.

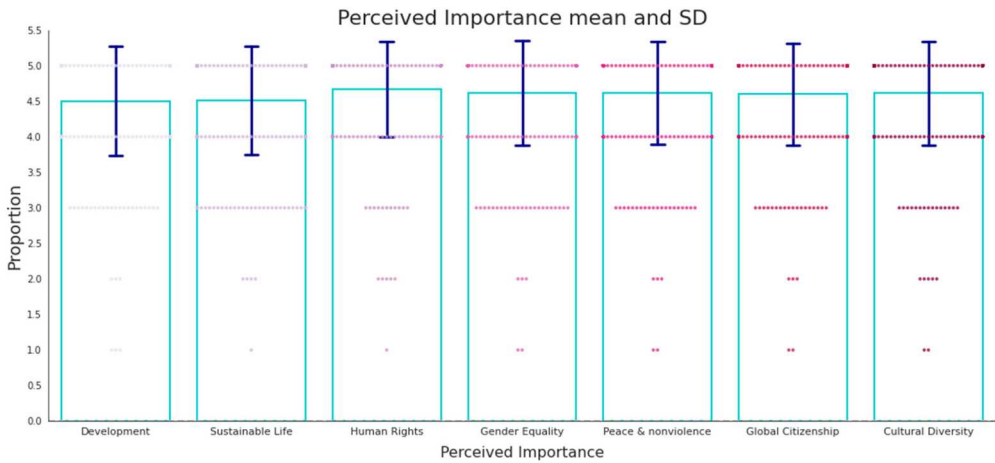
## Results

### *Knowledge of, and perceived importance of GCE topics*

As indicated by Figure 1, when rating their GCE-related knowledge on a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the highest knowledge rating, participants ( $n = 287$ ) recorded a mean rating of 3.25 ( $SD = .97$ ) in knowledge of sustainable development, 3.29 ( $SD = .95$ ) in knowledge of sustainable lifestyles, 3.56 ( $SD = .91$ ) in knowledge of human rights, 3.59



**Figure 1.** Mean ratings on participants' knowledge of GCE-related topics. Error bars indicate standard deviation.



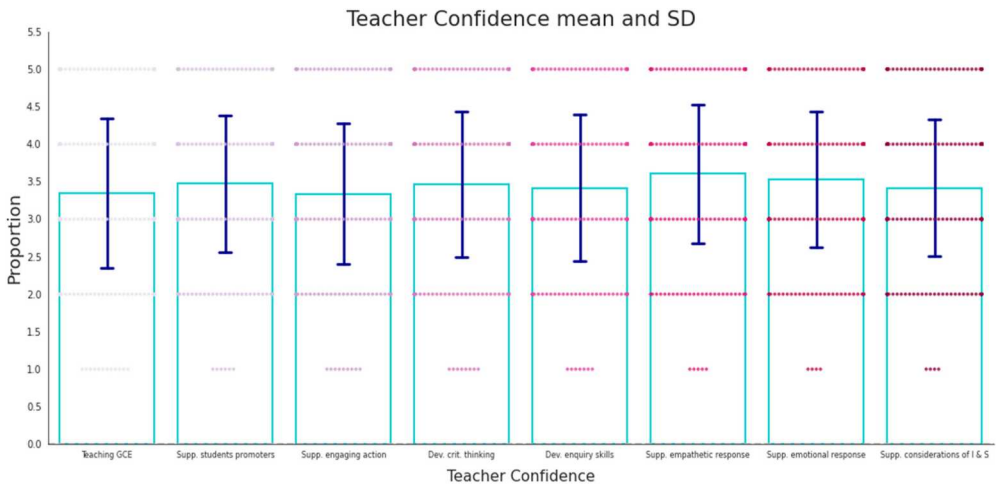
**Figure 2.** Mean ratings on participants' perceived importance of GCE-related topics. Error bars indicate standard deviation.

(SD = .95) in knowledge of gender equality, 3.45 (SD = .88) in knowledge of peace and non-violence, 3.3 (SD = .96) in knowledge of global citizenship and 3.52 (SD = .89) in knowledge of cultural diversity. This indicates a moderate level of knowledge across each of the categories.

Participants' ratings of their perceived importance of pupils learning about GCE-related topics are presented in Figure 2. Participants gave a mean rating of 4.49 (SD = .8) (n = 286) to the importance of sustainable development; a mean rating of 4.51 (SD = .76) (n = 285) to the importance of sustainable lifestyles; a mean rating of 4.66 (SD = .69) (n = 286) to the importance of human rights; a mean rating of 4.62 (SD = .74) (n = 286); a mean rating of 4.62 (SD = .73) (n = 286) to the importance of peace and non-violence; a mean rating of 4.6 (SD = .72) (n = 285) to the importance of global citizenship; and a mean rating of 4.62 (SD = .73) (n = 286) to the importance of cultural diversity. This indicates high levels of perceived importance across all categories.

### **Confidence and pedagogical skills**

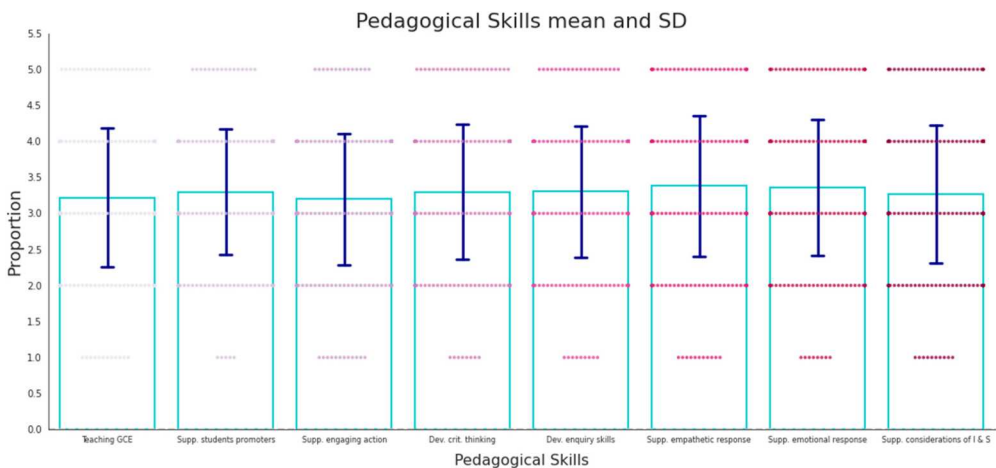
Participants' rating of their confidence in teaching and approaches to engaging students in GCE are presented in Figure 3. They rated their confidence on a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the highest confidence rating. Participant (n = 285) confidence in teaching GCE had a mean rating of 3.34 (SD = 1); participant (n = 284) confidence in supporting pupils to become active promoters of inclusive and sustainable societies had a mean rating of 3.47 (SD = .91); participant (n = 285) confidence in supporting pupils in engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges had a mean rating of 3.34 (SD = .94); participant (n = 285) confidence in developing pupils' critical thinking skills when engaging with GCE topics had a mean rating of 3.46 (SD = .98); participant (n = 285) confidence in developing pupils' enquiry-based skills on topics related to GCE had a mean rating of 3.42 (SD = .97); participant (n = 284) confidence in supporting pupils' empathetic responses to global issues had a mean rating of 3.61 (SD = .92); participant (n = 285) confidence in supporting pupils' emotional responses to global issues



**Figure 3.** Mean ratings for confidence in teaching and engaging students in GCE. Error bars represent standard deviations.

had a mean rating of 3.53 (SD = .91); participant (n = 284) confidence in supporting pupils’ considerations of interdependence and solidarity had a mean rating of 3.42 (SD = .91). These all indicate moderate levels of confidence in teaching and approaches to engaging in GCE.

Pedagogical skills in teaching and approaches to engaging students in GCE were rated on a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the highest skill rating (see Figure 4). Participants (n = 276) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.22 (SD = .97) in teaching GCE; participants (n = 275) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.3 (SD = .87) in supporting pupils to become active promoters of inclusive and sustainable societies; participants (n = 274) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.2 (SD = .91) in engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges; participants (n = 274) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.3



**Figure 4.** Mean ratings for pedagogical skills in teaching and engaging students in GCE. Error bars represent standard deviation.

(SD = .94) in developing pupils' critical thinking skills when engaging with GCE topics; participants (n = 275) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.3 (SD = .92) in developing pupils' enquiry-based skills on topics related to GCE; participants (n = 274) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.38 (SD = .98) in supporting pupils' empathetic responses to global issues; participants (n = 274) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.36 (SD = .94) in supporting pupils' emotional responses to global issues; participants (n = 275) reported a mean pedagogical skill of 3.27 (SD = .96) in supporting pupils' considerations of interdependence and solidarity. These all indicate moderate levels of pedagogical skills in teaching and approaches to engaging in GCE.

### **Time spent teaching GCE**

Time spent teaching GCE was also analysed. Over 42% of participants reported spending 1–60 min teaching GCE per week. Nine percent reported spending no time teaching GCE per week; 12% reported spending 61–120 min teaching GCE per week; 4% 121–180 min per week; and almost 5% of participants reported spending 181 min or more teaching GCE per week (the responses of 28% of participants were unquantifiable).

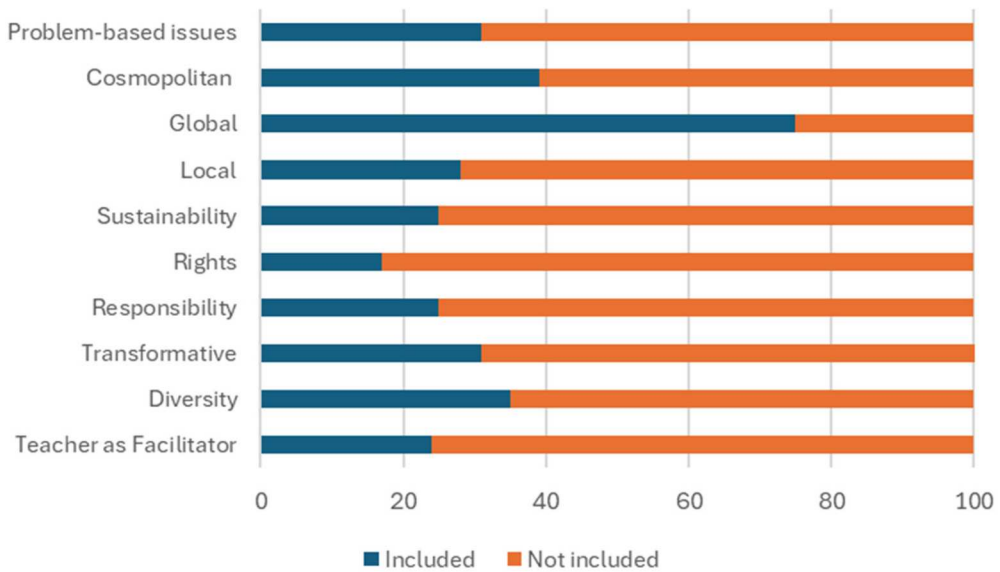
A multiple linear regression examined whether the following variables predicted the amount of time a teacher spends teaching GCE per week: teaching qualification, teaching experience, gender of school, school DEIS status, knowledge of GCE-related topics, perceived importance of GCE-related topics, confidence in teaching GCE-related topics and pedagogical skills concerning GCE-related topics. The overall regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0.2$ ,  $F(9,111) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As indicated in [Table 3](#), the only variable that was found to significantly predict time spent teaching GCE was participants' ratings of their pedagogical skills ( $\beta = 0.63$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Participants who rated their skills in teaching GCE higher were more likely to spend more time teaching GCE in a week.

### **Understandings of GCE**

Participants were asked to define GCE in an open-ended question (n = 246). This data was coded qualitatively, and these codes were then analysed based on frequency. The number of participants who included the code and those who did not include the code as part of their response were counted. [Figure 5](#) shows the frequency of inclusion

**Table 3.** Multiple linear regression model outcomes predicting time spent teaching GCE per week (taken from Barry et al. (2023)).

Characteristic	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Time spent teaching	1.42	1.02	1.39	.167
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Teaching qualification	−0.03	0.22	−0.13	.892
Teaching qualification [other]	0.00	0.55	0.01	.996
Teaching experience	−0.18	0.09	−1.96	.053
Gender of school	−0.25	0.20	−1.25	.213
School DEIS status	−0.41	0.21	−1.96	.053
Knowledge of GCE topics	0.27	0.21	1.26	.210
Perceived importance of GCE	0.17	0.15	1.10	.272
Confidence in GCE	−0.34	0.21	−1.6	.113
Pedagogical skills in GCE	0.62	0.21	2.93	<b>.004*</b>

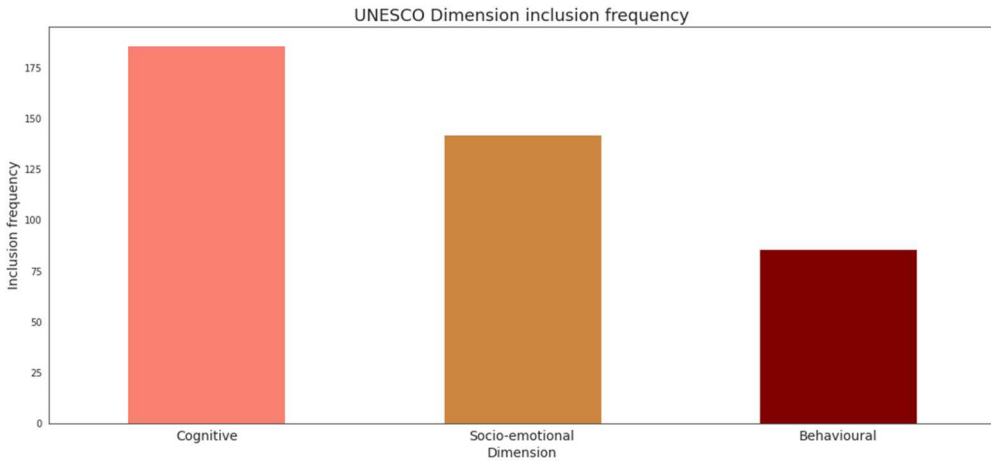


**Figure 5.** Percentage of codes included in participants' understanding of GCE ( $n = 246$ ).

for each code. The most frequently included code was Global, followed by Cosmopolitan and then Diversity. Rights was the code that was most absent in participant responses, followed by Teacher as Facilitator and then Responsibility.

The study also examined and compared teachers' understandings of GCE, against UNESCO's three core dimensions (cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural). To do this, a Chi-Square Goodness of Fit test was performed to determine whether the proportion of the three main GCE elements put forward by UNESCO married the teacher's own description of GCE. The test showed that participants' definitions of GCE did not have equal frequency across the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions, and therefore was inconsistent with the elements put forward by UNESCO in their definition of GCE ( $\chi^2 = 36.41$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .05$ ). As indicated in Figure 6 the cognitive dimension was noted most frequently, and the behavioural dimension was noted least frequently in teachers' definitions of GCE.

Two Chi-Square tests of independence were performed to determine whether the codes of 'Rights' and 'Responsibility' were linked and whether the codes of 'Local' and 'Global' were linked. For the first test, the test statistic of 21.98 was greater than the chi-square value of 3.84. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a relationship between the inclusion of both the 'Rights' and 'Responsibility' codes in teacher descriptions. The standardised residuals show that participants mentioned both rights and responsibility in their description of GCE more than would be expected if the variables were independent ( $<1.96$ ). Similarly, fewer participants mentioned rights who hadn't also mentioned responsibility than would be expected if the variables were independent ( $<-1.96$ ). The second test examining the link between the inclusion frequency of 'Local' and 'Global' also indicated that there is a relationship between these two codes, with a test statistic of 13.38. On examination of the standardised residuals, this link was only present ( $<-1.96$ ) between Local inclusion and Global exclusion. In other words, there were fewer participants who mentioned local



**Figure 6.** Comparison of inclusion frequency between three UNESCO dimensions of GCE (taken from Barry et al. (2023)).

issues who did not also mention global issues than would be expected if the variables were independent. There was no association found between the presence of Local and Global in participants' understanding of GCE. In other words, those who mentioned Local in their definition also tended to reference Global, but participants who mentioned Global in their definitions did not necessarily also include references to Local.

### Strengths and limitations

These results should be interpreted in light of both the strengths and weaknesses of the study. The sample employed is generally representative of the teaching population. A diverse spread across the different levels of experience, from newly qualified teachers to very experienced teachers (20 plus years) was evident, and the gender breakdown was reflective of the Irish primary teaching population. However, the sample was relatively small, and the self-report nature of the study may have resulted in social desirability. Response bias, inherent in research, means that teachers interested in GCE participated in this study which may limit the generalisability of the sample to teachers with less favourable attitudes and knowledge. We intentionally did not provide a clear statement about GCE in recruitment so that this would not impact on the questions pertaining to understanding of GCE. This may have had an impact on the number of participants in the study and may have limited participation from teachers with less refined understandings of GCE. A ceiling effect was evident in the Likert responses to the attitude measure, suggesting social desirability may have impacted the results. Additionally, there was likely a selection bias in the sample, such that those teachers who are interested in GCE are more likely to take the time to participate.

### Discussion

The aim of this paper is to examine primary teachers' understanding, attitudes, and knowledge of GCE alongside their classroom skills and confidence. The findings

provide important information on teachers' attitudes and skills but also nuanced data on their confidence and individual understandings of GCE. The findings are generally positive and similar to previous studies (Strachan 2020; Waldron and Oberman 2016), indicate highly positive attitudes towards GCE, specifically as it relates to its importance for pupils' learning. Overall, this study indicates that primary school teachers in Ireland appear to be very highly disposed to GCE, as indicated by their high ratings of the importance. Human rights was perceived as the most important topic, whereas sustainable development received the lowest response for importance, but only marginally so, and it still received a very high rating of importance. While these results do indicate very positive attitudes to GCE for the teachers in the sample, given the ceiling effect evident, we should also consider the possibility of social desirability impacting on the findings.

Generally, there were somewhat moderate ratings of self-reported knowledge amongst participants. Descriptively, the highest rate of knowledge was for knowledge of gender equality, lowest for knowledge of sustainable development; however, the differences between the ratings were minimal and there were similar moderate ratings across all categories of GCE-related topics. Significantly, these ratings for knowledge were not as high as perceived importance. In addition, moderate levels of confidence in teaching and engaging pupils in GCE were evident among these teachers. All elements of GCE teaching and practice (supporting pupils to become active promoters of inclusive and sustainable societies, supporting pupils in engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges, developing pupils' critical thinking skills when engaging with GCE topics, developing pupils' enquiry-based skills on topics related to GCE, supporting pupils' empathetic responses to global issues, supporting pupils' emotional responses to global issues, supporting pupils' considerations of interdependence and solidarity) were rated above the midpoint. Confidence in supporting pupils to become active promoters of inclusive and sustainable societies received the highest mean rating, while supporting pupils in engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges received the lowest mean confidence rating, albeit again with minimal differences between the categories. This echoes previous findings of teachers' moderate to high levels of self-confidence in their teaching and facilitating of GCE (Křepelková, Činčera, and Kroufek 2019). Although naive confidence (Harris and Clarke 2011) should be borne in mind when interpreting these results, the similar moderate ratings of confidence and knowledge suggest that participants responded cautiously and accurately to the survey questions.

van Werven et al. (2021) suggest that competencies in teaching GCE should fall into three categories: a foundational competency, a facilitation competency and a curriculum design competency. While previous research suggests that teachers feel they lack the tools and understanding to teach GCE (e.g. Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren 2019), the teachers within this study rated pedagogical skills moderately, and slightly lower than confidence. Again, very similar ratings were found across each of the skills categories. Skills in supporting pupils' empathetic responses to global issues was rated as the highest and, engaging in individual and collective action to address global challenges was rated as the lowest. Pedagogical skills were also found to be a significant predictor of time spent teaching GCE. There is likely to be a cyclical effect here such that teachers who rate their skills highly are likely to spend more time teaching; but time teaching is also likely to improve skills. Understanding such predictors is important given the continual

competition for space in the curriculum. Furthermore, it should be noted that the positive responses in relation to attitudes were higher than those related to teacher knowledge, confidence and skills. In other words, the teachers indicated that their own capacity to deliver GCE, albeit at a moderate level, was not as high as its perceived importance. This indicates both scope and need for strengthening professional development opportunities for practicing teachers to deliver GCE. Moreover, it supports Strachan's (2020) finding that teachers' existing recognition of GCE needs to be bolstered by more explicit links to curriculum policy and it needs to be supported with more opportunities for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills in the area. It should also be borne in mind that the teachers who responded to this study were likely interested in GCE and may not reflect the teachers who do not share the same attitudes, skills, or confidence, but who are nonetheless required to implement GCE in their teaching.

Consistent with previous studies, the qualitative data indicates varied conceptualisations of GCE across participants (Shah and Brett 2021; van Werven et al. 2021; Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren 2019). Returning to the discursive orientations of GCE offered by Pashby et al. (2020), in examining teachers' understanding of GCE, this study found little evidence of the neo-liberal framing of GCE which has received significant criticism, yet we do identify evidence of liberal forms of GCE as rights-based, democratic and cosmopolitan. However, significant questions remain as to whether such liberal approaches may lead to an interface with critical GCE through, for example, a critique of power structures, or take a pathway towards a neoliberal-liberal interface which fails to address dominant westernised, racialised or colonial cultures. Whilst recognising that GCE represents a small proportion of the recent offering of professional development in Ireland, teachers should be provided with opportunities to reflect on how GCE is oriented in both policy and practice (including their own practice), to consider what pedagogical possibilities may be opened up or closed down through varying orientations, and to collaboratively explore whether these understandings remain fit for purpose in response to the ever evolving political landscape.

In addition, our findings indicate that teachers' understandings of GCE do not align with UNESCO's (2015) three core dimensions of GCE at an equal frequency. Rather, the cognitive domain was the most frequently cited domain, followed by socio-emotional, followed by behavioural dimensions. This finding not only suggests an inconsistency between policy iterations and teachers' understandings but also it indicates an imbalance across the core dimensions of GCE and the prioritisation of cognitive elements amongst teachers. This is unsurprising, given the higher status traditionally given to cognitive domains within formal education. Taken together with the comparatively lower rates of pedagogical skills that teachers reported in relation to supporting their pupils to engage in individual and collective action, this points to a need for more support for developing teachers' awareness of, and competence in, the action-orientated and behavioural elements of GCE, in addition to the need to emphasise those policy frameworks that validate the centrality of these elements to GCE. It is a particularly pertinent finding considering the imminent addition of 'Being an active citizen' to the new primary curriculum in Ireland and suggests significant professional development is required in this area.

Similar to Niens and Reilly (2014), participants included global most frequently in their definition of GCE followed by cosmopolitan. This is unsurprising given the

overarching theme of GCE in addressing global issues. The inclusion frequency of local and global also indicates that there is a relationship between these two codes. This supports previous findings and highlights the clear linkage teachers make between local and global contexts, a necessary but challenging component of effective GCE teaching (Shah and Brett 2021). Diversity was also frequently cited, similar to Yemini's (2018) findings. Given that context shapes understanding of GCE (Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren 2019), these results should be interpreted in light of the teachers' context. This study took place during a period of significant and ongoing global challenges. The data were collected predominantly in the later part of 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine which had a massive global impact, including an energy supply and cost of living crisis. The war also had an impact on the Irish educational context. In March 2022, 9,877 Ukrainian pupils were enrolled in schools across Ireland. It is likely that GCE delivered during this time was impacted by this context and that matters of diversity, inclusion and integration were to the forefront of teachers' minds as they completed the survey.

By contrast and surprisingly, whilst the study was conducted in the same year as the stark IPCC (2021) report which unequivocally stated that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land, and is affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe, a substantial proportion of the respondents did not include sustainability or climate change in their definitions of GCE. This detachment of GCE from climate change is consistent with Waldron et al.'s (2019) study of Irish teachers which found an underdeveloped understanding of climate change amongst their participants and an association with climate change as a scientific and geographical process, as opposed to a global justice issue. Furthermore, it is surprising that this distance between sustainability related themes and GCE persists, given that in recent years in Ireland, there has been a concerted effort on the part of the government to improve coherence at a policy level. For example, recent national policy developments in the areas of ESD (GoI 2022) and GCE (GoI 2021) make explicit connections with sustainability and climate change. Nevertheless, findings from this study suggest that coherence at a policy level has not yet reached the staffroom or classroom. This has implications for curriculum planning and GCE as an integrated, as opposed to discrete, aspect of the curriculum.

The study found that participants did not include human rights in their definitions. This relative absence of human rights from participants' conceptualisations are consistent with Waldron and Oberman's (2016) findings on teachers' understanding of human rights; and, similarly, may suggest that teachers' understandings of GCE are as a result of their own contexts and everyday experiences, as opposed to familiarity with international or national frameworks or policies. On the other hand, however, the quantitative findings seemed to indicate that participants rated human rights as an important topic within GCE (descriptively the most important) and having a high rating of knowledge on the topic. While some of the literature points to the inclusion of rights as a key element of GCE (e.g. Larsten, Upchurch, and Christina 2022; Palmer 2016; Poursalim, Arefi, and Vajargah 2020), other literature notes how rights are missing as a common education concept in GCE teacher education (Yemini, Tibbitts, and Goren 2019) and teacher practice (Shah and Brett 2021). In addition, when qualitatively rating GCE, an association was found between rights and responsibilities such that participants tended to include both

dimensions together in their conceptualisations. This is unsurprising given the frequency with which rights and responsibilities are paired together in GCE specifically (Palmer 2016), but also in the broader popular discourse and governmental legislation and policy, including the new Irish primary curriculum framework. Nonetheless, the linking together of rights and responsibilities has received little attention (Deign 1988). Deign (1988) questions the underlying assumptions about the rights-holder when that correlation between rights and responsibilities is so ingrained. It is likely in this context that teachers were influenced by the broader discourse correlating rights with responsibility.

## Conclusion

This paper provides insight into the GCE understandings and practices of primary school teachers and highlights the breadth and depth of teachers' GCE understandings and pedagogy, albeit with a limited sample of primary teachers. Global Citizenship Education remains a complex educational phenomenon which deals with issues that are complex, challenging, often controversial, and in many contexts, emotionally charged. Policies tend to place GCE at the centre of a broader framework of actions which are tasked with addressing significant social, political, and environmental issues. This promotion places considerable onus on education systems and, more specifically, weighty responsibility on teachers to provide opportunities for pupils to learn about, and take action in response to, these challenges. In many contexts, this is at the same time as managing increasing bureaucracy, meeting the demands of national and global education targets, navigating increasing class sizes, and supporting the physical and psychological wellbeing of pupils in their care. Impending curriculum reform in Ireland should, on paper, support teachers in this endeavour. Given these well documented pressures and contexts, the diversity but also the richness of participants' conceptualisations of GCE is evident in this study. Indeed, the variety speaks to the myriad ways in which GCE can be understood and indicates a certain sense of ownership amongst teachers that Walsh (2016) argues is crucial for realising curriculum change in classrooms.

The importance-enactment gap identified in this study, meaning the space between teachers' perceptions of importance relating to GCE and their confidence in delivering this in the classroom, may be recognised as a shortfall between desire and practice. However, at a time of such significant curriculum reform, this lacuna can also be viewed as a significant opportunity for policy makers, teacher educators, and teachers to work towards realising the importance of these issues. This study identifies clear indicators of areas that can be addressed. First, certain pedagogical skills which, whilst recognised as commonplace within effective GCE practice, are less confidently considered by primary teachers in the Irish context. Strengthening pedagogical approaches, for example, to support children to engage in individual and collective action to address global challenges, may be one means to support teachers. Second, there is increasing consideration of the extent to which national, European and global competence frameworks may underpin neo-liberal forms of GCE (Pashby et al. 2020). Given the new Irish Primary Curriculum's turn towards a competence-based approach, it will be imperative to ensure that these developments are met with a wider framework of professional

learning support which serves as the foundation for the most critical forms of GCE. Fundamentally, this will require deep collaboration between classroom teachers within and beyond this study, school leaders, educational policy makers and the wider network of institutions and organisations involved both in the creation and provision of reflective and responsive initial and in-service teacher education, and the pursuit of education which challenges and addresses injustice.

## Research ethics statement

Ethical approval was received from DCU's research ethics committee in January 2022, reference number DCUREC/2022/068.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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