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Editorial

PEDAGOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE META CRISIS: THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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Introduction

The intersecting crises currently impacting our world are known as a polycrisis and many of these converging and interlocking issues have previously been debated in *Policy and Practice*, including: the climate emergency; racism and the far-right; the hollowing out of democracy; the genocide in Gaza; and neoliberal economics. The meta crisis, however, seeks to understand the systemic causes of these crises (Pollock and Bell, 2025) which neatly aligns it with development education's concern with 'the root causes of local and global injustices and inequalities in our interdependent world' (IDEA, 2022: 13). According to UNESCO (2017: 10) competency in systems thinking 'is the ability to recognise and understand relationships; to analyse complex systems; to think of how systems are embedded within different domains and different scales; and to deal with uncertainty'. To what extent have the development education and international development sectors risen to the challenge of the meta crisis and applied a systemic analysis to the ecological, economic, political and social crises enveloping our world? The limited evidence available to us on the island of Ireland suggests that both sectors give 'priority to individual, single issue considerations and actions rather than systemic, holistic explanations and collective actions' (Fricke, 2022: 92). As Wheatley suggests: 'We might call this a meta-silence about the global metacrisis, and it is illustrated well by the fact that none of (the) twelve principles in the Irish Development Education Association's 2023 Code of Conduct (Code of Good Practice in Development Education), focus squarely on sustainability' (Wheatley, 2024: 40). 'To heal societies and

ecosystems and thus secure a decent future’, argues Wheatley, ‘education at every grade must shift toward teaching students about the nature and causes of this global metacrisis’ (Ibid.: 41).

One of the challenges to advancing systemic thinking about the meta crisis is the lack of political honesty and urgent action from decision-makers in engaging the public with the scale and causes of the crises impacting the world. This places a greater burden on educators to deconstruct ‘the paradigm underlying modern civilisation’ and develop the critical consciousness needed to support transformational action toward a sustainable society (Ibid.: 47). This editorial aims to unpack the main causes and effects of the meta crisis before introducing the collection of innovative and inspiring examples of practice in Issue 42 of *Policy and Practice* that suggest how development educators are rising to the challenge of the multiple intersecting crises afflicting society.

Democracy or oligarchy?

In its 2026 global economy report titled *Resisting the Rule of the Rich*, Oxfam argued that the world faced a choice of either democracy or oligarchy. With billionaire Elon Musk sitting on wealth of half a trillion dollars while one in four people globally lack enough to eat, inequality in terms of both wealth and income is assuming unprecedented proportions (Henley, 2025). This extreme wealth is not only engendering trenchant inequality but concentrating increasingly unaccountable political power governing in the interests of elites. Oxfam found that billionaires were 4,000 times more likely to hold political office than ordinary citizens (Oxfam, 2026: 3) which is resulting in the elite capture of political institutions and the unequal influence of the super-rich on political decision-making. When Musk assumed a leadership role in the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) as part of the newly elected Trump administration in 2025, he boasted that he fed ‘USAID into the wood chipper’ (Robins-Early, 2025). The swingeing cuts made to USAID are predicted to contribute to as many as 500,000 to 700,000 additional deaths annually around the world (Kenny and Sandefur, 2025) reflecting Trump’s renewed rejection of multilateralism initiated in his first administration. This unilateralist stance was reflected, too, in US withdrawal from 66 international organisations, mostly UN bodies combating climate change (The White House, 2026a).

Domestically, Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA) with its planned cuts of over \$1 trillion from health programmes has been described by the Center for Medicare Advocacy (2025) as 'the largest rollback of federal support for health care in American history'. The Yale School of Public Health (2025) estimates that the OBBA's removal of health coverage for millions of Americans could result in 51,000 preventable deaths per annum. These are the lethal consequences of neoliberalism driven by 'a ruthless emphasis on privatization, deregulation, commodification, a sclerotic individualism and ruthless model of competition' (Giroux, 2023).

In January 2026, the United States' increasing descent into authoritarianism was reflected in foreign policy by the illegal invasion of Venezuela and abduction of its head of state, President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, a Deputy in the National Assembly, killing 83 Cuban and Venezuelan soldiers in the process (Aljazeera, 2026a). And, on 28 February 2026, the US and Israel launched an illegal and unprovoked attack on Iran that 'was undertaken in violation of international law and the UN Charter' (Reliefweb, 2026) with the victims of this aggression including 180 schoolgirls, aged 8-12, attending an elementary school in Minab, southeastern Iran (Middle East Eye, 2026). The attack was launched while the US and Iran were locked in nuclear disarmament talks that held the promise of a breakthrough, according to the Oman negotiator (Aljazeera, 2026b). The Middle-East is now convulsed in an entirely preventable conflict that is engulfing countries across the region and causing prices to surge on energy markets which will most severely impact the poorest in society (Chia and Sherman, 2026). The US has also intensified its economic blockade of Cuba by threatening tariffs on countries that supply the island with oil (The White House, 2026). This is a naked attempt to overthrow the Cuban revolution which has withstood US aggression and an extraterritorial blockade for more than six decades that is estimated by the Cuban government to have cumulatively cost their economy \$171 billion (Cuba's Report, 2025: 6).

The United States' aggressive posturing toward Latin America under the Trump administration has been interpreted as a modernist renewal of President James Monroe's 1823 declaration that 'the hemisphere belonged to the US's sphere of influence' (Sommers, 2026). Taken together with his threat to 'acquire

Greenland' (Cole, 2026), diplomatic, financial and military support of Israel's genocide in Gaza, and illegal war on Iran, Trump's renewal of Monroe's conception of Latin America as Washington's backyard seems to confirm an abandonment of election pledges 'to end multiple global conflicts' (Bazzi, 2026). Trump's unvarnished imperialist ambitions (Borger, 2026) are most directly impacting peoples of the global South subjected to US aggression but has rendered the world a more dangerous place by completely upending the rules-based order. As Trump's Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, said about how the US will conduct its campaign against Iran: 'No stupid rules of engagement, no nation-building quagmire, no democracy building exercise, no politically correct wars. We fight to win, and we don't waste time or lives' (US Department of War, 2026).

Trump's theatre of cruelty

Trump's domestic policies have been equally devoid of a rights-based framing and have included performative acts of cruelty visited mostly on migrant communities and undocumented workers but including American citizens. As Henry Giroux writes in this issue of *Policy and Practice*: 'State violence has become a public spectacle, disinformation has supplanted truth, and the democratic bonds of shared responsibility have withered into a corrosive politics of shared fear'. The murder by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Minneapolis of Renée Nicole Good, a 37-year-old mother of three, and Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive care nurse on 7 and 24 January 2026 respectively while peacefully protesting the cruelty of Trump's anti-immigration program, sent a shudder of fear and anger across the entire nation (St. Clair, 2026a). Jeffrey St. Clair presciently summarised the aim of the ICE operations: 'to inflict maximum cruelty on a vulnerable population that it has used as a scapegoat for the decline of the American economy, resulting from four decades of ruthless neoliberal policies' (2026b). Trump's Deputy Chief of Staff, Stephen Miller, has been a relentless purveyor of far-right rhetoric with a speech in May 2025 decrying what he described as 'cancerous, communist, woke culture that is destroying this country' and called for the dismantling of policies on diversity, equity and inclusion, and transgender medical treatments (Viser and Wootson Jr., 2025). In chilling rhetoric recalling fascist Europe of the 1930s, Miller said: 'Children will be taught to love America. Children will be taught to be patriots' (Ibid.).

'Trump is only a symptom, not the cause of our troubles', wrote Henry Giroux (2016) after Trump's 2016 presidential election, adding that 'Global capitalism is the monster and Trump is its most dangerous, confused and hateful messenger'. In an atomised society created by neoliberalism, poverty is presented as the result of individual failings and success the product of hard work, ingenuity and entrepreneurship. But according to Oxfam (2025: 7), 60 percent of billionaire wealth comes 'from either inheritance, cronyism and corruption or monopoly power' - not from hard graft. Those at the other end of the economic scale on low wages are finding that employment is no longer a firewall from poverty. Polling by the Living Wage Foundation (2025) in the UK has found that '3 in 5 low-paid workers (59 percent) were forced to skip meals regularly, were unable to heat their homes, fell behind on bills or took out a pay-day loan to cover their essentials in the past year because of their level of pay'. At a macro level, the World Inequality Report (2026) has found that the top ten percent of the world's population control 53 percent of income and 73 percent of wealth. The bottom 50 percent controls just 8 percent of income and 2 percent of wealth; a staggering picture of global inequality facilitated and accelerated by neoliberalism (Ibid.). These extreme levels of economic injustice are both pushing people into deeper levels of poverty and fueling support for the far-right. Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, warned that: 'From London to Lisbon, politicians from centre-right and centre-left parties alike had steadily eroded social programmes, fostering a sense of scarcity and creating fertile ground for the stirring up of anti-migrant sentiment' (Kassam, 2025).

The interconnectivity of the meta crisis

There has been a striking interconnectivity to the crises currently assailing democratic spaces and institutions. Many of these crises are rooted in the collusion of global minority states in Europe and North America with Israel's genocide in Gaza which has undermined the norms and conventions of international humanitarian law and the institutions set up to uphold them (Albanese, 2024). Amnesty International (2024) has concluded that Israel 'has unleashed hell and destruction on Palestinians in Gaza brazenly, continuously and with total impunity'. Francesca Albanese (2025a), the United Nations (UN) Rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian Territories (oPT), has reported on the extent of corporate complicity in Israel's settler-colonialism of Palestine finding

that ‘the law governing corporate responsibility has deep roots in the historic relationship between violent dispossession and private power and the legacy of corporate collusion with settler-colonialism and racial segregation’ (Albanese, 2025a: 3). Albanese has also reported on the complicity of ‘third states’ in enabling ‘long-standing systematic violations of international law by Israel’ (2025b: 2). The legal obligations on all states ‘not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by Israel’s illegal presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory’ was set out in a July 2024 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024: 18).

Despite this ruling, Francesca Albanese (2025b: 3) has named 63 third states as complicit in Israel’s illegal occupation and yet it is activists protesting against this complicity who have regularly been targeted by their governments. In the UK, 2,500 protestors were arrested for publicly supporting Palestine Action, a direct action movement that was proscribed by the British government as a terrorist group. On 13 February 2026, the government’s proscription was overturned by the high court as ‘disproportionate and unlawful’ as their (Palestine Action’s) ‘activities had not reached the level, scale and persistence to be defined as terrorism’ (Siddique, 2026). While this was an important victory for the right to protest, the original ban reflected how far fundamental freedoms, once taken for granted, were being constrained and criminalised by governments. University campuses across the world have seen student protests against the genocide in Gaza (Williams, 2024) with many encampments brutally suppressed by their governments which have been prepared to strip the rights of citizens to defend corporate and state complicity in Israel’s occupation and colonisation of Palestine (Levin, 2025).

The complicity of states in the genocide in Gaza and their preparedness to defend their illegality at all costs up to the point of incarcerating, deporting and inflicting violence on protestors is arguably the epicentre of the meta crisis. As the political activist and academic, Angela Davis, has said: ‘Palestine is a moral litmus test for the world’ (Davis, 2023) which means educators should self-assess the extent to which they pass that test and support a pedagogy of resistance to the rising tide of fascism, normalised violence, extremism and genocide. We are living in dangerous times that demand what Henry Giroux (2025: 145) describes

as an ‘educated hope’ that confronts the ‘constraints facing the struggle for a radical democratic society’ and creates the preconditions ‘for imagining a future that does not replicate the nightmares of the present, for not making the present the future’.

Confronting the meta crisis

Issue 42 of *Policy and Practice* carries contributions from authors based in Ethiopia, India, and Indonesia, as well as several European states. It’s a reflection of the development education sector’s growing recognition and practice in education sectors and societies across the world. Four of the Focus contributions to Issue 42 are concerned with the practice of development education in alternative settings underscoring the sector’s flexibility and capacity to support learning beyond the formality of mainstream education. Gertrude Cotter’s article reflects on the ‘critical global justice education’ co-created by students who established Camp Saoirse, a six-week student encampment on the campus of University College Cork (UCC) to ‘protest their university’s institutional and financial links to companies complicit in Israel’s actions in Gaza’. The article draws upon interviews with nine of the participating students who reflected on the pedagogical outcomes from the encampment which included ‘practiced democratic decision-making’ and engagement in a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’. The encampment not only functioned as a form of political intervention but as an alternative pedagogical site that extended beyond the ‘boundaries of formal higher education’. The article’s implications for the development education sector include the lesson that ‘mainstream educational structures often prioritise cognitive knowledge and abstract analysis, neglecting the embodied, affective, and political dimensions of learning’. This is a salutary learning point for the development education sector in Ireland which has largely restricted its solidarity work with Palestine to mainstream learning spaces rather than engage in non-direct actions such as ‘occupations, vigils and picket lines’.

The second Focus article that champions alternative pedagogical spaces to traditional formal sector education is by Aris Sarjito and Nora Lelyana, who draw from a qualitative thematic discourse analysis of secondary sources to present evidence of home-based learning by urban communities across the global South. Their five-year period of analysis (2019-2024) includes the COVID-19 pandemic

when school closures forced mothers to operate ‘as de facto educators, transforming domestic spaces into sites of learning grounded in care, emotional labour, and critical awareness’. The authors show how the home was redeployed ‘as a legitimate site of development education praxis’ and their article calls for the validation of ‘maternal pedagogies’ that exemplify core principles of development education such as critical consciousness and participative learning. Development education in alternative settings is also the focus of an article by Katie Chapple and Joanne O’Flaherty which is centred on Youthreach, a state-funded employability programme for early school leavers aged between 15 and 20 years. The article presents findings from a study carried out by WorldWise Global Schools, a national post-primary programme for development education, that explores how five educators in Youthreach centres and an alternative setting have practiced global learning outside formal, mainstream delivery. The study reveals how learners’ direct experience of marginalisation and exclusion helped to foster their agency and critical consciousness. It also revealed the pedagogical benefits of student-led experiential and cross-curricular practices focused on global issues such as climate activism. The authors’ deliver a valedictory assessment of the positive pedagogical outcomes of delivering development education in alternative settings suggesting that it contributes ‘to broader reflections on pedagogical approaches within mainstream education, alongside ongoing considerations around leadership and resourcing for GCE’.

The fourth Focus article in Issue 42, based on research in alternative settings, has been submitted by four researchers from the University of Zaragoza in Spain - Ana Cristina Blasco-Serrano, Jorge Bernad-Vicente, Ana Virginia López-Fuentes and Esperanza Cid-Romero - who reflect on a participatory action-research project in Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. The research was initiated by the Sahrawi Education Ministry and Sahrawi teachers to enable the latter ‘to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices’. The research sought to co-create transformative teaching approaches that supported the critical thinking and autonomy of students. The researchers visited the camps bi-annually and established WhatsApp groups to maintain remote learning as part of participatory action-research that nurtured ‘political, socially engaged, democratic action, based on horizontal relations, with real participation, avoiding the traditional hierarchies between investigators and those being investigated’. The multifaceted research

included interviews and focus groups with Ministry of Education civil servants, head teachers, teachers and students, counsellors and inspectors. Teacher questionnaires reflected meaningful shifts in pedagogical approaches in the classroom using more critical, transformative and interactive methodologies. The research outcomes included enhanced teacher confidence and pedagogical skills and new opportunities for peer learning in ‘processes of reflection, deconstruction and construction of knowledge’. It has also created more horizontal management practices in what was a very hierarchical education system. In commenting on the application of Freirean methodologies in a refugee community, the authors / researchers suggest that ‘collaborating with refugees operating on the margins of society in the global South, is both a vindication and exemplar of the sector’s radical pedagogical process’. The training and pedagogy of teachers in a refugee community has been rarely researched by the development education community, so this article is potentially ground-breaking in establishing a valuable baseline for future practice.

While alternative settings provide new opportunities for debating the meta crisis with learners, formal education remains a critically important statutory provider of development education to students. The Focus article by Brighid Golden, Jenny Gannon, Benjamin Mallon and Fiachra Kennedy is concerned with how Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) navigate the delivery of development education in their first year as practicing teachers. The article is based on a case study of four NQTs who have received initial teacher education (ITE) from the DICE (Development and Intercultural Education) Project, a longstanding and well-regarded national programme in Ireland that delivers ITE at primary level. In interviews with the NQTs, the authors reveal the ‘opportunities and constraints in implementing global citizenship education, shaped by school culture, curriculum priorities, and the broader context of intersecting global crises’. The teachers shared how the meta crisis has impacted their practice through the questions, behaviours and emotions of their students who have ‘lived experiences of the global issues emerging in the classroom, whether it be racism, war and conflict, or migration’. The authors call for deeper research engagement with more diverse groups of NQTs to ‘investigate how different ITE pathways, including those which don’t include a specialism in GCE, shape teachers’ long-term engagement with global justice issues in the classroom’.

Bridging the gap between policy and practice

The first of six Perspectives articles in Issue 42 is a laudatory critique of the development education sector's silence on the genocide in Gaza and settler-colonialism of Palestine (Murphy, 2024) by five early career researchers: Maayke de Vries, Małgorzata Anielka Pieni ek, Diego Posada Gonzalez, Riikka Suhonen, and Luca Vittori. They have been actively involved in Palestinian solidarity activism in their respective higher education institutions and 'share the increasingly explicit critique of the field that exposes its hypocrisy: employing value laden terms without accompanying actions'. Their response has been to engage with Palestinian scholars and literature to identify ways to shift the sector from silence to action and ensure that normative commitments are translated into effective activism. This engagement has led them to solidarity *with* and *for* Palestine and Palestinians. Solidarity *with* Palestine 'entails working alongside Palestinians in collective struggle, grounded in relationality and shared political commitment'. Solidarity *for* Palestine 'refers to actions that disrupt the erasure of Palestinian voices within curricula, research, and institutional structures'. The article usefully carries a list of questions that development educators can use to reflect on their practice and ensure that their work is informed by Palestinian voices and literature. *Policy and Practice* has long championed the need for the development education sector to break its silence on Palestine and this article commendably addresses that by listening to Palestinians, learning 'from their pedagogies of resistance and joy', and calling for action.

Perspectives articles are concerned with the practice of development education and often reflect the gap between policy and delivery. That is the case in Getaw Girma Zemedu's article about the language policy of the Ethiopian government which has supported aptitude in English at the expense of Indigenous languages. The Ethiopian government promotes an 'inclusive education policy' but this is inconsistently implemented. The author argues that integrating the dynamic development education pedagogy with critical language pedagogy (CLP) can assist in narrowing the gap between policy and practice. The article identifies a role for development education in supporting the professional development of language teachers and supporting curriculum design toward introducing critical enquiry and participative learning in Ethiopia's language education system. A highly internationalised Perspectives' collection includes an article by Shashikant

Nishant Sharma that advocates the application of development education in the training of urban planners in India to ‘re-centre values of participation, equity, and interdependence’. Urban planning education is currently dominated by ‘technocratic and formalist models’ that ‘often privileges economic growth’. It argues that integrating critical pedagogies into the urban planning curricula can ‘interrogate systemic drivers of inequality, ecological degradation, and authoritarian governance’. It can also offer ‘both a critique of the present and a pathway to reimagining education as a site of resistance and reconstruction in times of crisis’.

The fourth Perspectives article shares the findings of a systematic literature review on poverty in Northern Ireland which was commissioned by the Centre for Global Education, development non-governmental organisation based in Belfast, and carried out by researchers from the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work in Queen’s University Belfast. The three researchers – Canan Ozkaya, Qurat Ul Ain and Allen Thurston – have summarised their findings in this article which includes a comparative analysis of poverty in Northern Ireland with the Group of 12 industrially advanced economies. The report reflects how neoliberal policy making has increased the vulnerability of marginalised groups in society, increased inequality to dangerous levels and concentrated capital accumulation in the hands of the few. This is a valuable micro study of poverty in a small regional economy on the edge of Europe which reflects the extent to which the meta crisis is permeating into societies in the global North.

The fifth Perspectives article is authored by Colette Saunders, the Early Years Development Education Officer with Trócaire, an Irish international development agency. Her article is a blueprint for an early childhood workshop focused on climate justice and activism, and framed by Aistear, the early Irish childhood curriculum framework and the Sustainable Development Goals. The workshop also aims to debate children’s rights in the context of climate and the environment, and enable young people to become ‘agentic, competent and confident global citizens’. The climate emergency is framed by the workshop as a form of injustice and inequality experienced by young people, and therefore a matter of intergenerational justice. The article and workshop offer the prospect

of valuable peer education for development educators interested in introducing climate justice into early years education.

The sixth Perspectives article has been written by Portuguese educators, Carlota Quintão and Sara Borges, who are part of the community of practitioners engaged with the delivery of a project called Sinergias ED. The project aims to create collaborative learning spaces between civil society organisations (CSOs) and higher education institutions (HEIs), promoting participatory action research and supporting the co-production of knowledge. The article is concerned with the challenges of evaluating the nuances of development education practice within a linear, deductive and performative model that has been advanced by government bodies within the sector. The article particularly rails against the theory of change evaluative framework characterised by rigid frameworks leading to pre-designed outcomes and based upon pre-determined assumptions. This neoliberal evaluative paradigm has become increasingly prominent in Portugal since the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent financialisation of social policies and impact assessment. The article asks if development educators will continue to have the freedom to experiment and evaluate their practice using the same kind of participative methodologies that characterise their practice.

Henry Giroux's Viewpoint article for Issue 42 titled 'Higher Education in the Time of Fascist Plague', is an urgent call for the defence of higher education from 'fascist and neoliberal control'. Universities, argues Giroux, have been turned into 'battlegrounds for democracy's future', given the criminalisation of dissent to Israel's genocide on campuses across the United States and the contesting of truth and civic memory. Giroux calls for the preserving of universities as sites of 'knowledge production and democratic possibility' to ensure the cultivating of 'agency, solidarity, and critical awareness'. He adds that: 'Higher education must reclaim academic freedom, dissent, critical thought, and democratic governance not as abstract principles but as urgent practices of resistance'.

As we face into the meta crisis as educators, the content of Issue 42 has been an important reminder of Paulo Freire's enduring influence as a radical practitioner across the world. His work has been cited by many of the authors

published in this issue because it assumes increasing importance in developing pedagogies of resistance against rising tide of global authoritarianism. In the words of Henry Giroux about his friend and colleague: ‘For Freire, education and schooling were part of a larger struggle against capitalism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, fascism, and the depoliticisation and instrumentalisation of education’ (Giroux, 2021: 115). Adding that ‘Freire’s spirit and politics are not to be celebrated but emulated’ (Ibid: 117).

Remembering Dip Kapoor

Finally, it was with great sadness that the *Policy and Practice* community learned of the untimely passing of Dip Kapoor, Professor in Social Justice and International Studies in Education at the University of Alberta, Canada in August 2025. Dip was a member of the *Policy and Practice* International Editorial Board and a renowned scholar and author in the fields of education and international development, with a particular focus on social movements in the global South. Giselle Thompson, a longstanding colleague and friend of Dip, has written a moving and fulsome tribute to his political pedagogy for Issue 42 of the journal.

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Focus

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE FIRST YEAR OF PRIMARY TEACHING DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

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Abstract: This article examines the impact of specialising in global citizenship education (GCE) on the professional practice of primary-based newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in Ireland, within the context of the DICE (Development and Intercultural Education) Project. Since 2003, DICE, funded by Irish Aid, has worked to embed development education (DE) and intercultural education (ICE) into initial teacher education (ITE), aiming to equip graduates with the knowledge, values, and pedagogical skills to engage critically with global issues in their classrooms. With an understanding and appreciation of the rich history of DE as a forerunner to GCE in Ireland and internationally, both terms are used interchangeably within the project. Despite the project's longevity, little is known about how GCE specialisation influences teachers' practice once they enter the profession. This case study follows four graduates who specialised in GCE during their degrees. One year into their teaching careers, they were interviewed to explore how their GCE training shaped their classroom experiences and approaches. Findings reveal both opportunities and constraints in implementing GCE, shaped by school culture, curriculum priorities, and the broader context of intersecting global crises. The article reflects on the tensions between critical pedagogical intentions and institutional realities, offering insights into how initial teacher education can support sustained engagement with GCE in practice.

Key words: Initial Teacher Education; Early Career Teachers; Newly Qualified Teachers; Primary Teaching; Global Citizenship Education.

Introduction

Current Irish primary teachers are working in a time of significant flux. While policies influencing both ITE and the curriculum are changing, so too are the global contexts shaping their own lives and the lives of the children they are teaching. Teachers are faced with the challenge of supporting children to navigate and understand shifting global challenges such as war and conflict, climate change, racism exemplified through anti-migration protests and wider violence, and rising geo-political tensions between world leaders with competing values and aims which can collectively be considered a polycrisis. Many of the children in our classrooms have lived experiences of the trauma associated with these issues, while others are navigating the emotional challenge of trying to understand injustice which is far removed from their own life experience.

We propose that GCE offers teachers an avenue to respond to this polycrisis and support children to navigate it. The approach to GCE which underpinned the teaching and research outlined in this article is in line with the critical-liberal typology identified by Pashby et al. (2020), heavily influenced by Andreotti's (2006) conceptualisation of critical GCE in juxtaposition to soft GCE. Consequently, in our vision of GCE we reject neoliberal contestations about economic functions of education and instead align our work with the liberal ideals of universal values and a common humanity, alongside a critical orientation of GCE which focuses on addressing injustice and critiquing power structures.

This article explores the experiences of four primary level NQTs who completed a specialism in GCE as part of their undergraduate degrees. The opportunity to specialise in GCE within ITE in Ireland is made possible due to the DICE Project and its integration into primary-level ITE programmes in Ireland for over twenty years. The DICE Project is a nationally significant educational initiative established in 2003 and in four publicly funded ITE providers in Ireland: Dublin City University Institute of Education; Marino Institute of Education, Dublin; Mary Immaculate College, Limerick; and the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth

University. The project provides a unique cross-institutional network of teacher educators who share knowledge and skills to strengthen GCE across their institutions and programmes. The project aims to embed GCE within ITE programmes and to enhance the ongoing professional development and personal values of teacher educators and student teachers through a GCE perspective. Its goal is to ensure that teachers graduating from ITE programmes in Ireland understand GCE and are equipped with the pedagogical skills and values necessary to teach GCE effectively in primary classrooms, supporting Ireland's and the United Nations' (UN) commitment to providing inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UN, 2015).

As will be outlined further, the Teaching Council has incorporated several essential elements into GCE, including education for sustainable development, wellbeing (personal and community), social justice, and interculturalism under the Céim Standards (The Teaching Council, 2020), presenting an exciting opportunity for DICE to enhance its impact on the next generation of primary-level teachers across Ireland, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to foster a more just world.

Global citizenship education in (teacher) education policy

The roots of GCE can be traced back to the 1980s, and in the Irish context, should be viewed alongside a rich and deep tradition of development education (Doorly, 2024). Unsurprisingly, given its global focus, GCE received significant exposure when in 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) were published by the UN, with Goal 4 emphasising the importance of quality education that is lifelong, inclusive and equitable. Global citizenship was recognised as a central concept and part of a strengthening of educational provision and a response to significant and complex sustainability challenges. Despite well founded critiques of how questionable elements of global policies are translated into Irish national policy and then local practice (Morrissey-Gleeson, 2025), the SDGs have permeated educational policy, including those frameworks defining ITE. In 2020, the Teaching Council published *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* which set out the requirements which all ITE programmes in Ireland were required to conform to (The Teaching Council, 2020).

This document includes GCE as one of eleven core elements underpinning ITE programmes. The Teaching Council’s definition of GCE draws on SDG 4.7, which specifically cites global citizenship and refers to social justice and interculturalism while making explicit connections to an ethic of care. The Céim standards presented a new conceptualisation of GCE, which in many ways extends a history of GCE-related policy as open to contestation (Gaynor, 2024). Nevertheless, Dolan (2024) argues to the importance of the inclusion of GCE within the Céim standards, bringing GCE from the margins to the centre of educational policy, recognising that this development stems from global and European developments, and also from individuals and organisations demanding an education which addresses widening inequality and entrenched injustice. Furthermore, Dolan (2024) contends that despite this policy level integration, there is a need for research to consider the longer-term impact of ITE on teacher’s capabilities in delivering more critical forms of GCE. Nevertheless, the nature of GCE within ITE policy requires careful consideration. Da Costa, Hanley and Sant (2024: 138) provide a strong critique of the manifestations of GCE often found within ITE policy, arguing that Eurocentric liberal approaches, grounded in the ‘acquisition of global knowledge’ do little to address entrenched inequalities.

Early career teachers: teaching and ITE reflections

Limited research in the Irish context has explored the GCE practices of early career Irish primary teachers. In one study which explored the impact of DICE-supported courses on subsequent classroom practice, Dillon and O’Shea (2009) found that participants held diverse but somewhat shallow understandings of GCE. Regarding their practice as NQTs, participants reported using a broad range of active participatory methodologies to deliver GCE in the classroom and explored themes such as ‘food and trade’, ‘identity and belonging’, ‘culture and interculturalism’ and ‘human rights’ through multiple subject areas. When reflecting on the learning outcomes that shaped their current practice, participants identified knowledge and attitudes as the most prominent. Outcomes related to skills were less apparent, while outcomes relating to action appeared much less frequently (Dillon and O’Shea, 2009). The most common reason participants in Dillon and O’Shea’s (2009) study gave for exploring GCE in the classroom was as a response to diversity, which at the time of the study included non-Irish

nationals as 9.4 percent of the total population, with five percent of this proportion being those recognised as refugees or seeking asylum (Central Statistics Office, 2007). The most significant factors teachers perceived to influence (for better and for worse) GCE in their classrooms included the curriculum, school ethos, societal issues, and time constraints. Over ninety percent of participants identified that engagement with GCE in the context of ITE had to some degree influenced their teaching, with teaching activities, resources, teaching practice, reflection and lectures focused on GCE themes noted as particularly important elements of programmes in this regard.

Beyond the Irish context, important research recognises the complex nature of GCE provision in ITE. In a multi-method study exploring 134 primary student teachers in England, Bamber et al (2018), explored the relationship between broader governmental policy (in this case the promotion of Fundamental British Values (FBV)) and those educational policies and practices promoting critical GCE within ITE. The study found that within this GCE context, student teachers held four orientations towards FBV: ‘comfort’ (being unconsciously uncritical), ‘compliance’ (being consciously uncritical, in the pursuit of performance measures), ‘criticality’ (those challenging discourse), and finally ‘critical being’, (resisting through pedagogies of critical reflection and dialogue). This research highlights the conflict between global and national teacher education policy, the importance of pursuing critical GCE within ITE, and the development of a ‘a critical orientation towards professional requirements’ (Bamber et al., 2018: 448) as an ongoing dimension of professional learning.

With so little research concerning GCE practices of NQTs teachers in Ireland, it is useful to turn to more general research. ITE provision in Ireland is largely regarded as positive and useful in preparing teachers for practice in schools. Teaching experiences in ITE are recognised as a significant supportive factor for teachers in developing their own practices (Ni Chróinín and O’Sullivan, 2014; Kozina, 2013; Hourigan et al., 2025). However, Hourigan et al. (2025) identified clear areas where early career teachers perceived themselves as underprepared, such as assessment, meeting diverse needs and engagement with parents. This is echoed by Kozina (2013) whose participants felt somewhat underprepared in relation to assessment and working with diverse learners, including children with

English as an additional language. This highlights the important contextual factors such as children, classrooms, schools and wider society, which shape the emerging practice of early career teachers.

Other research has considered the formal pathways by which teachers transition from ITE into their newly qualified teaching. School-based induction for teachers in Ireland, or *Droichead*, is the mandatory period of post-qualification professional practice (The Teaching Council, 2017). Nally and Ladden (2020) argue that this induction process offers practical and emotional support and a space for reflection. Albeit writing prior to 2017, O’Sullivan and Conway (2016) explored the experiences of nine newly qualified primary teachers as they negotiated the induction process, recognising the need to strengthen the capacity and coherence within and between systems and practices surrounding teacher induction. They note the need to further explore the relationship between the different phases of teacher education, which in the context of this article, raises questions as to the relationship between GCE practices in ITE as framed by the Ceim Standards, and early career teaching as framed by *Droichead*.

Teaching global citizenship education in Irish primary classrooms

There is a small but increasing body of research exploring teachers’ GCE practices in Irish primary schools. Mallon (2019) found that well-planned and theoretically grounded forms of critical GCE offered important opportunities for children to engage in learning across cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions as proposed by UNESCO (2014). This study highlighted the potential of GCE practices which are framed by the curriculum, supported by whole school structures, and underpinned by reflection. Other research illustrates the complexity of turning the theory and policies of GCE into practice. In their qualitative study of primary teachers’ GCE practices, Waldron et al. (2014) found that teachers’ practices can champion GCE in schools and wider communities, but when framed by external programmes and motivations, can serve to limit learning processes and in some cases reinforce values which conflict with those recognised as central to GCE.

More recently, a mixed methods study incorporating a national survey of Irish primary teachers found that teachers held positive attitudes towards GCE,

which they understood in nuanced and often highly localised ways, specifically recognising its importance for the diversity of children they work with (Barry et al., 2025). However, the study also found that teachers' perceptions of their own capability to deliver GCE did not match their positive perception of GCE's importance, leaving what the authors describe as a gap between practice and aspiration. Although neo-liberal framings were not apparent in teachers' conceptualisations of GCE, the authors questioned whether the more evident liberal forms of GCE may underpin more critical forms that challenge inequitable and unjust social structures. The authors note the need to strengthen teachers' confidence in using pedagogical approaches synonymous with GCE, and to pursue greater collaboration across the continuum of teacher education. Barry et al. (2025) note the importance of this work considering the position of 'active citizenship' as a central competence of the new Irish Primary Framework, and the inclusion of 'global citizenship' as a theme within the specifications of the primary curriculum area social and environmental education.

Literature review conclusion

Whilst GCE has increasingly been positioned at the centre of Irish formal education policy (NCCA, 2025; The Teaching Council, 2020), there remain questions about the extent to which this policy inclusion translates into ITE practice, and subsequently into the practices of NQTs (Dolan, 2024). Where early career teachers may hold diverse understandings of GCE, there has been a recognition that these definitions may be somewhat underdeveloped (Dillon and O'Shea, 2009). More recent research highlights the nuanced and varied conceptualisations of GCE developed by teachers (Barry et al., 2025) raising the question of the extent to which NQTs may have similar or contrasting understandings of GCE. Whilst early career teachers' conceptualisations of GCE may lack an action-component (Dillon and O'Shea, 2009), the challenges of teaching action-oriented GCE are also recognised by Irish primary teachers across the spectrum of experience (Barry et al., 2025). Research demonstrates how teachers engaged with GCE as a response to increasingly diverse classrooms in the post-Celtic Tiger era (Dillon and O'Shea, 2009). Importantly, more recent demographic data recognises a significant increase in the number of children with diverse national and cultural identities (Machowska Kosciak and Barry, 2025). It also raises the question of how this relationship between GCE and diversity has

developed, and whether ‘diversity’ (whether as reference to culture, languages, inclusion, empathy, tolerance, or religion) may feature as an element of NQTs conceptualisations of GCE, as it does for Irish primary teachers (Barry et al., 2024).

Publications in the Irish context continue to lay out the significant environmental, social and political crises which present significant challenges to education systems and practitioners (Dillon et al., 2024; Mallon et al., 2024). As we recognise that teacher confidence may often relate to the perceived sensitivity of issues or themes being addressed in classrooms (Yamashita, 2006; Reilly and Niens, 2014), it is important to consider how NQTs, moving from the relative safety of school placement to the exposure of their own classrooms, perceive and engage with issues which continue to be and emerge as controversial.

Finally, it is important to recognise the importance of connecting the practices of early career teachers back to their experiences within ITE. For example, school placement is recognised by practitioners and academic research as a pivotal dimension of ITE (Kozina, 2013; Ní Chróinín and O’Sullivan, 2014) and as a valuable element of GCE ITE provision (Dillon and O’Shea, 2009) and a deeper exploration of this relationship would be highly beneficial. This review of literature highlights the importance of undertaking a deeper exploration of the educational perspectives and practices of NQTs as they set out to tackle the complexities, challenges and emotions of GCE in their own classrooms. It also examines how their experiences of ITE have shaped this process. As such this research seeks to respond to several questions raised in literature around the impact of ITE on teachers’ GCE practice and in doing so shares the experiences of four NQTs and their perceptions of the impact which GCE learning within ITE had on their emerging practice.

GCE within one ITE programme - study context

The teachers who participated in this research completed a four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree. GCE was embedded within various curricular and foundation studies modules, where its values, concepts, and skills were interwoven. In addition, students received explicit GCE instruction through dedicated modules, including within core ‘Social Studies’ modules during their

second year. Social Studies involved one hour of weekly teaching in large groups (sixty to seventy students) which focused on understanding global justice issues during the first semester and exploring methodology and pedagogy in the second semester. At the end of the second year, students completed a school placement where they were encouraged to design and implement a thematic plan embedding a GCE theme across multiple curricular areas.

In their third and fourth years, students specialise in a particular area of education in smaller groups (twenty to thirty students). Those specialising in GCE completed three 36-hour modules; two in third year and one in fourth year, alongside completing a dissertation focused on GCE teaching engaged with during school placement in the final year. The GCE specialism comprised the following modules: 'Exploring Resources for Teaching GCE', 'Intercultural Education in the Primary Classroom', and 'Developing Active Global Citizens'. Each module provided opportunities for practical engagement, including delivering lessons in local schools and learning from guest speakers with lived experience of global justice issues or expertise in GCE practice. The specialism aimed to ensure that graduates not only understood GCE conceptually but also developed the values, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective teaching such as empathy and critical thinking.

Methods

This study utilised qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences and perspectives regarding teaching GCE. Interviews included a mix of online and in-person sessions as convenient for participants. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interview guide focused on; (1) experiences of specialising in GCE during their B.Ed., (2) perceptions of how this specialisation influenced their teaching practice and professional identity, and (3) opportunities and constraints encountered when embedding GCE in primary classrooms as NQTs. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled a responsive and flexible flow to the interview process, allowing for reflection and additional topics to emerge.

Participants

Participants in this study were identified as they had completed a specialism in GCE and had indicated their willingness to be contacted for future research or learning opportunities related to GCE. Those contacted had demonstrated sustained engagement with GCE beyond formal modules, making them a group likely to (a) continue integrating GCE into their teaching practice and (b) respond positively to invitations for research participation. Of the six graduates contacted, four agreed to participate in the study. With only four participants, the study offers in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences but is limited in its ability to capture the full diversity of experiences in the broader NQT population in Ireland. As such, the study should be interpreted as an exploratory response to an identified research gap.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The process began with familiarisation which involved the authors independently reading transcripts and listening to recordings, followed by collective listening to two interviews to discuss initial impressions and potential codes. Following the co-establishment of codes and potential inclusion and exclusion criteria, one author conducted initial coding of all interviews, which was shared with co-authors for review and commentary. Once all authors had reviewed, commented on, or suggested additional coded text, authors then worked by email and video conferencing to discuss, refine, consolidate and finally define and name the final themes and their associated data which were used to structure the presentation of findings in this article.

Findings

The four primary school teachers in this study described the evolution of their GCE practice across their first year as NQTs, building on the foundations of GCE knowledge and practice established in ITE. Whilst the experiences of the teachers as student teachers and as NQTs varied: (1) there were several aspects of alignment in how GCE was conceptualised; (2) there were similarities in the factors, stemming from initial teacher education, which were perceived to support the development of their individual GCE practices; and (3) there was overlap in

their perspectives on the factors which were perceived to (both positively and negatively) influence their GCE practice, and to which GCE is seen as responsive.

NQTs' conceptualisations of GCE

In line with findings from Barry et al. (2025) these teachers had broad conceptualisations of GCE, connecting to knowledge, skills, and values throughout their narratives which were rooted in a belief in the transformative potential of GCE, demonstrating a progression from earlier studies with similar cohorts (Dillon and O'Shea, 2009). All mentioned an increased understanding of global issues and expressed confidence in addressing topics such as anti-racism, sustainability, and interculturalism. Highlighting the significance of this, one teacher shared 'just how important it is to teach children our values and to grow up as citizens in the world who know who they are and know their place in the world'. For all participants teaching GCE was conceptualised as an ongoing process which was aligned with educational philosophies, embedded in their pedagogy, and shaped by teacher agency. They discussed choices made in choosing materials and setting up classroom spaces, approaching every aspect of teaching through a GCE lens; one described books chosen for their library, while another shared topic choices, and another mentioned choosing to examine areas that arose incidentally in the class with a GCE lens, saying 'I give them the space and give them the attention'. They also recognised how their professional and personal identities were deeply connected to GCE, sharing that engagement with GCE shaped them not only as teachers but as human beings. This engagement ranged from a commitment to staying connected with global events, to a growing ability to develop opinions and make decisions based on multiple perspectives. One teacher mentioned that for them, GCE was about 'informing yourself more about a lot of things' and highlighted an increasing awareness of the need to be critical of what was encountered on social media or in the news, adding that when topics came up such as gender equality, war or racism she 'felt more confident having learned about it in the modules to address them'.

Some teachers described the evolution of their GCE practice, and the transition from soft towards more critical forms of GCE (Andreotti, 2006). They demonstrated an ability to be adaptable and responsive to their classroom contexts, adapting plans and deepening engagement with global justice topics

beyond 'soft' or surface-level conceptualisations in response to questions, knowledge and engagement. Furthermore, teachers demonstrated an ability to not only embrace children's emotional reactions to GCE topics, but also to guide children to spaces of hope through deeper exploration of issues. For example one teacher described supporting children to engage in a process of head, heart, hands; not just rushing to action but ensuring that children are supported in 'having the knowledge, feeling the empathy, and then acting upon it', describing their classroom as one in which 'pupils will learn and they'll feel, and they'll act not just memorising rote learning'. The teachers' conceptualisations of GCE mirror the aspirations of SDG 4.7 through inclusive and equitable consideration of the diversity of their contexts, and a commitment not only to building GCE-related knowledge, but to fostering relevant skills and dispositions. Teachers mention their knowledge increasing through the specialism but also developing their skills through teaching experiences. Theory and experience combined to shape an ambitious yet practical vision of GCE.

Factors from ITE which supported NQT GCE practice

For these teachers, the opportunity to specialise in GCE during the ITE programme appeared foundational in underpinning and shaping their NQT practice. This included the teaching skills, activities, methodologies, and resources which were transferred and translated into their post-qualification practice. Teachers shared examples of active participatory teaching approaches for GCE including walking debates, mindmaps, using photographs and story, talk and discussion, mirroring similar findings from Dillon and O'Shea (2009). Teachers also appreciated placement opportunities within ITE, with one noting 'I definitely found it to be a support' echoing sentiments from the teachers who engaged with Dillon and O'Shea (2009), highlighting the sustained significance of these opportunities more than fifteen years apart. The teachers in this study conceptualised the opportunities to work with children as part of their specialism as valuable stepping stones to independent professional practice, and as opportunities to develop the pedagogical and content knowledge to further their GCE practice. One teacher shared that these experiences were an opportunity to learn that 'it isn't as scary as you think it is'. Another shared that 'I definitely felt out of my comfort zone and that's OK, that's a natural part of teaching global ed'. A third teacher outlined that without the placement opportunities they would not

have had the confidence to embed the pedagogical and content knowledge gained through ITE into their own teaching.

It was clear that the specialism was perceived to build confidence, including the ability to sit with discomfort generated through GCE, and a willingness to ask questions and investigate responses to emerging challenges. Teachers' confidence was evident in descriptions of being open to learning from and with the school community, and commitments to broadening their own understanding and challenging their own personal views. Through the specialism modules, students also had the opportunity to meet children, parents, and guest speakers. In interviews some teachers mentioned how these opportunities supported them in understanding how to navigate diverse spaces, preparing them to teach in diverse classrooms and schools. One teacher having had a variety of school experiences as an NQT found that:

“schools that are more diverse, I suppose it's kind of celebrated more because, you know, a lot of the bigger schools without kind of realising, are touching on GCE by just celebrating the different nationalities ... And it does make children more aware. The significance of ITE in shaping the teachers”.

GCE practice, and building their confidence was clear in the data, with one teacher describing that 'it's at the core of my pedagogy in the way I kind of take every lesson' while another said 'I think even now just with the knowledge I have from GCE and like from the specialism, I just feel like I'm way more informed'. Questions, remain in relation to how further coherence and connections between ITE and NQT induction processes could support further GCE embedding.

Contextual factors influencing NQT GCE practice

There were four key factors influencing participants' GCE practice, and in many cases, these developing GCE practitioners were continuously responding to them. The first factor was the children being taught who were conceptualised by participants as diverse, agentic, curious, emotional, passionate, engaged, knowledgeable and capable of deep thinking and participation in GCE action. Conceptualising children in this way is not unique to this study, others have

commended children's capacity to engage with complex global justice issues in Irish primary schools (Ruane et al., 2010; Oberman et al., 2012). Reflecting on children's capacities, one teacher described being impressed with children's ability to react to a difficult lesson, sharing that 'they were sitting there and immediately outraged in the discussion that came out of it. It was just a fantastic lesson'. Another teacher highlighted children's ability to engage with diverse and diverging perspectives and reach their own conclusions, to come to know their own minds. All teachers maintained the sentiment that:

“we should be giving kids more credit for the way that they think and the way that they reply to things ... it's amazing how much kids know and that they can see injustice before you even name it sometimes”.

Despite the confidence that all teachers expressed in children's capacities, they also acknowledged that children could sometimes be resistant to GCE concepts, reflecting values expressed elsewhere in society about migration, or diversity. Indeed, the pervasive influence which the undercurrent of anti-migrant sentiments across some aspects of society can have in our classrooms cannot be ignored or underestimated.

The second factor was the curriculum as policy, as planned and as something hidden. Here curricula appear as sites of possibility, interconnectedness and fertile grounds for embedding GCE. An example was shared of how a history lesson on the Vikings opened up opportunities to dig deep and ask 'why', enabling conversations about causes and effects of migration. Each of the teachers shared examples from their classrooms where their lessons were shaped by the experiences and identities of the children they taught; a child from South Africa prompted lessons on Nelson Mandela, and children from the Traveller Community deepened lessons on racism and stereotypes. One teacher shared that 'the curriculum actually supported me a lot more than I would have thought. I think Global Ed also enhances the curriculum by making things more interesting, like it goes both ways'. Another teacher described their approach to curriculum integration, stating that for them 'GCE is in every subject that I'm teaching. I'm really trying to find the root causes or how they can act on their knowledge that they have learned'.

A core example of how GCE was woven into curricula was evident in the many examples of how lessons not planned as GCE opportunities gave rise to questions about stereotypes, action, and fairness when teachers embraced opportunities to allow children to voice their thoughts and opinions and in how the hidden curriculum was harnessed to promote GCE values through displays and library book choices. The conceptualisation of GCE as woven into the fabric of the curriculum was a lesson the teachers learned in ITE, and which was reinforced through their practice, as exemplified through the statement that ‘global ed is actually everywhere and I definitely noticed that in the classroom, a lot of the times I had meaningful conversations it was actually without me planning that in the classroom’. Another teacher encouraged other teachers to have the confidence ‘to just ask a broad question and see what happens, see what they know, see what they have to say’. However, the formal curriculum also appeared to restrict transformative educational practices at times. Teachers described the challenges of a packed curriculum, time constraints due to guest speakers, competing priorities, and the pressures of planning as affecting their capacity to embed GCE into their teaching. These frustrations are not unique to GCE but reflect the busyness of primary schooling (Waldron et al., 2014) and remain a significant factor when considering how GCE, a non-curricular area, gets implemented in schools.

The third factor was the local context and diverse nature of schools as the culture of each school was viewed as pivotal to the development of GCE practice. This sentiment mirrors the strong correlation between GCE and interculturalism outlined by the Teaching Council (2020), and by teachers in both Dillon and O’Shea’s (2009) and Barry et al.’s (2024) studies. Each of the teachers mentioned diversity as a catalyst for embedding GCE values into school life. The teachers highlighted that many schools have embraced the diversity present in their schools through cultural celebrations and embracing an openness to learning about global issues impacting their students’ lives. One teacher shared that in more diverse schools GCE is ‘kind of celebrated more because ... without kind of realising, [they] are touching on GCE by just celebrating the different nationalities ... And it does make children more aware’. While the diverse nature of schools fostered an ethos of inclusion and empathy, it also served as a catalyst for more critical GCE for the teachers who embraced the opportunity to explore global

justice issues as factors contributing to the increased diversity in classrooms and across society. Multiple teachers described lessons featuring migration and its connection to diversity in society. Examples included history lessons on the Vikings, social personal and health education (SPHE) lessons on stereotypes or racism, and ways in which conversations on current global conflicts were woven into classroom life.

While diversity was largely seen as a positive factor, one teacher also notes inherent challenges in navigating significant cultural differences in terms of gender norms which were impacting her classroom. This teacher embraced this challenge by teaching explicit lessons on gender and diversity, supporting the children to consider multiple perspectives and embrace values of equity and human rights. This demonstrated their comfort with GCE themes, and their ability to be responsive and adaptable to issues arising in the classroom. Another teacher shared the questions being asked by children impacted by the war in Ukraine; ‘They were looking at the map, and they were saying how come Russia, such a big country was invading?’, and outlined the discussion that followed questions like this when children were allowed to voice their upset and frustration in the classroom. Although the teachers in this study were able to harness the potential for GCE engagement in the context of diversity, they noted that many other teachers they worked with were not yet doing this due to a lack of confidence in exploring complex global issues, mirroring similar findings from Barry et al. (2025). This highlights the impact of the GCE specialism on teachers’ confidence and ability to be responsive to emerging global issues now that they were out in the classroom. Their learning moved beyond the lecture room.

The final factor is the global context, namely the polycrisis which shapes the lives of children and teachers, serves to deepen inequality and fuel injustice, and is perceived by participants to demand a response from education in the form of critical GCE. The teachers all described how the crises were impacting their classrooms, including questions, perspectives, emotions, or behaviours emerging in response to crises which children are hearing about and, for some, experiencing. Two of the teachers described incidents of racism, where children mirrored language from anti-migration movements. Multiple teachers shared

experiences of children bringing diverging perspectives into the room and how these shaped their discussions and engagement.

Teachers demonstrated an awareness that some children they were working with had lived experiences of the global issues emerging in the classroom, whether it be racism, war and conflict, or migration. They highlighted the impact this was having on children's mental health, and the knock-on impact for their learning. A specific example of how the polycrisis was showing up in classrooms was shared by one teacher who noted the prevalence of gun-based games across multiple schools they had worked in. This teacher indicated that this must be 'due to technology ... or even just watching the news or video games, you know, they [guns] are everywhere'. For some teachers, children's experiences of the polycrisis enabled them to open discussions and allow children to share their experiences and thoughts, for others they saw a need to close down those conversations to protect vulnerable children. The teachers' ability to respond to the needs of their students and to be aware of the range of emotional capacities in their classrooms given the toll inherent in the polycrisis was clearly rooted in an ethic of care. Demonstrating the diverse reactions they are encountering one teacher shared that 'some kids can look at it and look at the facts and be like this is happening and understand it's sad, but leave it at the door', while others 'if they heard this would be extremely, extremely upset and go home upset'. The teachers demonstrated nuanced skills of empathy through various examples they describe and connect their skills to their GCE specialism. This was not their first time focusing on these topics and as one teacher said, 'the more you practise it, the more you do it', making it easier to ask questions, observe responses, and pay attention to the sensitivities in the room.

A common approach amongst teachers was to allow 'things come up naturally ... to give them the space to and give them the attention as well if an issue comes up or a topic', highlighting the importance of being flexible throughout the teaching day and being responsive to what children are experiencing and feeling. The significance of the challenges facing teachers working against a backdrop of the polycrisis cannot be understated, however, the confidence and skill they demonstrated in supporting children to navigate this complexity is commendable. All teachers acknowledged the role of the GCE

specialism in developing this confidence. It is widely acknowledged that these crises present significant challenge to schools (Dillon et al., 2024; Mallon et al., 2024) and can impact on teachers' confidence in addressing them (Yamashita, 2006; Reilly and Niens, 2014).

Conclusion

For the teachers in this study the opportunity to specialise in GCE impacted not only their professional development but also had significant impact personally for each of them. They shared examples of how they became more critical, more aware of what is happening in the world around them, and how engagement with GCE has shaped and influenced their values and perceptions of the world. While this study took place at a specific point in time against a backdrop of particular environmental, social, and political crises, the skills and dispositions demonstrated by the teachers indicates an ability to be adaptable and responsive in the face of emerging and unknowable futures. This article aims to illuminate the impact and consequent importance of GCE provision within ITE in supporting NQTs to navigate complexity in their teaching practices. The findings point to the importance of modelling active and participatory methodologies, building skills of critical thinking, empathy and adaptability, and providing opportunities for engagement with GCE through practical school engagement opportunities during ITE.

Given the study's exploratory nature and small participant numbers, further research involving larger and more diverse groups of NQTs is needed to examine whether these patterns of confidence, responsiveness, and critical engagement with GCE are evident more broadly. Future research could investigate how different ITE pathways, including those which don't include a specialism in GCE, shape teachers' long-term engagement with global justice issues in the classroom. Comparative and cross-institutional studies would help identify which features of ITE provision most effectively support sustained, critical GCE practice within and beyond the first year of teaching. Indeed, longitudinal studies following teachers across the early years of their careers would also provide insight into how GCE practices evolve in response to shifting school cultures and global contexts. Furthermore, as the polycrisis continues to shape children's lived experiences and teachers' professional realities, further research is required to

understand how teachers navigate these pressures over time. Studies exploring how school cultures, community contexts, and national policy reforms interact to either enable or constrain critical GCE practices would be particularly valuable.

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GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FROM THE MARGINS: INSIGHTS FROM YOUTHREACH AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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Abstract: Global citizenship education (GCE) is well established in mainstream schools, but its role in Ireland's Youthreach and alternative education settings is less explored. Youthreach is a state-supported programme that re-engages early school leavers through flexible, learner-centred and accredited education pathways, while alternative education settings provide holistic, relationship-based learning environments outside mainstream schooling for marginalised young people. This article presents findings from a study conducted within WorldWise Global Schools, Irish Aid's national programme for GCE in post-primary schools. The study explores how five educators across three Youthreach centres and one alternative setting conceptualise and enact GCE within their respective settings.

Two key themes emerged. First, educators viewed GCE as a transformative process grounded in empathy, interdependence, and critical awareness. Their own experiences of exclusion strongly shaped their commitment to fostering learners' agency and critical consciousness. Second, GCE was enacted through experiential, cross-curricular practices such as climate activism, ethical consumption projects, restorative circles, and creative subject integration. Small class sizes, strong relationships, and supportive leadership enabled these approaches, creating inclusive spaces where learners' voices were central. Challenges included inconsistent attendance, limited resources suitable for Youthreach and alternative education settings, and the emotional demands of engaging with global issues. Overall, the study highlights Youthreach and alternative education settings as unique and powerful contexts for meaningful GCE, demonstrating how global themes can be authentically connected to learners' lived experiences. It also suggests that experiences from alternative education settings may contribute to broader reflections on pedagogical

approaches within mainstream education, alongside ongoing considerations around leadership and resourcing for GCE.

Key words: Global Citizenship Education; Youthreach; Alternative Education Settings.

Introduction

While global citizenship education (GCE) has gained prominence in both policy and practice, much of the research and debate has been located within mainstream schooling and higher education (Bryan and Bracken, 2011; Bamber et al., 2018). This emphasis risks reproducing exclusions, as little is known about how young people outside the mainstream, those who leave school early, experience socio-economic disadvantage, or navigate trauma and exclusion, encounter or engage with GCE (Andreotti, 2006; Oxley and Morris, 2013). Ireland's Youthreach and wider alternative education sector provide a particularly valuable lens for addressing this gap. As settings designed for young people marginalised by the formal system, they not only highlight the challenges of extending GCE equitably but also offer insights into pedagogical approaches that may embody its transformative aspirations more authentically (Jeffers, 2008; Khoo, 2017). Set against this context, this article explores the experiences, enablers and challenges of embedding GCE in Youthreach and alternative education settings. The article begins by situating GCE within its international and Irish policy contexts before outlining the distinctive role of alternative education settings, with a particular focus on Youthreach. The methodology of the study is then presented, followed by the key findings, which are discussed considering existing literature.

Global citizenship education (GCE)

GCE is an evolving educational framework that seeks to prepare learners to engage ethically and effectively with global challenges such as inequality, sustainability, and human rights. UNESCO (2021a) defines GCE as an endeavour to empower learners to become active participants in building peaceful, tolerant, and sustainable societies, framing it as central to the broader Education 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2016) and its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 mandate. This target calls for education systems worldwide to ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills that promote sustainable development, human rights,

gender equality, and cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015). GCE emerged from earlier educational movements, notably development, human rights, and environmental education (Bourn, 2020; Tarozzi and Torres, 2018). Key milestones include the Council of Europe’s Global Education Charter (1997), the Maastricht Declaration, UN education decades and SDG 4.7 (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2015), and the OECD’s PISA global competence framework (2018), though criticised for neoliberal leanings (Scheunpflug and Mehren, 2016; Simpson and Dervin, 2019).

GCE is operationalised through diverse frameworks and policy instruments. UNESCO plays a central coordinating role, integrating GCE into its education sector strategy and producing guidance for educators (UNESCO, 2015). These guidelines outline three key dimensions of learning: cognitive (knowledge of global issues), socio-emotional (empathy, solidarity), and behavioural (participation and action). While widely adopted, UNESCO’s approach has faced critique for its perceived depoliticisation and insufficient engagement with structural causes of inequality (Franch, 2019). At a European level, organisations such as Global Education Network Europe (GENE) promote policy coherence and peer learning among member states. The Dublin Declaration on Global Education to 2050 (GENE, 2022) represents the latest strategic framework, aiming to enhance both the quality and scale of global education across Europe. Approaches to GCE vary by national context, reflecting local priorities, political will, and educational traditions. Mainstream or ‘soft’ forms tend to emphasise personal responsibility, empathy, and intercultural awareness (Andreotti, 2006; 2011), whereas ‘critical’ GCE foregrounds systemic inequalities and power imbalances, encouraging transformative action and decolonial perspectives (Giroux and Bosio, 2021; McLaren and Bosio, 2022). Pedagogical approaches such as the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2018) challenge learners to confront their biases and grapple with uncomfortable truths about global injustices.

This duality, between reformist and transformative interpretations, remains central to ongoing debates about GCE’s purpose and impact. Ireland’s approach to GCE has developed incrementally, shaped by both international commitments and domestic advocacy from civil society and state actors. Key

policy milestones have significantly shaped the development of GCE, reflecting a growing national commitment to embedding global and sustainable learning across the education system. Ireland's *A Better World* policy signalled a strong commitment to global education (GoI, 2019a), further advanced by the Irish Aid GCE Strategy 2021-2025 (GoI, 2021). Alongside national Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) strategies (DES, 2014; DoE, 2022a), climate and SDG plans (GoI, 2019b, 2022), the Céim standards for initial teacher education (ITE) (Teaching Council, 2020) identify GCE as one of seven core elements required across all ITE programmes, collectively shaping a comprehensive national framework.

Alternative education settings

Alternative education settings or 'out of school settings' are structured learning environments that operate outside, or alongside, mainstream schooling to address the holistic needs of young people. What distinguishes these settings is their co-curricular orientation, combining academic support, arts, sport, and technology with strong pastoral care and high staff-student ratios (Rosenthal and Vandell, 1996). They predominantly serve learners aged 5-19 years whose socio-economic circumstances place them at heightened risk of disengagement and early school leaving (Smyth et al., 2013a, 2013b; Orfield, 2004; Hennessy and Donnelly, 2005). In Ireland, such provision is particularly targeted at young people in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), an Irish Department of Education policy launched in 2005 to tackle educational disadvantage in schools with high concentrations of poverty or social exclusion. It also targets regeneration communities where trust in formal schooling may be fragile (INTO, 2004; NEWB, 2008).

The purpose of alternative education settings lies in breaking inter-generational cycles of disadvantage by creating locally based, less politically charged spaces in which students can experience success, develop agency, and remove barriers to participation (Axelson and Flick, 2010; OECD, 2010). Provision includes state-supported programmes such as Youthreach, which serves 15-20-year-olds and offers Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 3-4 courses and Junior/Leaving Certificate equivalents, as well as other out-of-school settings like Youth Encounter Project Schools, Life Centres, and online/blended

options such as iScoil (DoE, 2022b; Kovačević and Forkan, 2024). These settings differ in structure and governance but typically use flexible, student-centred pedagogies to address the complex socio-economic and personal factors behind early school leaving.

The Youthreach programme was officially launched in 1988 by the then Minister for Labour, Bertie Ahern TD, and the Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke TD. It was initially designed as a two-year initiative for early school leavers aged 15-18 years. The transition from a 'temporary experimental' scheme to a recognised structure occurred in 2004 when centres were designated as 'Centres for Education' under the Education Act (DES, 2004), embedding Youthreach within the Further Education and Training sector with explicit accreditation pathways at QQI Levels 1-4 and strong links to further education and training and employment progression routes (McHugh, 2014). The Centres are managed and administered by Education and Training Boards. The official aim of the National Youthreach Programme is 'to provide early school leavers (16-20 years) with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment' (Smyth et al., 2019: xi).

Youthreach's educational approach is characterised as highly learner-centred and scaffolded, more closely aligned to adult and community education than to didactic post-primary schooling, emphasising relationships, co-creation of individual learning plans, experiential group work and wrap-around counselling supports (Kenny et al., 2022; Smyth et al., 2019; Sheridan, 2018). This ethos seeks to recognise and reward achievement rather than reinforce failure, yielding a cross-fertilisation of expertise from teaching and youth-work traditions. The curriculum provision in Youthreach centres varies significantly, as each centre designs programmes in response to the needs of its particular learner group (McHugh, 2014; Smyth et al., 2019). There is considerable variation in the posts, contracts, and working conditions of staff across Youthreach, including Resource Person/Assistant Coordinator roles, part-time and full-time teaching positions, and smaller numbers of instructor, administrative, and other support posts (Kenny et al., 2022). Most Youthreach co-ordinators come from teaching

backgrounds with substantial youth-work experience and engage frequently with professional learning (Smyth et al., 2019: 91).

These features make second-chance contexts particularly amenable to GCE. Youthreach already aims to build confidence, responsibility and power as holistic competencies (Gordon, 2011), paralleling GCE's focus on participation, democratic values and social justice. Integrating GCE can therefore connect learners' local experiences to global interdependence, offering purposeful civic engagement and a hopeful identity as active citizens within flexible, community-based settings.

GCE and Youthreach

WorldWise Global Schools is Irish Aid's national programme for global citizenship education in post-primary schools. It aims to cultivate critical thinking, empathy, and informed action on global justice, sustainability, and human rights in support of a more equal, sustainable world. WorldWise Global Schools (2023) frames GCE as a lifelong process that challenges stereotypes, examines the root causes of inequality, and links local experience to global realities. WorldWise Global Schools assists schools, educators, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to embed GCE through grants, teacher training, resource development, the Global Passport Framework (which guides a whole-school approach), national events, advisory groups, and policy collaboration to empower whole-school communities as active global citizens. Youthreach centres can register for WorldWise Global Schools' Global Passport and use this framework to assess GCE under six key areas or 'stamps', including GCE in the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities, in youth and educator capacity, in leadership and in the wider education community.

GCE in Ireland has expanded into Youthreach centres, supported by the WorldWise Global Schools programme. A notable approach is illustrated in West Wicklow Youthreach, where staff designed a dedicated sustainability module framed through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (WorldWise Global Schools, 2025). Learning was organised around small, project-based tasks in which early school leavers explored issues such as climate justice, fair trade and local-global interconnection, privileging dialogue and learner voice over

examinations. This reflects a centre-wide model in which GCE is embedded within the QQI curriculum rather than delivered as occasional workshops. However, Smyth et al.'s (2019) evaluation, as well as prior evaluations, notes that Youthreach centres work with an increasingly marginalised cohort presenting with elevated mental-health, literacy and numeracy needs, requiring significant differentiation and pastoral support. Time pressures linked to getting learners 'over the line' for mandatory awards can constrain space for additional, non-core content such as GCE modules. Public image and limited progression opportunities were also identified as systemic barriers that may suppress learners' emerging civic identities (Ibid.: 123).

Beyond WorldWise Global Schools, broader youth-sector organisations demonstrate complementary models to support integration of GCE in alternative education settings and Youthreach. Youth2030 is a national programme led by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI). It aims to strengthen the integration, quality and reach of global youth work and development education across the youth sector in Ireland through non-formal learning. The programme operates in venues such as Youthreach centres, community training centres and local youth services. It defines global youth work as an approach that explores global issues such as poverty, inequality, injustice and climate change with young people, emphasising their role locally and in a globalised world (NYCI, n.d.). Lourdes Youth and Community Services (LYCS) in Dublin's Northeast inner city, which manages a community training centre, integrates GCE through arts, digital media and community action projects. This approach connects personal development with civic participation, demonstrating how trust-based, relationship-centred environments can engage learners with global themes in a reflective and inclusive way (LCYS, n.d.).

Saolta, a GCE programme for the adult and community sector, has developed a mapping report documenting GCE provision and practice across the adult/community education sector in Ireland. The report found that a broad range of providers engage learners in workshops, public events, seminars, and accredited and non-accredited courses on global justice, sustainability and inclusion (Hurley and Keenaghan, 2023). Activities often focus on community-relevant themes and sustainable community development, reflecting local needs

alongside global issues and frequently involving collaboration with other stakeholders to deepen engagement and understanding. Finally, the Irish Aid GCE Strategy 2021-2025 (GoI, 2021) underpins these models by recognising both formal and non-formal education as sites for GCE. The strategy's emphasis on participation and social justice provides a rationale for GCE integration within second-chance provision, positioning Youthreach as an appropriate context for democratic global learning.

Given the dearth of available research mapping the integration of GCE in Youthreach and alternative education settings in Ireland, WorldWise Global Schools conducted a pilot study with Youthreach and alternative education settings for twelve months to support, train, embed and develop a GCE Framework aimed at whole setting change. Using the WorldWise Global Schools' Global Passport Framework, an auditing tool designed to support education settings in embedding GCE, this study aimed to investigate how GCE is integrated in Youthreach and alternative education settings.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach used to explore the experiences, enablers and challenges associated with embedding GCE in Youthreach and alternative education settings in Ireland. The study adopted a qualitative design and was situated within the WorldWise Global Schools programme, which uses the Global Passport Framework to support the integration of GCE across teaching and learning, extracurricular activities, and community engagement. WorldWise Global Schools provided an appropriate contextual framework for examining GCE practice, as participating centres were actively engaged in structured reflection and the implementation of global citizenship approaches. The study was framed by the following research question: What were the experiences, enablers, and challenges of embedding GCE in Youthreach and alternative education settings? Given the exploratory and practice-oriented nature of this research question, a qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate to capture educators' lived experiences and nuanced perspectives (Dumas and Anderson, 2014) through reflective prompts and semi-structured interviews. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of educators' perspectives, allowing for rich, contextualised insights into how GCE is understood and enacted within

alternative education settings. Ethical approval was secured, and ethical procedures were adhered to throughout the research process; all participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in line with professional research practice.

Participants and methods

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit educators involved in the WorldWise Global Schools programme who had direct experience of GCE across seven alternative education settings, including Youthreach centres and alternative education contexts. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate given the study's focus on eliciting in-depth, practice-based insights from educators actively engaged in GCE-related initiatives. Participants brought a wide range of professional and lived experience to the study, including long-standing Youthreach educators, centre coordinators, and resource workers, as well as tutors working across further education and training (FET) contexts. Several participants had experience teaching across diverse learner groups and settings, including English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision, digital literacy and alternative provision for school-refusal learners, as well as prior experience in mainstream education.

Notably, some participants had themselves followed non-traditional educational pathways, including re-engagement with education and progression through alternative provision. Educators typically worked with young people aged 13-21 years who were early school leavers or marginalised in mainstream education. Participants held a range of roles within their respective settings, including programme coordination and classroom teaching across multiple curriculum areas, allowing for diverse perspectives on the enactment of GCE. Five educators (two male, three female) volunteered to participate across four settings: three Youthreach centres and one alternative provision for learners aged 13-15 years. Although the sample size was small, it enabled sustained engagement over time and the generation of rich, contextualised data, consistent with qualitative research principles prioritising depth over breadth.

Data were collected across seven months (September 2024-April 2025) through seven reflective prompts emailed every two to three weeks. This data

collection period facilitated prolonged engagement with participants, enabling reflection on evolving understandings and practices related to GCE rather than capturing isolated or time-bound experiences. Participants reflected on their understandings of GCE, classroom practices, student engagement and emerging enablers or challenges, submitting responses as text, audio, or visual artefacts to secure OneDrive folders. The use of reflective prompts was designed to encourage iterative and reflexive engagement, allowing participants to document changes in thinking and practice over time. Participants were offered multiple response formats to accommodate different reflective preferences and support authentic expression. Prompt topics included personal definitions of GCE, early experiences, changes over time, application of WorldWise Global Schools' guiding principles, learner engagement, recent learning, and emerging challenges or enablers. These prompts were aligned with the study's research question and the Global Passport Framework, supporting participants to critically examine both pedagogical practice and institutional conditions shaping GCE implementation.

Following the reflective prompt phase, participants engaged in semi-structured interviews to deepen and clarify emerging themes; this method was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to generate rich, nuanced accounts of lived experience (Bryman, 2016), aligning with the study's interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises subjective meaning-making (Dumas and Anderson, 2014). The interviews provided an opportunity to probe issues that emerged during the reflective phase and to explore participants' interpretations of change, impact, and challenge in greater depth. Interview questions focused on participants' reflections on the overall process, their engagement with the Global Passport Framework, perceived outcomes, and shifts in practice. The reflective prompts and follow-up interviews strengthened the methodological coherence of the study by enabling data triangulation and supporting a more nuanced understanding of educators' experiences.

Data Analysis

All reflective responses and interview transcripts were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), which followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Coding was conducted collaboratively to co-construct a nuanced

interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). An initial coding scheme was piloted on a randomly selected group of transcripts to check clarity and applicability. The scheme was then applied independently, and preliminary themes were identified and refined, with authors merging, adjusting and defining themes through iterative dialogue, reflecting Braun and Clarke's (2019) emphasis on reflexivity and co-construction in thematic analysis.

Findings

Findings are presented through two themes. The first examines how GCE was conceptualised as a transformative process shaped by educators' experiences of exclusion and inequality. The second explores how GCE was enacted in alternative settings, highlighting key enablers supporting its integration and the tensions and challenges that complicated its enactment. Coded data are presented as follows: 'J' refers to 'journal entries' and 'I' indicates interview data.

Understandings of global citizenship education

This theme includes two sub-themes: GCE as transformative learning and personal interest in GCE.

GCE as transformative learning

GCE was consistently described as a transformative form of learning that extends beyond traditional notions of citizenship. As one participant reflected, GCE 'aims to empower individuals to actively participate in their local, national, and global communities as responsible, informed, and ethical citizens' (J1). Several participants highlighted its transformative outcomes: 'students who grasp the core values of GCE will fight for fairness and equality in every capacity and will pay this learning forward by role modelling critical thinking, respect, inclusivity, resilience, and compassion in their future lives and communities' (J3). Others emphasised its role in 'connecting students to their world and helping them to relate their own experiences to that of other human beings [...] exploring global links to develop humanitarian values' (J3). This transformative quality was linked to empathy, diversity and interdependence. Participants noted that GCE 'applies a human face to world events, no matter where or to whom they are happening' and highlights 'the vital interdependence between us and our environment, which spans from the local and familiar to the global scale' (J3). Learners are encouraged to 'look below the surface and ask the difficult questions [...] students come to

understand that everything and everyone is connected; therefore, everything they do matters' (J3), becoming 'consciously empowered in their actions' and gaining 'belief in their own capacity to be heard and affect real change' (J3).

GCE was described as 'a powerful tool to nurture students as autonomous, responsible and empathetic global citizens capable of tackling the evolving challenges of our time' (J3). It develops values, critical thinking, and respect for diversity, encouraging learners to 'critically examine stereotypes, fight discrimination, and appreciate different world views' (J4). One reflection noted that GCE 'instils the values of active participation in both local and global communities [...] and promotes the idea that individuals have rights and responsibilities as global citizens' (J4). Its humanising and relational qualities were emphasised: 'both empowering and a call to responsibility. It opens opportunities to connect with people from all walks of life and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for the future of the planet' (J1), and 'GCE inspires hope by cultivating a mindset that small actions can contribute to larger changes [...] it helps me feel that I am part of a collective effort for positive change' (J1). However, participants cautioned that awareness alone is insufficient, as 'many educational approaches stop at raising awareness without providing students with critical tools for analysis and action' (J1), advocating for active, critical engagement with global issues.

Personal interest in GCE

GCE resonated most strongly through personal encounters with exclusion and inequality. Early experiences of stereotyping were recalled as formative moments shaping a lifelong awareness of injustice. One participant remembered how opportunities in school sport were 'more limited, or in some cases even completely exclusionary for girls versus boys' (J3). This exclusion was felt as 'unfair, unjust and frustratingly final' (J3). They reflected that such experiences of being 'stereotyped, excluded and disempowered' echoed throughout life whenever they were 'judged or labelled [...] based on blunt assumptions instead of who I really am' (J3). Others linked GCE to contemporary injustices, particularly gender-based violence. One participant explained: 'It can be terrifying for women [...] we are all told not to walk on our own, not to provoke, what to wear and how to act' (J2). After learning that 'about 30% of women have endured

physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime’, the participant described feeling ‘terrified and disappointed in the world’ (J2). Childhood encounters with difference similarly shaped participants’ views of diversity. One participant recalled the arrival of a Nigerian family in their small hometown: ‘I think it was the first time I had ever seen an African person in “real life” [...] as a child you knew they were treated differently without really being able to pinpoint why, which made you feel uneasy’ (J4).

These experiences also influenced professional practice. As one educator reflected: ‘This requires me to constantly check and challenge my own assumptions, biases, and privileges [...] GCE helps learners connect what they learn to real-world issues and see the impact they can have on their communities and beyond’ (J3). Personal histories of injustice underpin pedagogical approaches that empower learners to question and act on inequities locally and globally. For some, such moments were disempowering; for others, they became the foundation of a strong sense of justice and motivation to ‘help explore global justice issues and encourage learners to take action and deepen their knowledge of the world’ (J2). These reflections demonstrate how personal awareness of injustice is translated into GCE practices that cultivate empathy, critical thinking, and active global citizenship.

GCE in an alternative setting: enablers and tensions

This theme includes three sub-themes: GCE approaches; supports for GCE in an alternative setting; challenges for GCE in an alternative setting.

GCE approaches

Participants described a wide range of GCE activities, spanning content-focused, experiential and interdisciplinary/cross-curricular approaches. Pedagogical approaches frequently began with learners’ local perspectives. As one participant explained: ‘When approaching broad themes such as climate change and justice, it is helpful to start with how this issue is affecting them personally [...] this helps learners make a real emotional connection to the human experience linked to global issues’ (J3). Critical thinking and action were emphasised: ‘We want to build empathy, accountability, and action: not just sympathy and charity [...] learners now know how to ask themselves, is this fair? Why is this happening?’

What can I do to change things?’ (J3). Experiential learning was central. Learners engaged in climate strikes, volunteering, and activism, giving them ‘hands-on opportunities to apply the values learned through GCE and a sense of autonomy and agency’ (J3). Digital tools facilitated online petitions, awareness campaigns and ‘virtual exhibitions’ (J3). Collaborative projects, such as a virtual climate-action game, reinforced personal responsibility (J3), while field trips like biodiversity visits enhanced experiential learning (I3). Other initiatives integrated ethical consumption and sustainability, from ‘growing our own vegetables [...] to exploring fast fashion and our local heritage of weaving’ (J4). Restorative circles supported dialogue on conflict and peacebuilding (I3).

GCE was interwoven across subjects, from Cultural Studies and Environmental Sustainability to Art, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and human rights courses (J3). Learners explored poverty, migration, conflict and climate change while recognising global interconnections: ‘GCE content [...] helps them understand how these issues affect not only local communities but also the wider world’ (J3). Cross-curricular links were vital: ‘In maths, we analyse global inequality through statistics. In woodwork, we build models inspired by sustainable development goals. In English, we write reflective essays on social justice’ (J1). Another educator used tutorials, videos and a human rights board game, integrating multiple subjects (I1). Overall, GCE was framed as adaptable, experiential and embedded across learning. As one educator summarised: ‘GCE can be a part of almost any curriculum or activity [...] keeping actions student-driven maintains their sense of empowerment and agency’ (J3).

Enablers: supports for GCE in an alternative setting

Youthreach provides a unique context for GCE, enabling learners to connect personal experience with global responsibility. As one educator explained, ‘Youthreach focuses on helping students develop a sense of responsibility and belonging in a global society. Many of our learners are naturally curious about real-world issues such as climate change, human rights and equality. These topics align seamlessly with the idea of fostering global citizenship’ (J1). Learners lived experiences of inequality and discrimination strengthen this connection, making inclusion a daily priority. When tied to their own experiences, issues such as sustainability or inequality ‘resonate with students’ and become more meaningful’

(J1). A key enabler was the context. The alternative education curriculum allows GCE themes to be embedded in learning modules. ‘Global Citizenship is interwoven into many topics on our curriculum’, one participant explained, with learners exploring social justice through ‘real-world examples, case studies and discussions about global interdependence’ (J3). Small class sizes were repeatedly highlighted, creating space for ‘open discussions and peer learning’ (J1), where learners are ‘supportive yet appropriately critical of views and concepts’ (J3). ‘Group discussions and project-based learning enable learners to explore different perspectives and develop critical thinking’ (J3).

Staff commitment was another powerful enabler. Participants described colleagues as ‘supportive and progressive educators’ who embrace student-led approaches (J1). Professional development, collaboration and external support from organisations like WorldWise Global Schools were also crucial: ‘When everyone is committed to the same goals, GCE is far more impactful and joyful’ (J3). Small centre size reinforced ownership: ‘There are eight staff and [...] we’re all on the same page [...] it’s a real advantage for a smaller setting’ (I3). Leadership emerged as critical. Where leadership failed to prioritise GCE, it was often left as an optional extra, with staff reluctant to adapt briefs or use unavailable resources (J1). In contrast, proactive leadership embedded GCE into whole-centre visions, facilitated modules such as Environmental Sustainability Awareness and Climate Justice, invested in continuous professional development (CPD), and promoted equity: ‘Our centre practices and policies promote inclusivity and equity, fostering an environment where all voices are heard, respected, and valued’ (J3).

Tensions: challenges for GCE in an alternative setting

While participants strongly valued GCE, they acknowledged significant challenges in embedding it within Youthreach and alternative education settings. Learners’ personal circumstances were a recurring issue. Many learners struggle with daily challenges and ‘don’t necessarily see the relevance of some of these bigger societal and environmental problems’ (J2). Attendance difficulties disrupt ‘engagement, consistency and enthusiasm for the subject as a whole’ (J2). Vulnerable learners may find ‘participation in GCE [a] huge barrier, as learners need to feel they are in a safe space in order to be open to the principles of GCE’ (J3). Global topics can feel overwhelming: ‘climate change, inequality and global conflicts can be

heavy and can lead to feelings of helplessness [...] it is crucial to balance learning about these challenges with a focus on solutions and positive actions' (J3). Low literacy, limited confidence and minimal exposure to global issues also hinder engagement. Many learners come from small communities, so 'the sphere our learners occupy when they first cross our threshold is very small' (J3), making global issues appear distant and abstract (J1). Building confidence to think critically 'takes time' (J1).

Structural and systemic barriers were also evident. Participants cited time constraints: 'GCE topics often require time for research and discussion, which can be challenging when balancing the curriculum's core requirements' (J1). They noted a lack of resources tailored to Youthreach learners: while WorldWide Global Schools provides support, 'it can be hard to find tools tailored to the specific needs of Youthreach learners, who often benefit from visual and hands-on learning' (J1). Some felt overwhelmed by the volume of material: 'quite a lot of information to get through [...] very overwhelming when trying to create lesson plans' (J2). A 'lack of institutional investment in GCE resources' (J1) and unclear strategies left GCE as 'an add-on rather than a core subject' (J1). Participants also warned against superficial approaches, such as 'feel good activism [...] one-day charity events, slogans about equality' (J1).

Despite these challenges, practical solutions were identified. Case studies of successful projects demonstrated what is possible (J1). Empathy and emotional connection were emphasised: starting with learners' local experiences supports 'emotional connection to the human experience linked to these global issues' (J3). Support from external organisations and accessible resources, such as 'project templates, easy-to-understand materials [and] step-by-step guides' (J1), were recommended. Professional development, community partnerships, small funding grants and collaboration across centres were also suggested to sustain GCE, encourage innovation and enable practical projects like gardening, sustainability campaigns, or cultural exchanges (J1; I1).

Discussion

The findings reveal two key themes. First, GCE was seen as a transformative process grounded in empathy, interdependence, and critical engagement, shaped

by participants' experiences of exclusion and inequality. Second, in alternative education settings, GCE was enacted through diverse, experiential approaches supported by flexible curricula, small classes, and committed staff and leadership. Challenges included learner vulnerability, attendance, limited resources, and systemic constraints. These insights are discussed in two sections: 'The unique lens of Youthreach and alternative settings' and 'From lived experience to classroom praxis: how practitioner histories inform GCE pedagogy'.

The unique lens of Youthreach and alternative settings

This study indicates that Youthreach and alternative education settings provide a distinctive and valuable context to conceptualise and enact GCE. Their small size, learner-centred curricula, and close-knit staff teams create favourable conditions for embedding GCE across programmes. This aligns with previous research positioning dialogic, student-led inquiry and critical engagement at the heart of GCE pedagogy (De Wet et al., 2024; González-Valencia et al., 2022; Andreotti, 2006, 2014). Smaller classes and small-group formats provide the interactional space needed to support these pedagogical approaches. Leadership emerged as a key determinant of whether GCE becomes a sustained and meaningful dimension of practice, aligning with previous research (Day et al., 2020; Mogren and Gericke, 2019; UNESCO, 2021b). Settings where management articulated a shared vision of GCE, allocated resources, and invested in staff continuing professional development (CPD) were more likely to achieve deep integration. Centre-wide planning, embedded accredited modules, and ongoing CPD reinforced GCE as a core organisational priority. Conversely, where leadership failed to prioritise GCE, it was delivered inconsistently or confined to isolated projects, echoing findings by Barry et al. (2024) and UNESCO (2024/25). Curricular rigidity and limited time allocation further constrained educators' ability to engage with real-world case studies and foster critical thinking.

Consistent with Mathie's (2024) findings, a whole-centre approach emerged as a particularly powerful enabler. Integrating GCE themes across subjects such as Communications, Social Education, SPHE, and Art and Design allowed learners multiple points of engagement, enabling exploration of global issues from varied disciplinary and experiential perspectives. Learners' lived experiences, including issues of sustainability, human rights, and equality, were

personally meaningful and provided a foundation for connecting personal narratives to global systems. This highlights Youthreach's potential to position GCE not merely as a cognitive endeavour, but as an affective, transformative process supporting critical consciousness (Bosio, 2023). This highlights Youthreach's potential to position GCE not merely as a cognitive endeavour, but as an affective, transformative process supporting critical consciousness (Bosio, 2023). Rather than suggesting direct transfer, these findings highlight elements of practice that could inform broader discussions of how GCE might be supported within mainstream schooling contexts. Staff commitment was also central. Collaborative engagement, shared strategies, and co-constructed initiatives strengthened the coherence and impact of GCE. External partnerships, with development education organisations and international exchanges (e.g. Erasmus+), enhanced learner engagement and staff capacity, reducing reliance on individual champions. Challenges remained, however, including irregular attendance, time constraints, and superficial engagement with global issues, highlighting the need for sustained leadership, systematic planning, and a shared pedagogical language.

From lived experience to classroom praxis: how practitioner histories inform GCE pedagogy

A striking finding is how educators' personal histories shape their interpretation and delivery of GCE. This aligns with Andreotti (2014), who argues that GCE inevitably reflects the positionalities, assumptions, and commitments of those who facilitate it. Participants' engagement with GCE was often rooted in personal encounters with injustice, exclusion, or cultural difference, which became formative touchstones for their teaching philosophy. Early experiences of stereotyping and exclusion, such as gendered participation in school sports, were described as moments that 'scarred but strengthened' their commitment to fairness and equality, shaping classrooms that prioritise inclusion and empower learners to challenge inequities (Nussbaum, 1997).

Contemporary experiences of social injustice also framed GCE practice. One participant explained that living with constant awareness of threats to women's safety informed their commitment to fostering critical consciousness and learner agency. Personal encounters with cultural difference, such as witnessing

a Nigerian family arriving in a predominantly white town, were pivotal in understanding ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’, feeding directly into classroom practices that normalise diversity and celebrate plurality. Participants reported integrating critical questioning and experiential learning, prioritising spontaneous dialogue or ‘teachable moments’ as opportunities for transformative learning where learners could interrogate power and systemic injustice (UNESCO, 2021b). Personal histories could also be a source of vulnerability. Facilitating GCE required revisiting difficult memories and creating safe and brave spaces, balancing personal investment with professional boundaries (Pashby, 2018). Participants also highlighted how learners’ lived experiences shaped engagement. Young people’s participation in climate strikes, social justice movements, and activism outside school provided fertile ground for connecting curriculum to action, enabling them to become agents of change. By validating students’ prior knowledge and building upon their experiences, educators co-created learning environments that were empowering and anchored in learners’ realities.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Youthreach and alternative education settings are not peripheral to the GCE landscape but are central to its transformative possibilities. The findings suggest that GCE in these contexts should not be considered as an educational intervention, but as a significant form of democratic and transformative education. Policy frameworks must therefore move beyond inclusion rhetoric toward structural recognition of alternative education settings, leadership accountability, and whole-setting implementation models that reflect the realities of marginalised educational contexts. Policies must consider the importance of sustained leadership support and whole-centre approaches in embedding GCE meaningfully across curricula. Given the challenges identified around superficial engagement, further policy attention is needed to strengthen educator capacity for critical GCE, supporting learners to move beyond ‘feel-good’ actions towards deeper engagement with inequality and global justice. Further research is needed to explore how educators’ life experiences shape GCE pedagogy and how learning from alternative settings might inform practice in mainstream post-primary education. However, the main implication of this study is clear: by recognising and resourcing Youthreach as a site of innovation and critical practice,

Irish education can move closer to delivering GCE that is relational, critical, and grounded in lived experience.

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CAMP SAOIRSE AND DIRECT ACTION AS RADICAL PEDAGOGY

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Abstract: In the summer of 2024, students at University College Cork (UCC), alongside students across Ireland and internationally, established a six-week encampment to protest their university's institutional and financial links to companies complicit in Israel's actions in Gaza, which United Nations bodies and major human rights organisations have determined constitute genocide under international law (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). The encampment emerged in response to a military campaign that, by the time of writing, had resulted in the deaths of more than 72,000 Palestinians and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and residential areas (OCHA, 2026). At UCC, students demanded institutional transparency, divestment from companies and partnerships complicit in Israel's occupation, colonisation of Palestinian land, apartheid policies, and genocide in Gaza, and a public condemnation of these actions from university leadership. Camp Saoirse ('freedom' in Irish) was established on the university's central quadrangle (the 'quad'), a symbolic ceremonial space traditionally reserved for graduation. Supported particularly by members of the student Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) group, the encampment functioned both as political protest and as a sustained 'living classroom'.

Drawing on interviews with nine students and visits to the camp as a supportive member of staff, this article focuses on Camp Saoirse from a pedagogical perspective. All students at the camp were invited to participate in this research and nine students accepted the invitation. It argues that the camp offers a compelling case study of radical pedagogy within critical global justice education (CGJE), showing how student-led direct action can foster critical consciousness and transformative learning. Drawing on Freire's (1970: 36) concept of praxis and theories of critical pedagogy, the article explores how students co-created knowledge, practiced democratic decision-making, and

engaged in a pedagogy of discomfort. It also situates Camp Saoirse within wider traditions of student activism and proposes that direct action offers not only political resistance, but also a radical pedagogy for empowering learners as agents of change.

Key words: Critical Global Justice Education; Direct Action; Radical Pedagogy; Student Activism; Genocide; Higher Education; Praxis; Transformative Learning.

Introduction

Across the world, students have increasingly reclaimed streets, parks, and university campuses as sites of education and struggle, transforming public spaces into arenas of political learning, collective inquiry, and democratic experimentation within movements such as climate strikes and Palestine solidarity encampments (Choudry, 2015; Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). From school climate strikes to encampments opposing war and injustice, youth-led movements have asserted that learning does not begin and end in the classroom. These actions are not distractions from education but powerful enactments of it. They are forms, too, of radical pedagogy that fuses reflection and resistance. In this moment of overlapping global crises - including war, climate emergency and inequality - critical global justice education, as understood in this article, is called to re-engage with its radical origins, and to embrace the role of direct action in fostering transformative learning and agency.

This article examines Camp Saoirse, a student encampment at University College Cork (UCC) in summer 2024, as a case study of direct action as pedagogy. The encampment was established during Israel's military campaign in Gaza, which, at the time of writing, had resulted in the deaths of more than 72,000 (OCHA, 2026). United Nations bodies and major human rights organisations have determined that the large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure and killing of civilians in Gaza constitutes genocide under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). The encampment in UCC formed part of a wider wave of global student protests extending solidarity to Palestinians and demanding their universities divest from any institutional complicity in Israel's genocide. At UCC, students occupied the central 'quad'

and called for the university to divest from companies and partnerships complicit in Israel's occupation, apartheid policies, and genocide in Gaza. The encampment became a sustained six-week action, blending protest with community, grief with determination, and theory with practice.

The article focuses on pedagogy rather than the details of negotiations between the students and UCC. Drawing on interviews with participants and site visits/observations as a supporting staff member, the article argues that Camp Saoirse functioned not only as a site of resistance but also as a radical learning environment. It explores how students collectively engaged in Freirean praxis, reflection and action aimed at radical transformation, and how the encampment became a space of co-created knowledge, democratic decision-making, and a pedagogy of discomfort. These embodied experiences are situated within broader traditions of student activism in which protest functions as a site of political learning, from anti-apartheid divestment campaigns (Soule, 1997) and fossil fuel divestment movements (Ayling and Gunningham, 2017), to #FeesMustFall (Mavunga, 2019) and the global youth climate strikes (Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). The article explores how they share pedagogical themes of solidarity, emotional engagement, and radical hope. Ultimately, the article explores how direct action can be recognised by CGJE as a legitimate and important form of education. It invites educators and institutions to reimagine their roles, not merely delivering curricula, but facilitating conditions for learners to confront injustice, build collective power, and act in the world. Camp Saoirse offers a compelling vision of what that can look like in practice.

Methodology and positionality

This article draws on qualitative data generated during and immediately following the Camp Saoirse encampment. Data sources included written student testimonies collected after the occupation concluded, informal reflective debrief sessions, observational field notes taken during the encampment, and publicly available materials produced by the students such as statements, posters and social media posts. The aim was not to produce a comprehensive ethnography, but to document and analyse the learning processes emerging through direct action in a higher education context. Student testimonies were voluntarily submitted following the encampment and anonymised for the purposes of this research.

Pseudonyms are used where appropriate. Care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose students to additional risk given the politically sensitive context of the action. The author occupied a dual position during the encampment: as a member of staff at the institution and as a supportive observer of the student-led action. While not involved in decision-making within the camp, the author engaged in reflective observation and occasional supportive dialogue when requested. This positionality shaped both access to the space and interpretation of events. The analysis, therefore, adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging that the account is situated rather than neutral.

Data were analysed thematically, with particular attention to moments of transition, tension, and decision-making that illustrated processes of transformative learning. Rather than seeking to evaluate the political success of the encampment, the analysis focuses on pedagogical dynamics: how students articulated learning, how democratic processes evolved, and how care and conflict functioned as educational mechanisms. The intention is not to generalise from a single case, but to use Camp Saoirse as a situated example through which to examine the possibilities and tensions of direct action as CGJE in practice.

Direct action and critical pedagogy

Direct action can be reconceptualised as a form of radical pedagogy within CGJE, where the act of protest becomes a process of learning and empowerment. It embodies a transformative meeting point of reflection and action in the struggle for change. Freire (1970: 52) defines praxis as ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’, highlighting that it is not enough to critically understand the world, one must also act to change it. In direct-action contexts like student encampments or protest movements, participants engage in praxis by critically analysing conditions of oppression and simultaneously taking action to address them. This approach frames activists as co-learners who generate knowledge through the very process of resistance. A protest thus turns the street into a classroom of critical consciousness, exemplifying Freire’s (1970) idea that education becomes a practice of freedom when learners actively participate in transforming their world.

bell hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy deepens the understanding of direct action as education. hooks argues for a holistic, participatory approach to learning that values students and teachers as 'whole human beings' (Ibid.: 14) with minds and emotions. Unlike traditional pedagogy, engaged pedagogy 'emphasises well-being' (Ibid.: 15) and insists that teachers and learners commit to their own and each other's growth. In an activist context, this means protest spaces often become caring communities where participants support one another's learning and empowerment. Direct actions frequently result in co-created, dialogical learning environments and attempt to have non-hierarchical approaches to decision-making. In the case of Camp Saoirse, everyone's voice was heard in daily meetings and decisions were made collectively. This horizontal, dialogic structure reflects Freire's ideal of replacing the top-down 'banking' model of education with a process in which knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue. By engaging fully, intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually, in the work of social change, activists enact what hooks calls education as the practice of freedom, linking learning with concrete action to transform society.

Giroux's work on public pedagogy and civic courage provides another lens for viewing direct action as pedagogical. Giroux sees education as occurring not only in classrooms but in the public sphere through culture and activism. Direct-action movements function as forms of public pedagogy, by highlighting social injustices and modelling democratic engagement. Giroux argues that educators must help students develop the 'language, knowledge, and social relations' to translate private troubles into public issues (Giroux, 2004: 75). This translation is precisely what activists do when they turn personal experiences of injustice into collective demands for change. Engaging in protest thus teaches participants how to connect the personal and the political, fostering what Giroux describes as civic courage, the willingness to speak and act on one's convictions in public. Such acts make the pedagogical more political, linking critical thought to collective action. As a result, a demonstration or encampment educates both its participants and society at large. It invites critical debate and exposes onlookers to new perspectives. Through public acts of resistance, students learn not only about social change but how to practice it; a living civics lesson in democracy.

Direct action also resonates with what Boler and Zembylas (2003: 110) call a pedagogy of discomfort. Deep learning often requires unsettling one's assumptions, and activism inherently involves this kind of discomfort. Boler and Zembylas (2003: 110) note that critical inquiry 'often means asking students to radically re-evaluate their worldviews', a process that can trigger anger, grief or resistance. Likewise, participating in a protest or occupation pushes individuals out of their comfort zones, confronting them with the realities of injustice and their own positionality. This discomfort can ultimately spur unlearning, as critical pedagogues urge. For Spivak (1990: 13), privileged learners must relinquish the sense of certainty and entitlement that blocks them from truly hearing others. Andreotti (2012) likewise calls on students to 'learn from below'. Direct-action solidarity work puts these ideas into practice. Participants are compelled to decentre their own perspectives, unlearn paternalistic attitudes, and listen to subaltern voices. In this way, the theory of critical pedagogy becomes lived practice, protest becomes a forum for critical self-reflection, dialogue, and the challenging of hegemony. The emotional upheaval and discomfort are not side effects but integral to the learning process, as activists collectively work through uncertainty towards new understanding and agency.

Another radical perspective that enriches the pedagogical view of direct action is the idea of fugitive learning from the Black radical tradition. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe fugitive learning as the subversive, unofficial education that oppressed people engage in 'under the radar' of dominant institutions. They suggest that the marginalised learner might 'sneak into the university and steal what [they] can' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 25), capturing how those excluded from power often acquire knowledge informally and against the grain. Direct-action initiatives create exactly this kind of parallel learning space, outside the formal curricula, in occupied parks or campus plazas, activists gather to share knowledge, strategise, and study issues together. These movement spaces function as underground classrooms where people teach each other histories, tactics, and critical analyses that may be absent in mainstream education. This approach represents a refusal to accept official narratives, choosing instead to learn on their own terms. The ethos here resonates with global South traditions of popular education, where learning is rooted in community empowerment and often happens within social movements themselves. Activists

in these spaces learn how to build communities of trust and how to ‘study’ in a way directly tied to survival and liberation. Thus, direct action exemplifies how education can occur in the wild, an insurgent pedagogy that prefigures the more just social relations activists are fighting for.

Furthermore, direct action shows the importance of the embodied and affective dimensions of learning. Feminist and decolonial thinkers have long emphasised that true learning engages the body, emotions, and spirit, not just the intellect (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 1994; Lugones, 2010). In protests, knowledge is quite literally embodied. Marching shoulder to shoulder in a demonstration, chanting slogans, or holding a banner in a public square are acts that teach participants experientially (Taylor, 2020). Emotions run high in activism, outrage at injustice, grief for suffering, joy in solidarity and these emotions themselves become pedagogical (Zembylas, 2015). In many global South movements, song, art, and ritual serve as powerful pedagogical tools that carry knowledge across generations (Darder, 2015; Motta, 2011). Such cultural practices highlight a nonlinear mode of activist learning, lessons emerge through storytelling, collective memory, and the blending of past and future visions (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Indeed, the temporality of activist education is different: a flash of insight during a protest might only fully make sense later, or the spirit of past struggles may inform the present through shared memory (Choudry, 2015). Direct action thus invites a more expansive view of pedagogy, one that embraces the body and the nonlinear rhythms of social change alongside critical reflection.

Finally, the notion of radical hope ties together the pedagogical power of direct action. Jonathan Lear defines radical hope as a hope directed toward ‘a future goodness’ that one cannot yet fully grasp, beyond the horizon of current understanding (Lear, 2006: 103). In the context of activism, this translates to the resilient, visionary hope that sustains movements even when immediate outcomes are uncertain. bell hooks (2003: 110) likewise chooses hope over despair in order to continue the struggle. Direct action is fundamentally an exercise in radical hope. Every protest, sit-in or encampment is predicated on the belief that the world can be different, even if we cannot exactly imagine how. This hope is radical because it persists in the face of adversity and nourishes the courage to act without guarantees. In a practical sense, engaging in collective action teaches hope

by allowing participants to experience moments of empowerment and community. By organising prefigurative spaces that model cooperation and solidarity, activists practice hope by turning ideals into lived experience. Through direct action, learners cultivate radical hope as they witness that their collective agency can bring about change, however small. Taken together, these diverse critical perspectives show how theory and practice merge in protests and encampments, revealing the transformative learning that unfolds through collective action. Direct action is not an interruption of education but its extension, a legitimate and powerful form of learning. In protest spaces, the divide between theory and practice dissolves; participants become critical co-educators who collectively produce knowledge through praxis, directing reflection and action toward social transformation.

Camp Saoirse: a case study of learning through solidarity

In the summer of 2024, amid Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, students at UCC established a six-week encampment on the university's historic quad, naming it Camp Saoirse. Initiated by the student Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) group and supported by a broader coalition of students, staff, and allies, the encampment demanded that UCC divest from companies and institutional partnerships financially or materially complicit in Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, apartheid policies, and genocide in Gaza (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). Students also called for greater transparency regarding university investments and for a formal public condemnation of these actions by university leadership. The occupation of the central quadrangle, a space typically reserved for ceremonial use, was both symbolic and strategic. It disrupted the aesthetic neutrality of the university and transformed a site of institutional prestige into a site of moral questioning. Yet while the encampment functioned as political intervention, it also evolved into something else: a sustained, collective site of critical learning. Students lived in tents, organised daily demonstrations, hosted teach-ins and film screenings, engaged in negotiations with university management, and welcomed visitors from across the university community. What emerged was not simply protest but a living pedagogical space, one where learning unfolded through action, tension, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

Learning in the middle: messiness and democratic praxis

The most significant learning did not occur in public-facing moments alone, but in the internal life of the camp. Daily assemblies, late-night strategy discussions, disagreements about tactics, emotional exhaustion, and negotiation with institutional power all became sites of education. Students encountered, often for the first time, the complexity of democratic organising under pressure. Internal meetings were not always harmonious. One student reflected:

“The meetings were not always straightforward. What was good is that we took time to make sure everyone was heard and it was respectful. But it was also messy and of course there were differences of opinion on strategy etc!”

Such reflections matter. They reveal that Camp Saoirse was not a romanticised model of activism but a lived experiment in collective decision-making. Students learned that solidarity is not automatic; it requires patience, emotional labour, and continuous negotiation. They grappled authentically with core democratic questions: who speaks? who decides? how are disagreements resolved? how do we remain inclusive while acting strategically?

Tensions also emerged around informal authority, especially with one incident involving students from another university. Reflecting on an interaction with experienced activists, one student wrote:

“I wonder why we took the (other university) students’ suggestion so easily and followed every step they suggested, I guess some of us, at least I, did fall into some kind of false authority logic”.

Here, learning extended beyond critique of institutional power to examination of power within the movement itself. Students recognised how hierarchy can re-emerge even in spaces committed to horizontalism. Such moments illustrate praxis in Freirean terms: reflection and action intertwined, not as theory but as lived ethical struggle. Debates about structure versus full horizontal leadership further deepened this learning. As one participant noted:

“Infighting is inevitable in large groups... overall I think we had a good horizontal process but sometimes I wondered if having a more centralised committee would have stopped some egos from rising to the surface... there is a difference between those who are true leaders and those who are ego-centered! I do not think there is an easy answer for this”.

Rather than weakening the movement, such reflections demonstrate political maturity. Students were not simply demanding justice; they were interrogating how justice is organised. They learned that democratic practice is iterative, imperfect, and sustained through dialogue rather than certainty.

From participants to organisers

Camp Saoirse brought together students with varying levels of activist experience. Some had previously organised; others had never participated in protest. This diversity created an informal apprenticeship model in which learning occurred through participation. Many students began with logistical roles, managing supplies, maintaining the camp, preparing materials, welcoming visitors, before gradually taking on more visible responsibilities. Leadership was not confined to spokesperson roles; it included care work, coordination, and sustaining morale. These ‘small but essential tasks’ became entry points into collective agency. Students described the reality of consensus-based decision-making as demanding yet empowering. One participant reflected:

“Trying to let everyone say their piece and contribute towards the decision making process is time consuming and can feel frustrating at times, but I often came away from meetings also very glad ... I usually felt that every point worth considering was brought up and discussed by the group”.

Here, democracy shifts from abstraction to embodied experience. Students learned that participation requires listening, compromise, and endurance. They developed confidence, political fluency, and organisational competence in real time.

Experienced activists shared practical knowledge about media engagement, negotiation strategy, and protest safety. As one student described:

“They were important in providing intel from their previous experiences... and helped us on how we should behave from now on, especially in difficult situations for examples if the police arrived”.

Learning flowed in multiple directions. Newer participants brought ethical questions and fresh perspectives; experienced organisers contributed tactical insight. Together, this created a collaborative learning ecology grounded in action.

Care, wellbeing, and the role of staff

Sustaining the encampment required more than political strategy. It required care. Students lived outdoors during an exceptionally wet Irish summer. It did not stop raining for the entire time they were there. Fatigue, emotional strain, and constant exposure to distressing news from Gaza intensified the experience. In response, the camp formalised structures of support. A code of conduct was developed, and Wellbeing Officers were appointed from within the group, to monitor burnout and ensure respectful communication. One student reflected that discussions were generally led ‘with empathy’. A burnout roster was introduced so that core organisers could rest. Shared meals, late-night conversations, and even moments of joy, karaoke under tarpaulins, tea shared during storms, became practices of resilience. Students learned that sustaining justice work requires tending to emotional and relational wellbeing. Welcoming visitors with tea and a chat was also part of the experience. As a visitor, the author felt privileged to sometimes sit and talk to what she considered the most courageous, well-informed and kind students she had ever met. She sent an email to all UCC staff expressing this sentiment.

Supportive staff played an enabling role. Early in the encampment, a staff member facilitated a session on democratic decision-making, communication, and de-escalation strategies. This intervention strengthened student autonomy rather than directing it. A small number of staff also provided quiet, ongoing support, occasionally remaining physically present at the camp to ensure safety and solidarity. These interactions blurred traditional boundaries between

educator and activist. They raised ethical questions: how can staff support without controlling? how can institutions allow dissent without neutralising it? Such tensions became part of the pedagogical landscape.

Direct action as transformative learning

Camp Saoirse demonstrated that direct action can operate as a profound site of higher education learning. Students did not passively consume information about occupation or human rights; they engaged critically through organising, strategising, negotiating, and reflecting. Creative protest tactics, memorial graduation ceremonies, public art, tea stalls for dialogue, functioned as public pedagogy. Students became educators within civic space. They invited speakers, analysed corporate complicity, debated concessions offered by university management, and deliberated collectively about compromise and accountability. When UCC offered a partial concession mid-way through the occupation, students engaged in intense deliberation. Some feared losing momentum; others insisted that symbolic gestures without structural change were insufficient. Ultimately, they held firm until a student-led working group was agreed to review institutional ties and transparency processes. This moment reflected growing political sophistication: students were learning how to negotiate power while remaining accountable to principle.

By the end of the encampment, many participants described deep personal transformation. One student reflected that ‘it was the first time I truly understood what solidarity feels like... and that understanding came not from a book but from living it’. Even in debriefing circles after the camp closed, students critically assessed shortcomings and tensions. They acknowledged that the outcome was ‘not a clean win’, yet emphasised what they had learned about collective resilience, democratic practice, and the complexity of change. Camp Saoirse demonstrated that higher education can extend beyond formal curricula to encompass collective political action as a legitimate site of learning. It integrated theory and action, intellect and emotion, critique and care. Several identifiable turning points within the encampment illustrated how learning unfolded through transition rather than abstraction. The first turning point emerged during early internal conflicts, when the group confronted disagreement over tactics and informal authority; what began as frustration became an opportunity to critically

examine power within the movement itself. A second threshold moment occurred when university management offered a partial concession. The ensuing deliberations required students to weigh symbolic recognition against structural change, forcing them to articulate shared principles and long-term strategy. A third moment arose as exhaustion intensified during prolonged bad weather, prompting the creation of a burnout roster and wellbeing roles – a practical recognition that sustaining justice work requires intentional care. These moments were not peripheral to the encampment’s aims; they constituted its core pedagogical engine. In each case, students moved from reaction to reflection, from uncertainty to collective decision-making. Learning did not occur despite difficulty but through it.

Drawing the learning together

Camp Saoirse illustrates that learning through direct action is not incidental but structured around identifiable pedagogical processes. Students engaged in democratic deliberation under pressure, confronted informal hierarchies within their own movement, negotiated institutional power, developed organisational competence, and constructed systems of collective care. They moved from participation to agency, from frustration to strategic reflection, and from abstract solidarity to embodied political responsibility. The encampment also revealed that transformative learning in higher education can occur beyond formal curricula when students are permitted, and supported by at least some, to act collectively in response to injustice. Learning was cognitive, affective, relational, and political. It involved discomfort and disagreement as much as conviction. It required both courage and care. Most importantly, it demanded reflexivity: the willingness to examine power not only in the university or in global systems, but within the movement itself. Camp Saoirse therefore demonstrated that critical global justice education is not confined to classroom discourse. It can emerge through organised civic action where theory and practice converge, where students become political subjects rather than recipients of knowledge, and where institutions themselves become sites of democratic interrogation. Rather than existing outside education, the encampment deepened it.

Global movements as radical pedagogical spaces

A substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated that contemporary student movements function not merely as political interventions but as alternative pedagogical sites that extend and contest the boundaries of formal higher education (Choudry, 2015; Hall et al., 2012). Rather than operating at the periphery of academic life, such movements transform public and institutional spaces into arenas of collective inquiry, where students analyse power, debate strategy, negotiate difference, and experiment with democratic decision-making. In these contexts, streets, university quads, occupations, and protest camps become sites of praxis – understood in Freirean terms as the dialectical process of reflection and action directed toward social transformation (Freire, 1970: 36). Learning emerges through participation itself, not as an abstract exercise but as embodied engagement with structures of injustice.

This dynamic resonates with hooks's (1994: 14-15) conception of engaged pedagogy, which insists that education must address learners as whole human beings and integrate intellectual, emotional, and ethical dimensions of growth. Within movement spaces, learning is relational and dialogical rather than transmissive. Research across diverse contexts supports this framing. Studies of the anti-apartheid divestment campaigns demonstrate how student protest generated both political pressure and critical political education (Soule, 1997). More recent analyses of fossil fuel divestment activism show how students developed institutional literacy, strategic framing skills, and democratic organising competencies through sustained campaigning (Ayling and Gunningham, 2017). Similarly, scholarship on the global youth climate strikes identifies protest as a form of public pedagogy in which young people collectively constructed knowledge about climate science, governance failures, and intergenerational justice (Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). Across these cases, activism operates simultaneously as resistance and as education.

The #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (2015-2016) offers a particularly clear illustration of this pedagogical dimension. While initially mobilised around the demand for affordable higher education, the movement rapidly expanded into a broader critique of colonial epistemologies, structural racism, and neoliberal governance within universities (Mavunga, 2019: 88-98).

Campuses became spaces of sustained debate and collective theorising, where students organised assemblies, reading groups, teach-ins, and strategy forums that interrogated the reproduction of inequality in higher education. These practices constituted what Freire (1970: 125) terms *conscientização* - the development of critical consciousness through dialogue and struggle. Participants did not simply analyse injustice; they experimented with alternative organisational forms, negotiated horizontal decision-making processes, and practised prefigurative models of institutional transformation.

Parallel dynamics can be observed in the global youth climate strikes that began in 2018. By walking out of classrooms, millions of young people signalled that conventional schooling was insufficient to address the existential realities of climate breakdown. Protest became a ‘living classroom’ in which participants engaged with climate science, researched policy failures, articulated systemic critiques, and developed collective demands (Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). In several contexts, activists established Public Climate Schools – grassroots educational programmes centred on climate justice – further blurring the boundary between activism and curriculum. Importantly, emotional responses such as grief, anxiety, anger, and hope were recognised as integral to learning rather than peripheral to it. In line with Zembylas’s (2007: 1) pedagogy of discomfort, unsettling affective experiences were transformed into ethical and political commitment. Across these diverse movements, a common pattern emerges: activism generates pedagogical spaces in which students cultivate critical consciousness, organisational competence, and democratic agency through participation. Rather than existing outside education, such movements expand its meaning, demonstrating how collective struggle can operate as a form of radical learning grounded in praxis (Freire, 1970), relationality (hooks, 1994), and transformative political engagement (Choudry, 2015).

Historical movements offer further insight into how activism becomes pedagogy. During the anti-apartheid divestment campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, students across the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Europe, erected symbolic shantytowns, organised mock trials, and staged sustained sit-ins to challenge university complicity with South Africa’s apartheid regime. Soule’s (1997) analysis documents how these ‘shantytown protests’ spread rapidly,

dramatising the living conditions of Black South Africans and mobilising moral outrage. These performative actions fused symbolic representation with political critique, transforming campus quads into pedagogical spaces where participants and observers learned about racial injustice, global capitalism, and international solidarity. Contemporary reporting and subsequent scholarship emphasised their educational function, with shantytowns serving as visible, embodied critiques of apartheid that forced campus communities to confront institutional complicity (Soule, 1997).

These actions were also pedagogical in a practical sense. Students developed organising skills, learned to formulate strategy, build coalitions, negotiate with university administrations, and engage the media. Soule's analysis shows that the shantytown tactic diffused rapidly across US campuses between 1985 and 1990 as students monitored one another's actions and adopted tactics through indirect channels and shared identification, even where direct organisational ties were weak (Soule, 1997: 856-857; 861-862). In this way, protest repertoires circulated through peer learning and imitation, producing waves of mobilisation that turned campus space into a visible site of moral and political education (Soule, 1997: 859-860). Many participants later described such experiences as formative, shaping their political consciousness and ethical commitments. The legacy of anti-apartheid campus activism continues to inform contemporary divestment movements, including campaigns targeting fossil fuels, arms manufacturers, and corporations implicated in human-rights violations (Pappé, 2016).

Across these movements, certain pedagogical themes recur. Protest spaces become hubs of co-created knowledge, where learning emerges through dialogue, debate, storytelling, and shared labour. Leadership tends to be horizontal, emphasising mutual aid and inclusive decision-making. Emotions become pedagogical: anger illuminates injustice; grief exposes the human cost of violence; hope sustains collective struggle (hooks, 2003, Zembylas, 2007). Students become what Gramsci (1971) describes as organic intellectuals, producing theory grounded in lived struggle and shaping the ideological and ethical trajectories of their movements. These practices resonate strongly with traditions of popular education in the global South, where learning often unfolds

within social movements rather than formal institutions. Harney and Moten's (2013) concept of 'fugitive learning' captures this dynamic: marginalised communities cultivating undercommons of study outside institutional surveillance. Student movements frequently replicate such practices, building parallel pedagogical infrastructures, collective libraries, nightly discussion circles, shared research drives, kitchens, and care spaces that sustain both political and educational work. Such spaces challenge conventional definitions of legitimate knowledge and emphasise learning as embodied, relational, and insurgent (Harney and Moten, 2013; Andreotti, 2012).

These dynamics are especially visible in the current wave of Palestine solidarity organising. Across universities in Ireland, the UK, North America and beyond, encampments have functioned not only as protest sites but as deliberate spaces of political education. Reporting on Irish campus occupations, RTÉ noted that public talks formed 'just one of a series of "teach-ins" and "discussions" organised by students, addressing themes such as decolonisation, racial capitalism and international law' (O'Kelly, 2024). Participants framed their demands in explicitly legal and historical terms, describing Israeli policy as a 'violation of international law' and situating their activism within broader critiques of colonialism and militarism (O'Kelly, 2024). Reflections from US encampments similarly emphasised sustained engagement with 'the interconnected global and local scales of resistance against an increasingly transnational military-industrial complex' (Law and Political Economy Project, 2024).

Beyond formal teach-ins, students describe learning the ethics and practice of solidarity itself - negotiating allyship, addressing burnout, confronting representational politics, and managing the emotional toll of witnessing mass violence (McCloskey, 2025). In this sense, hooks's (2003) pedagogy of hope becomes tangible: protest operates as a refusal of despair and as an embodied commitment to imagining alternative futures. These movements therefore demonstrate that activism is not external to education but constitutive of it. Through collective struggle, students cultivate political literacy, ethical responsibility, and democratic agency, challenging universities to recognise direct action as a legitimate and generative form of learning.

Implications for CGJE

The pedagogical practices emerging from student-led direct action offer significant implications for critical global justice education. At its core, CGJE aims to cultivate critical understanding of global injustices and empower learners to act for social change. Yet mainstream educational structures often prioritise cognitive knowledge and abstract analysis, neglecting the embodied, affective, and political dimensions of learning. Movements such as #FeesMustFall, the climate strikes, and encampments like Camp Saoirse demonstrate the need for CGJE to re-engage with its radical, action-oriented roots. First, CGJE must broaden its understanding of legitimate learning spaces. Transformative learning often occurs beyond classrooms, in occupations, vigils, picket lines, and community spaces. These spaces foster forms of inquiry and reflection that cannot be replicated within conventional pedagogical settings. Recognising activism as an authentic site of learning requires educators to adopt more facilitative, collaborative roles and to value students and activists as co-educators.

Second, CGJE must foreground the emotional and ethical dimensions of learning. Movements such as #FeesMustFall and Camp Saoirse mobilise grief, anger, hope, and fear in ways that generate ethical insight and political clarity. Zembylas (2007) argues that engaging with discomfort enables learners to confront privilege, complicity, and structural violence. CGJE practitioners can support this by creating pedagogical spaces that hold emotional complexity and encourage sustained, uncomfortable reflection rather than closure or simplification. Third, student movements highlight the importance of co-created, horizontal learning. Protest camps rely on collective decision-making, mutual aid, and shared leadership, practices that align with Freire's dialogical model of education (Freire, 1970). CGJE can integrate such principles by incorporating popular education methodologies, student-led curriculum design, and collaborative action projects that bridge classroom and community. This challenges hierarchical 'banking' models of education and affirms learners' agency as political actors.

Fourth, CGJE can confront institutional complicity. Student movements often target universities themselves, questioning investments, partnerships, and governance practices that reproduce injustice. Camp Saoirse's challenge to UCC's ties with companies complicit in Israeli apartheid (B'Tselem,

2021) exemplifies how students scrutinise institutional ethics. For CGJE to remain credible, it must cultivate the willingness to interrogate its own location within systems of inequality and to take principled positions rather than adopting neutral technocratic stances. Fifth, CGJE could embrace the value of embodied and experiential learning. Activist spaces engage the whole self, body, senses, emotion and intellect. Sharing meals, organising vigils, crafting banners, negotiating with administrators and management, all are forms of learning. CGJE programmes can incorporate such experiences by supporting student activism, facilitating community organising opportunities, and legitimising direct action as a form of research or assessment. This requires institutional advocacy as well as creative pedagogical design.

Finally, CGJE must reclaim its radical imagination. Activist spaces are not only sites of resistance but of prefiguration, they model new forms of community, care, and democratic practice. Camp Saoirse, like many such encampments, rehearsed alternative futures in microcosm. As hooks (2003) reminds us, visionary pedagogy is rooted simultaneously in material conditions and in the imagination of new possibilities. CGJE must nurture this capacity to imagine otherwise and work collectively toward structural transformation. In sum, student movements demonstrate that education for global justice must be dialogical, embodied, relational, and politically engaged. They show what it looks like when learners become agents of change and when pedagogy aligns with struggle. For CGJE, the challenge is not simply to study these movements but to learn from them, to listen, to be unsettled, and to join the work of transformation.

Conclusion

The case of Camp Saoirse, situated within the longer histories and contemporary expressions of global student activism, demonstrates that direct action is not a disruption to education but one of its most powerful forms. Across movements, from anti-apartheid shantytowns to climate strikes, decolonial uprisings, and Palestine solidarity encampments, students have repeatedly transformed public space into pedagogical space. These actions blur the boundaries between protest and learning, theory and practice, intellect and emotion. They enact what Freire (1970) describes as praxis, the continual interplay of reflection and action through which people come to understand and transform their world. Camp Saoirse, like

the movements that precede it, shows how critical consciousness develops not only through texts or lectures but through embodied, relational, and risky participation in collective struggle.

This article has argued that such movements exemplify the radical pedagogical possibilities at the heart of critical global justice education. They offer students opportunities to co-create knowledge, practice democratic decision-making, engage in ethical deliberation, and cultivate solidarity across lines of difference. They nurture what hooks (2003) calls a pedagogy of hope, an insistence on imagining alternative futures even in moments of despair. They also expose the emotional labour of justice work, grief, rage, vulnerability, and exhaustion, but also joy, belonging, and courage. These dimensions of learning are too often marginalised within formal education, yet they are central to the development of engaged, ethical, and critically conscious citizens.

For educators and institutions, the implications are profound. If activism is a legitimate and vital form of learning, then universities must rethink how they understand their responsibilities to students, society, and global justice. This includes recognising protest as a site of knowledge production, supporting rather than policing student organising, and interrogating the university's own entanglements with systems of inequality. CGJE, in particular, must resist depoliticisation and reclaim its roots in transformative, action-oriented education. As the example of Camp Saoirse demonstrates, students are already doing this work. The question is whether institutions will learn from them. In an era of intersecting crises, war, ecological collapse, austerity, and rising authoritarianism, we urgently need educational practices that empower learners to analyse, imagine, and act. Direct action offers precisely such a pedagogy: experiential, collective, critical, and hopeful. Camp Saoirse stands as one small but powerful example of what education can become when students refuse passivity and step into their roles as agents of change. It invites all of us, educators, students, and institutions to consider how we might teach, learn, and live differently in pursuit of justice.

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RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS IN SAHARA REFUGEE CAMPS: AN ACTION- RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract: Inequalities and socio-educational disadvantages are a persistent feature of today's society (Vigo-Arrazola, 2024). Education systems are usually geared towards memorising content and results, and priority is given to performative production (Ball, 2003). Accordingly, critical pedagogy advocates for pedagogical practices focused on challenging the socio-political conditions that reproduce oppression and inequality (Giroux, 2025). Likewise, education must listen to the voices and legitimise the experiences and culture of minority groups (Freire, 1970), moving away from a Eurocentric and exclusionary view of northern countries (Stein, 2018). In this context, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the transformation of educational practices through the lens of critical pedagogy.

In particular, this article shares the outcome of a project that aimed to encourage school teachers in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices and move towards more participative, democratic and reflexive practices that empower and recognise all students (Pearce and Wood, 2019). The Chair of Solidarity and Global Citizenship at the University of Zaragoza provided training to teachers in the camps to include social justice and equity in school projects. To further this objective, the Chair collaborates with different stakeholders, such as the 'Studies in Peace' association of Spain. In order to enhance the quality of education in the camps, the association requested the assistance of researchers from the Chair. Together, the Chair, the Sahrawi Education Ministry and Sahrawi teachers initiated participatory action-research (Wood and Smith, 2018) with the aim of

encouraging school teachers in the camps to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices, so as to break with cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2006).

Using a qualitative approach, the participatory action-research involved experts from the Ministry of Education, primary school teachers, counsellors and researchers from the university travelling to the camps twice a year and maintaining contact with the other participants via WhatsApp. Together, they reflected on teaching practices to propose and implement a training plan focused on developing students' needs and interests (Jeffrey, 2006). While this reflection was ongoing, the teachers put their newly acquired teaching skills into practice, and the researchers carried out further training and provided tools for joint reflection.

In this way, the educational administration in the camps has committed itself to introducing inclusive methodologies into teacher training to transform educational practices, thereby promoting critical thinking and autonomy among students, while fostering the development of their sociocultural identity within global society (Gramsci, 2006). In doing so, this research is helping educational policymakers to rethink their policies. Furthermore, the camp's administration intends to share these reflections in its work with other educators in the continent of Africa.

Key words: Global Citizenship Education; Participatory Action-Research; Social Justice; Refugee Education; Transformative Education.

Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2025: 7) recommends 'making clear plans to improve learning' as a strategy for African countries to improve learning levels in the first years of education. Through its 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), the United Nations also acknowledges the importance of education as a vehicle for the development of people and societies. To this end, it is necessary to promote strategies and training plans that improve the teaching abilities of primary school teachers and bring about a shift towards a pedagogical approach that is more centred on educational inclusion and social justice and leaves no one behind (Ibid.). In this context, the

purpose of this article is to contribute to the transformation of educational practices through the lens of critical pedagogy. In particular, this article shares the outcomes of a project that aimed to encourage school teachers in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria to reflect on and reconstruct their educational practices and move towards more participative, democratic and reflexive practices that empower and recognise all students (Pearce and Wood, 2019). These practices promote the participation of all the students, giving voice to everyone and taking into account students' own experiences of life (Jeffrey, 2006) and reflecting on their social reality (Giroux and Paul, 2023). A participative and collaborative project was delivered in partnership with teachers in the schools to promote further processes of change and innovation from a perspective of education for social transformation. The research is part of the *Transformational Schools Project* funded by the Zaragoza Provincial Council, through what was originally the Cooperation Chair and is now the Solidarity and Global Citizenship Chair at the University of Zaragoza.

Context to the research: education in the Sahrawi refugee camps

The Sahrawis were nomadic tribes who lived in Bidan, who are most prominent in Mauritania and Western Sahara, in north-west Africa. The borders of the colony known as Spanish Sahara were not established until the arrival of the Spanish colonial power in 1884 (Barreñada, 2022). Spanish colonial rule continued until the Tripartite Treaty of Madrid of 14 November 1975 (United Nations, 1975) and the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara, as a result of which the Sahrawi people were obliged to seek exile in the Hamada desert, in the province of Tindouf in southern Algeria. This led to the creation of the Sahrawi refugee camps, where today more than 200,000 people live, surviving on the basis of humanitarian aid (Hassena-Ahreyem, Pérez-Chávez and Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2023). Currently, the Spanish state's relationship with the authorities of the Sahrawi camps is marked by two opposing sides. On the one hand, Spain is not supporting the autonomy of the Sahrawi people, and, on the other hand, it supports the camps through priority areas of cooperation (MFAEUC, 2024), which include aid to the Sahrawi refugee camps. After fifty years of exile, the Sahrawi refugee camps have developed a level of social and political organisation that makes life slightly easier for the people that live there. The health and education systems stand out among other institutions and structures (Vinagrero

Ávila, 2020). One of the institutional priorities is education, with almost 100 percent enrolment in primary education. However, as Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) points out, there is a paradox in the camps: education is seen as a tool for empowerment, but at the same time there is a feeling of frustration among young people due to the limited possibilities of returning to their country of origin in conditions of freedom and democracy.

The school system is organised into three levels: early childhood education from 3 to 6 years-old; primary education, from 6 to 11 years old; and compulsory secondary education, from 12 to 16 years old. Primary education, which is taught in schools known as *madradas*, is compulsory. In this way, the educational administration in the camps has managed to ensure that practically everyone can read and write. Most of the teachers are women, as happens in many different parts of the world due to the feminisation of the teaching and care professions. Initially, until the 2019-20 academic year, pre-service teacher education was carried out in the *Escuela Nacional 27 de febrero*, a school located in a complex some distance away from the *wilayas* (settlements), which made it very difficult for young women to do their teacher training there. As a result, many teachers do not have even the initial level of pedagogical training, and more, properly trained teachers are required. To address this issue, a teacher training college was established in the 2020-21 academic year in each *wilaya* to ensure that there is a supply of teachers with the necessary teaching skills.

In most schools in the camps, the teaching methodology revolves around the memorisation of curricular content without taking into account the context or the everyday experiences of the students. Some of the teaching materials come from Algeria, and therefore unrelated to the context of the camps. Despite efforts made by the authorities, the schools have almost no teaching materials or digital connections. The limited resources available to them make educational innovation difficult and have a considerably negative effect on learning and teaching processes (Sidahmed Mohamed-Fadel, 2025). The teachers receive advice from advisers or inspectors, who carry out supervisory functions, particularly guidance and support. In recent years, one of the main concerns of the educational authorities and of teachers themselves is the poor performance of the children at both primary

and secondary education and the increase in absenteeism, especially in the later stages of compulsory secondary education.

In this scenario, the teachers at the camps often wonder how they can improve their teaching to provide high-quality education for their wide diversity of students, with a broad range of abilities (Azorin and Ainscow, 2017). To achieve this goal, educational actions for social transformation are required, which must be based on participation, democracy and social justice. Education of this kind will promote critical, analytical and creative thought (Blasco-Serrano, Dieste, and Coma, 2019) in a context in which it is necessary to maintain critical positions and hope for a better future, looking towards a horizon in which the Sahrawis can return to their homeland, with decent jobs and better living conditions.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework applied in this research sought to understand education as a critical and transformative practice, which is capable of questioning the structures of inequality and of promoting processes of reflection and action that strengthen teacher training and the construction of committed global citizens, especially in contexts of vulnerability and resistance.

Transformative education by taking a critical pedagogy approach

Social and educational inequalities and disadvantages remain a persistent feature of society today (Vigo-Arrazola, 2024). The prevailing globalised neo-liberal society (Torres-Santomé, 2019) has created an educational system that is aimed purely at achieving individual success and enhancing productivity (Ball, 2003), but without questioning and reflecting one's own educational practice (Giroux and Paul, 2023). As a result, educational systems are geared towards the memorisation of content and priority given to performativity. The objective of these performative teaching practices is to achieve goals related exclusively to academic performance, improving the students' future possibilities and maintaining a privileged status quo. Therefore, to transform their educational practices it is crucial to encourage teachers to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their students as part of their professional transformation (Ball, 2003).

With this in mind, our project sought to promote transformative education through dialogue and interaction, setting aside traditional, more hierarchical teaching methods (Freire, 1970). In this way, horizontal relationships were established within schools to create a joint, shared vision of the school in which the participation of all is a fundamental principle. The reciprocal exchange of ideas allowed us to discover new perspectives and knowledge while providing value to challenge the socio-political conditions that maintain oppression and inequality among populations (Giroux, 2025).

Within this framework, education is an ideal tool for promoting emancipatory social transformation (Giroux, 2024) and supporting processes that are committed to beliefs, values and teacher identity which take priority over performative output (Ball, 2003). From this perspective, teachers can work together with students to raise awareness of situations of oppression by promoting practices of social transformation and contributing to an emancipatory project (Giroux, 2022). Teachers should go beyond a neutral transmission of knowledge to promote critical awareness and motivate students to face unfairness. In this way, teachers can encourage their students to become agents of change and activists in the fight for equality, fairness and democratic participation in the classroom and wider society (Freire, 1970). Therefore, in primary education, children can learn through projects where they reflect on how to care for the environment or how to restore their own culture.

Similarly, from a critical and citizenship approach, education should teach students to have awareness about how local and global conditions influence their lives, to learn about their history and their day-to-day experiences. Therefore, it is important to take into account the history and culture of the students, placing challenges in the context and experiences of the real world (Bourn, 2021). In this way, knowledge empowers students to recognise uncertainty and questioning as part of lifelong learning and can give them the courage to fight against despair. Cultivated hope, therefore, allows learners to analyse social and economic structures and think of alternatives for a better future (Dolan, 2025). In the context of the refugee camps, a pedagogy of hope not only provides the opportunity to collaborate in social change, but as McMonagle (2017) points out, if Western Sahara regained its territory with autonomy, young people would have

the skills and qualifications to build a free and democratic country. To that end, transformative education must engage students through research, reflection and questioning with enquiries and problems related to situations in the local and global reality of the students. (Jeffrey, 2006; Bourn, 2021; Giroux and Paul, 2023).

Student participation and voices from a decolonial perspective

Education must listen to the voices and legitimise the experiences and culture of minority groups (Freire, 1970), moving away from the Eurocentric, exclusive vision of countries in the global North (Stein, 2018). Teaching practices that take into account the voices of students and the dialogue between them are regarded as powerful tools for transforming the way they view reality and the world (Freire, 1970). When students' voices are present, an atmosphere of respect and trust is created and schools become more relevant for students' lives (Pearce and Wood, 2019). Along these lines, it is important that teachers are open to incorporating student participation and valuing students' voices when listening to them. This requires a variety of participatory activities, as well as establishing a dialogue between teachers and students (Messiou et al., 2024). This dialogue should take place within non-hierarchical spaces that minimise resistance and are enriched by diverse voices and perspectives, because student voices are highly sensitive to their local contexts (Pearce and Wood, 2019). In this sense, student voice initiatives aim to empower all students, with the broader purpose of fostering social change that will transform education (Ibid; Messiou et al., 2024).

Moreover, it is important to note that early career teachers often experience feelings of insecurity and uncertainty when initially engaging with student voices. However, these feelings tend to diminish over time as the process encourages reflection on practice, fostering collaboration and dialogue between teachers and students (Ibid). In summary, student participation is not just symbolic; it is genuinely empowering, as students develop their own sense of agency, enabling them to contribute actively to the pursuit of a better future (Bourn, 2021), and enabling the student to feel capable of bringing about change (Menzie-Ballantyne and Ham, 2023). From this perspective, it is necessary to consider children's participation rights in order to recognise and validate their cultural identities (Blanchet-Cohen, Cooper and Doel-Mackaway, 2023). This suggests that decolonial research requires scholars in the global North to examine

their own positionality when conducting research on the global South. The aim is to challenge the colonial structures that perpetuate Northern supremacy and affirm that colonised populations are not inferior and can contribute to the democratisation of scientific knowledge (Eriksen, 2022).

In this project, it was essential to analyse our own cultural conceptions about the teaching practices and the social context in which it was taking place, so as not to impose a Eurocentric, reductionist vision of the social and educational reality of the camps. Hence, the importance of carrying out joint research processes with local teachers, within which participatory action-research emerged as an adequate tool for social transformation.

Participatory action-research as a tool for professional development

Collaboration and commitment between professional researchers and agents from the local organisations, territory or community are inherent parts of participative action-research (Greenwood, 2000). This meant that the goal of the research was not so much to generate information and knowledge for other academics, but to promote change that is rational, fair (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2015), democratic and sustainable for the Sahrawi teachers and the educational community in which they work (Ibid.). This means that participatory action-research is a political, socially engaged, democratic action, based on horizontal relations, with real participation, avoiding the traditional hierarchies between investigators and those being investigated (Eikeland, 2012). Decisions and responsibilities are negotiated and organised to meet the needs and safeguard the interests of the community, although the work of the professional researchers centres on research strategies and methodologies, while the researchers from the community focus more on local pedagogical knowledge.

As Greenwood (2000) explains, the action research process is valid when it is accepted and shared by local participants. If these participants take ownership of the results and trust their value and usefulness, the research is valid although the social, economic and political context significantly influences research decision-making. Therefore, research is a social act involving both individual and social action and is constructed within a social and historical context. In this case,

the context is complex: a refugee camp with an ongoing armed conflict and political abandonment by the country that once colonised it.

Research process

The participatory action-research process began with a request in 2020 from the Asociación ‘Estudios en Paz’ (Studies in Peace), an association whose objective is to host Sahrawi children in families in the Spanish region of Aragón to enable the children to study there. Working together with the Sahrawi delegate of this association, an assessment was made of the needs of Sahrawi teachers in terms of pedagogical training. As part of this assessment process, written and audiovisual information about the situation of the Sahrawi people was reviewed (Bowen, 2009) particularly the educational system in the camps. After making a shared diagnosis with the Sahrawi educational community, a trip was made to the camps. During this ten-day visit, a representative of the camps’ Ministry of Education was interviewed and three focus groups were organised, involving 18 civil servants from the Ministry, school headteachers and counsellors / inspectors.

Visits were also made to different early-childhood, primary and secondary schools in which informal conversations were held with numerous teachers, who shared their experiences, beliefs, values and opinions about education in the camps. During this trip, we assessed the teachers’ training needs in terms of pupil-centred methodologies and didactics, school organisation and tutoring. Initially, situations of mistrust and even resistance arose from the part of the Sahrawi teachers towards the Spanish researchers. A process of dialogue and collaboration was therefore necessary between all participants, as well as a demonstration of humility and long-term commitment to the Sahrawi population. After identifying and understanding the particular problems and context, the next stage was to plan the teacher-training action. This involved five researchers from the university, the president of the Asociación Madrasa (the association that promotes the scheme by which Sahrawi children can study secondary education in Spain), the Sahrawi delegate of the ‘Studies in Peace’ association and three members of the Sahrawi educational community.

After negotiating various options and strategies, it was decided that the best plan was to begin the training programme in the *wilaya* of Smara, the largest

wilaya with the most complex administrative and training structures. The Sahrawi participants believed that if the project worked in Smara, it could work in any *wilaya*. It was therefore decided to offer training and advice sessions to the teachers from a primary school in the *wilaya* of Smara, in which both the school counsellor and head teacher were involved in the action-research project, and also to the head teachers and counsellors from the other schools in this *wilaya*. A sense of belonging was built around efforts to improve the education system as a means of fostering better relationships between stakeholders (Bradbury, 2025), which was reinforced with each trip.

A training programme was set up to teach primary school teachers about participative teaching methods and strategies that were both pupil and creativity centred (Jeffrey, 2006). The aim was to enable these teachers to reflect on their educational actions and reconstruct their educational practices. For the local participants, it was vital that the methodologies should focus on learning life skills and be adapted to the specific context of the camps, in such a way as to reflect the Sahrawi identity (Kemmis, 1993; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2015). Similarly, as regards the activities and resources proposed, the local teachers stressed the importance of learning to create teaching materials and resources with simple, recycled materials available in the camps, so as to ensure that they could be used by the Sahrawi teachers so that both the learning and the development of the practices could be economically sustainable over time. For this reason, the teaching materials and proposals were designed in accordance with the needs and demands of their specific context (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011), with for example the use of recycled cardboard and items such as plastic bottles and bottle tops.

During the project, the researchers from Zaragoza University travelled to the camps twice a year in Spring and Autumn. On these field trips, training was offered to teachers at the camps and they were given support with the application of the new methodologies they learnt in classroom and school settings. In order to immerse themselves in Sahrawi culture and education, the researchers stayed with the teachers' families in their homes. Over the rest of the year, the process continued with occasional training sessions and continuous interaction through digital media such as WhatsApp or YouTube. The planning of these training

sessions and meetings was flexible and dynamic to be able to adapt to the decisions taken by the participants and the needs identified on the ground (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2015).

Some students from the education faculty of the University of Zaragoza were also involved in project delivery. Students specialising in educational counselling on the Master's Degree in Secondary Teacher Training and those taking the subject of 'Education in the Knowledge Society' as part of the primary education degree took part in the creation of teaching materials and resources in line with the requests and needs of the teachers from the camps. During the entire participatory action-research process, from 2021 to the present, a field diary was recorded and questionnaires were used to gather feedback from participating teachers. This allowed the information to be analysed throughout the process of implementation of the training in order to improve the teaching practices and evaluate the participatory action-research process itself.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the data gathered in the field has enabled us to reflect on the process of improving teaching skills and to redirect the training activities, so as to adapt them to the needs and interests of the participants, considering their context and identity (Bourn, 2021). The culture, opinions and interest of the local teachers were a key factor in the development of this action-research process (Blanchet-Cohen, Cooper and Doel-Mackaway, 2023). After taking into account the reflections of all participants, the research highlighted how teachers were rethinking teaching practices and developing a critical pedagogy for educational transformation.

Perception of the usefulness of action research by Sahrawi teachers

The results indicate that in general, although some teachers were sceptical and even distrustful of the researchers at the beginning, by considering and respecting their culture and context, a climate of trust and respect was achieved between the teachers and researchers, allowing for reflection on teaching practices (Messiou et al., 2024, Greenwood, 2000). As a result, all the participants jointly created and helped to develop the objectives of the action research for educational change. All of this, involved processes of reflection, joint deconstruction and construction of

knowledge, which encouraged teachers to ask questions about their professional practice and how it connected with the framework of critical pedagogy. As one teacher puts it: 'it has been more like a peer-to-peer relationship; we have all been like students' (Teacher 5, reflection session, December 2025).

By enabling teachers to reflect on their practice the action research enhanced control over their development, improved their teaching skills, and raised their awareness of the theories on which their teaching practice was based, and of the limitations and opportunities inherent in it (Hernández and Álvarez, 2018). The participating teachers considered that the training they received had helped them improve their professional work as teachers and encourage reflection and questioning among students (Giroux and Paul, 2023). So, in the discussion sessions, they were asked if they would like to continue training and experimenting new methodologies, to which many responded that 'they would like to continue training because the materials work very well for them' (Field diary, February 2023). One teacher similarly stated after one of the training sessions: 'this training session has been very useful to help me change the children's routine and acquire comprehension and thinking skills' (Teacher 6, questionnaire, February 2023). Another teacher emphasised that the way she taught her classes was changing: 'For me, it has been helpful for explaining [syllabus contents] and for improving my teaching abilities' (Teacher 12, questionnaire, February 2023). In this sense, it was observed that in the training and reflection sessions, most of the teachers wished to continue with the project, so, the Sahrawi teachers perceive the action research process as useful and have validated it (Greenwood, 2000).

In order to involve more teachers in the teacher training, the Sahrawi educational authorities have proposed training lead teams in each of the *wilayas*, so that all the teachers can receive the training and pedagogical transformation can be carried out at a general level in all the schools in the camps (Reflection session, February 2025). The aim is to continue working on the project with the rest of the *wilayas* using face-to-face training and working groups during the visits to the camps by researchers from the University of Zaragoza, and online sessions during the rest of the year. There is, therefore, an ongoing process of transformation in the pedagogical values and culture of the educational

community (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003) through participative action-research in which the priorities are reflection and joint creation of pedagogical knowledge (Greenwood, 2000). Moreover, as a result of our work with the teachers and their institutions, the educational authorities have proposed sharing these reflections with other educators in African states. This is a clear sign that they value the changes in the structure and form of the educational system in the Sahrawi camps

Rethinking teaching practice

Throughout this process, the teachers have been questioning and rethinking their teaching practice. As one teacher put it: ‘this training programme does various positive things. It has helped me in the way I explain things and in making the class simpler for my students and also for rethinking the way I use teaching materials and how to make them’ (Teacher 5, February 2023). Along similar lines, a teacher explained during a work session: ‘applying the proposed methodologies will help me develop my creative and explanatory capacities and help me pass on the knowledge in a straightforward, comfortable way’ (Teacher 1, February 2023). Another teacher said:

“I have to follow the steps that I have been learning during this training programme so as to enhance the creativity of the students and improve the transmission of knowledge by making it easier, so that the students understand better” (Teacher 4, February 2023).

Following their engagement with the action research, the teachers have highlighted the importance of putting the focus on students, on their interests and their needs and not so much on the content set out in the textbooks, so as to move away to some extent from performative outputs (Ball, 2003). This was explained by a counsellor in a focus group session: ‘we must focus on their interests, their experiences, so as to discover each child’s personality and find out individual differences between them’ (Reflection session, February 2024).

Furthermore, during the group discussion sessions with the teachers, it was observed how after using the proposed teaching materials, they thought about and developed their use by proposing other possible pedagogical uses for the same

materials (Field diary, February 2024). For example, in the case of one of the teaching materials presented for working on fractions, the teachers proposed using it for recognising angles and even for identifying students' emotional state. In another example, one of the teachers designed her own games on the basis of ideas worked on in the training sessions: 'starting with a board game in which the children had to make mathematical calculations to pass the tests, the teacher designed other versions of the game to include other types of calculations or problem-solving based on their culture and day-to-day experiences' (Field diary, November 2023). The teachers similarly took a fresh look at how to motivate their students, what to do to reach them, working towards an effective learning process for all the children (Jeffrey, 2006) and ensuring that they identify with the school (Gramsci, 2006; Pearce and Wood, 2019). These ideas were recorded in the field diary after a discussion session in February 2024 with teachers and counsellors.

Another concern frequently raised by the teachers was their wish to attend effectively to all the students in the class, given their different learning and skills levels: 'they asked to learn how to work with different knowledge levels' (Reflection session, February 2024). In this way, the teachers were carrying out processes of reflection, deconstruction and construction of knowledge in a continuous ongoing way and through dialogue, so carrying out a strict examination of 'the self', which to some extent enabled them to identify and question local and global structures of inequality, as well as think of alternatives for a better future (Dolan, 2025). This encouraged teachers to start asking questions about their own professional practices, to move towards a more inclusive approach that is more committed to the transformation of their educational and social context (Freire, 1970). Moreover, a secondary school head, who also attended the work session with the primary school teachers stated that 'we need the same for secondary education' (Secondary school head teacher, March 2023). On the basis of all the different opinions put forward, it seemed that the teachers became aware of the need for reflection about their teaching practices (Andreotti, 2006; Giroux, 2025), so coming closer to a desired educational transformation which would enable their pupils to learn skills that will build a better future and support the reconstruction of their country if they are allowed to return home (McMonagle, 2017).

Developing teaching practice for educational transformation

Teaching practice is advancing towards greater interaction with the students, placing more trust in the boys and girls. Despite living in a very hierarchical society and school system, the teachers are turning towards a more horizontal relationship between students and teachers (Freire, 1970) and in this way are facilitating the empowerment of their students through decision-making and participation activities (Tarusarira, 2017; Pearce and Wood, 2019). Over the course of this process, which has now lasted several years, the teachers have been incrementally applying different pedagogical ideas at different times and situations in the classroom, trying to make small changes in their professional *modus operandi* towards teaching practices that are more centred on students' interests and involve greater interaction with them (Vigo-Arazola, 2024). The teachers have broadened their knowledge and begun shifting towards the desired transformation in their teaching practice, creating new activities and resources addressing their practices towards an approach more focused on intergenerational interaction and dialogue, without hierarchies (Pearce and Wood, 2019).

Teachers sent us videos via WhatsApp which illustrated the way they were using what they had learnt in the classroom and how they were going one step further by creating their own materials. Another positive outcome was that the teachers proposed creating libraries of interactive resources in each school in order to share resources to promote reflection, critical thinking, and motivation in their students (Jeffrey, 2006). This proposal has also been welcomed and accepted by the educational authorities given the empowerment of the teachers particularly in designing their own resources and bringing about a pedagogical transformation in the schools (Giroux, 2022). These resources are being designed and created jointly amongst all the teachers with recycled materials and in accordance with their Sahrawi and African identity. As one teacher told us: 'we can suggest our own teaching materials or projects, because the textbook is not very useful to us, as it does not include our animals or our culture' (Teacher, pedagogic session, December 2025). Therefore, the action-research project has helped to avoid the adoption of a Eurocentric, westernised approach to education (Stein 2018; Gaynor, 2023) that tends to dominate some training and research projects.

All of the teachers and educational institutions engaged in the project have started to promote more student-centred pedagogical methods and greater interaction with the students (Vigo-Arrazola, 2024), although performative goals can still be detected in these practices, in the system and in the teachers (Ball, 2003). The pedagogical culture of the camps has a hierarchical structure based on the reproduction and memorisation of content. As a secondary school teacher explained: 'I have revised for the exam we have coming up soon with games in which I include questions similar to those in the exam and this helps the children with revision and learning' (Field diary, secondary school, March 2023). Similarly, some teachers insisted on learning techniques and strategies to improve memorisation (Field diary, March 2023). Although teaching practices had changed and were more based on students' interests, they maintained practices modelled on individual and competitive school performance and good grades.

This action-research proposal could therefore be considered to have achieved its objective of encouraging teachers at the camps to reflect on and redesign their teaching practices and also to go further, promoting more profound and sustainable changes that empower their students (Pearce and Wood, 2019) inside and outside the sphere of action. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go and we must continue to work hand in hand, researchers and teachers together.

Conclusion

In view of all the above, it would seem that reflecting on professional teaching practice can help teachers control their own progress, improve their teaching skills, increase their knowledge and discover the limitations and opportunities of their teaching practices (Hernández and Álvarez, 2018). Likewise, from this perspective, teachers working together with students can draw attention to situations of oppression, promoting practices of social transformation and contributing to an emancipatory project (Giroux, 2022). The work carried out in this action-research helped to visualise the start of an educational transformation as the teachers are taking the lead in this project, to the extent of organising, by themselves, on-the-job training for other fellow teachers. This suggests that these practices could go beyond critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2022; 2024), becoming increasingly more like emancipatory practices (Celorio, 2020). However, a long

journey still lies ahead before this goal can be fully achieved and this will require the right structural conditions to facilitate the process.

From a development education perspective, collaborating with refugees operating on the margins of society in the global South, is both a vindication and exemplar of the sector's radical pedagogical process. Development education is designed to empower educators and learners, particularly in situations of oppression and dispossession. There has been very little engagement by the development education sector with refugees in the kind of context set out in this article. This project may indicate to researchers and educators in the development education sector how the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' can be effectively implemented to enhance education provision to and the social transformation of refugees.

In addition, by adopting an action-research approach, it is important to remember the complexity of the social system at the refugee camps, with consequent limitations in terms of the opportunities for teachers to interact with other contexts, given the difficulty of leaving the settlements and the poor digital links. This means that this particular context is very different from other contexts that might be explored in action-research projects (Kemmis, 1993). Looking towards the future, it is hoped that the research project and the enhanced pedagogical skills which it has generated within the camps will enable the Sahrawis to escape their refugee status, so ensuring they have access to all of their social and economic rights. Within this framework, transformative education can help educate future generations who are critical of their situation to allow them to reflect on power structures that perpetuate inequality, to enable the Sahrawi community to bring about social and educational transformation. Moreover, from a critical and transformative perspective (Rodríguez-Izquierdo and García-Bayón, 2024) and as a future line of research, it would also be interesting to assess the impact of the action-research project on the participating university students, when they collaborate in the creation of teaching materials and resources for the teachers from the camps.

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WHEN SCHOOL FAILS, MOTHERS TEACH: CRITICAL HOME-BASED EDUCATION IN URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: In many impoverished urban communities across the global South, formal schooling systems have persistently failed to deliver equitable and contextually relevant education. Within the field of development education (DE), such failures raise critical questions about where learning takes place and whose knowledge is recognised. This article examines how low-income mothers enact forms of critical, home-based development education when institutional provision collapses. Using a qualitative thematic discourse analysis of secondary sources, including NGO (non-governmental organisation) reports, media coverage, testimonial videos, and peer-reviewed literature published between 2019 and 2024, this article explores how maternal pedagogical practices are represented and enacted in urban poor contexts. The analysis reveals that mothers operate as de facto educators, transforming domestic spaces into sites of learning grounded in care, emotional labour, and critical awareness. These practices cultivate social literacy, resilience, and agency despite profound structural constraints. Drawing on Freirean pedagogy and feminist theory, the article reframes the home as a legitimate site of development education praxis, challenging deficit narratives that marginalise informal learning. By centring maternal voices, the article contributes to debates on development education by demonstrating how critical consciousness and collective learning emerge beyond formal institutions, and by calling for policy recognition of educational practices already thriving in marginalised homes.

Key words: Critical Pedagogy; Discourse Analysis; Mothers; Social Literacy; Urban Poverty.

Introduction

Development education has long emphasised critical consciousness, social justice, and the transformation of unequal structures through learning rooted in lived experience (Freire, 1970). Yet, in many low-income urban contexts across the global South, formal schooling systems increasingly fail to fulfil these aims. Rather than empowering marginalised learners, education systems often reproduce inequality through exclusionary practices, chronic under-resourcing, and curricula detached from everyday realities (Gadsden and Dixon-Román, 2016; Gil and Johnson, 2021). Within development education debates, this raises a fundamental question: where does education occur when institutions fail, and who becomes responsible for sustaining learning under conditions of structural neglect? In such contexts, educational labour frequently shifts from public institutions into the private sphere of the home, where mothers assume central yet largely unrecognised pedagogical roles. Dominant policy discourse frames this shift through technocratic concepts such as ‘parental involvement’ or ‘learning support’, obscuring the political, emotional, and intellectual labour embedded in maternal teaching practices (Antony-Newman, 2019). From a development education perspective, these framings risk erasing forms of critical pedagogy that emerge informally within households facing poverty, crisis, and marginalisation (hooks, 2014; Calderon-Berumen, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic made this double standard glaringly apparent. With schools closed, education was not suspended but relocated. In low-income urban areas across the global South examined in this article, mothers took on expanded roles as *de facto* educators, filling multiple functions as tutors, emotional anchors, caregivers, and learning facilitators under immense stress (Andrew et al., 2020; Chmielewska et al., 2021; Maloiy and Wawire, 2021). Yet instead of recognition, many faced criticism for their children’s ‘learning loss’, with media and institutional narratives often framing parents, particularly mothers, as failing to maintain educational progress at home (Chmielewska et al., 2021; Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024). The dominant discourse did not account for the harsh realities they navigated, nor the creativity and care they brought to the task of educating under duress (Murray, 2021). This framing not only misrecognises their efforts but obscures the pedagogical agency and resilience that exist within conditions of chronic scarcity.

These patterns of educational neglect cannot be understood as isolated failures or temporary disruptions. Rather, they reflect what scholars increasingly describe as a meta-crisis: the convergence of economic precarity, public sector retrenchment, democratic erosion, and social reproduction crises that collectively undermine the capacity of states to provide equitable education. In many urban contexts, decades of neoliberal reform have weakened public education through austerity, privatisation, and the outsourcing of social risk to households. As state responsibility recedes, the burden of educational continuity is disproportionately transferred onto women, intensifying the gendered dimensions of crisis and care. Within this meta-crisis, maternal pedagogical labour emerges not as an exception, but as a structurally produced response to compounded systemic failure.

Critical educational literature has begun to address this erasure. Scholars like bell hooks (2014) and Calderon-Berumen (2021) have challenged narrow definitions of education and argued for an expanded view of learning that occurs outside formal structures. Research shows that in many urban poor households, mothers engage in teaching practices rooted in oral traditions, intergenerational storytelling, and moral guidance (Boutte and Johnson Jr, 2013; Ali et al., 2022). These practices are not informal in a lesser sense but are embedded with cultural knowledge and political consciousness. As bell hooks (1994: 91) writes, they represent ‘education as the practice of freedom’. Moreover, the discourse around ‘supporting parents’ is deeply shaped by class and race. Antony-Newman (2019) points out that educational policy often privileges middle-class parenting models that align with institutional norms. Working-class and racialised mothers are frequently viewed as lacking not because they do less, but because their practices deviate from dominant expectations. This constitutes a form of symbolic violence, erasing their educational labour and maintaining the fiction that legitimate teaching only happens in schools.

This article builds on such critical insights by conducting a discourse analysis of four types of secondary data: NGO reports on home learning during school closures; media articles on maternal roles in education; testimonial videos capturing the realities of mothers teaching under strain; and peer-reviewed literature on informal pedagogies in the global South. These materials are examined not only for their content, but for the discursive frameworks they reflect

or resist. The core research questions are: how are mothers in low-income urban contexts constructed within public discourse as educators? And how do they assert and enact their pedagogical agency in the face of structural neglect?

Accordingly, this article addresses two research questions: how are low-income mothers in urban contexts discursively constructed as educators within public, media, and institutional narratives? And how do maternal home-based pedagogical practices embody principles of development education, including critical consciousness, agency, and learning through lived experience? By centring the often-overlooked educational work of mothers, this article challenged deficit narratives that cast domestic spaces as educational voids. Instead, it reframes them as generative sites of learning, resistance, and care. In doing so, it aligns with a growing body of critical research (hooks, 2014; Archibald, Graham and Larsen, 2021; Calderon-Berumen, 2021) calling for a radical rethinking of education, one that honours the resourcefulness, relationality, and resistance embodied in the everyday teaching practices of women navigating the margins.

Literature review and theoretical framework

This article drew on critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and discourse analysis to reframe the home, particularly in low-income urban settings, as a vital and legitimate site of education. It challenges technocratic and deficit-based models of parental involvement, aligning with policy and scholarly calls to recognise informal, community-based learning shaped by care, cultural knowledge, and lived experience. As Gaynor (2016) argues, rethinking where and how education happens is essential in contexts where formal schooling often fails to reflect everyday realities. Building on Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of education as a practice of liberation, the article highlights *conscientização* (critical consciousness) as central to maternal pedagogies at the margins. Freire's dialogical model and reflection - action praxis resonates with the everyday teaching practices of mothers whose labour is often invisibilised by systemic neglect (Freire, 2021; Althaus et al., 2021).

Rather than peripheral, domestic acts, storytelling, moral guidance and emotional nurturing are forms of legitimate pedagogy. Hooks (2014), Federici (2018), and Boutte and Johnson Jr (2013) argue that such care work transmits

values, ethics, and survival strategies. Archibald, Graham and Larsen (2021) extend this view by framing homes as ‘learning ecologies’ in which mothers are active architects of informal education. To strengthen the development education positioning of this article, the analysis was further situated within critical development education scholarship that foregrounded systemic inequality, crisis, and learning emerging beyond formal institutions. Existing DE literature has highlighted how austerity, educational retrenchment, and recurring crises reconfigure responsibility for learning, frequently displacing it from public systems onto communities and households in gendered ways (Andreotti, 2006; Bourn, 2014). These shifts are not merely logistical but ideological, reflecting neoliberal trends that reframe education as a private responsibility rather than a public good (Giroux, 2013).

Parallel work within development education networks has documented grassroots and community-based pedagogies that privilege dialogue, care, and collective learning as core elements of emancipatory education (Bajaj, 2011; Bourn, 2014; Andreotti, 2006). Read through this lens, the maternal pedagogies examined in this article are not marginal or informal practices but reflect development education enacted from below under conditions of structural constraint. These insights align closely with Vanessa Andreotti’s (2006; 2011) framework of *critical development education*, which contrasts with more depoliticised or ‘soft’ approaches to global learning. While soft DE tends to promote charitable responses and universal values, critical DE foregrounds historical responsibility, structural inequality, and reflexivity. The practices described in this article, such as maternal storytelling, moral instruction, and improvisational teaching exemplify Andreotti’s (2006) *critical literacy* and *pedagogies of discomfort*, which aim to unsettle dominant narratives and create space for ethical, relational learning. Furthermore, her *head-hand-heart* model offers a powerful interpretive frame: maternal pedagogies combine emotional care (heart), practical agency (hand), and reflective knowledge (head), forming a deeply situated form of transformative education under constraint (Andreotti, 2011).

Methodology

This article adopted a qualitative secondary data analysis approach to explore how low-income urban mothers were both represented in, and responded to, public

discourses as educators. Instead of collecting new field data, it critically reinterprets existing materials, media, reports, and personal narratives, as repositories of often-silenced knowledge. This methodology enabled an ethically grounded engagement with marginalised voices and treated public discourse as a contested space where meaning and ideology are actively shaped (Tripathy, 2013; Irwin and Winterton, 2020). The dataset included four categories of secondary sources selected for their narrative richness and relevance: NGO reports combining statistics and maternal testimonies; national and local media in English and Indonesian; testimonial videos and social media content capturing the emotional and visual textures of maternal pedagogy; and peer-reviewed academic literature highlighting mothers' perspectives. Spanning 2019 to 2024, the dataset reflected responses to systemic neglect during the pandemic and its aftermath.

The research analysis employed thematic discourse analysis and hermeneutic reading. Drawing from Frawley (1993) and Van Dijk (2016), discourse is viewed as a site of power and struggle. Hermeneutic interpretation, following Tripathy (2013), supported an empathetic reading of maternal voices. Themes were developed inductively, guided by reflective triangulation and documented through a positionality journal. To strengthen methodological transparency, the research applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria in the selection of secondary sources. Materials were included where they: explicitly documented maternal involvement in children's learning; were situated in low-income urban contexts; and engaged with periods of educational disruption, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Sources lacking substantive narrative detail on pedagogical practices or focused exclusively on institutional schooling were excluded.

The geographical focus on Indonesia, Kenya, and Brazil reflected an illustrative rather than a representative strategy. These cases were selected as analytically comparable urban contexts characterised by educational inequality, economic precarity, and gendered care responsibilities, rather than as a claim about maternal pedagogy across the global South. Analytically, the article followed three iterative steps: first, inductive coding of recurring themes related to care, teaching practices, and emotional labour; second, theme consolidation across

sources to identify patterned pedagogical responses; and third, critical discourse framing to examine how maternal education is represented, marginalised, or valorised within public narratives. This approach prioritises contextual depth and interpretive coherence over generalisation, consistent with qualitative development education research.

Findings and analysis

Grounded in a relational and political understanding of education, the discussion now turns to empirical material. Through secondary narratives, media testimonies, and institutional reports, this analysis reveals recurring patterns of care, improvisation, and resistance in the pedagogical practices of low-income mothers during crisis.

Theme 1: Mothers as de facto teachers

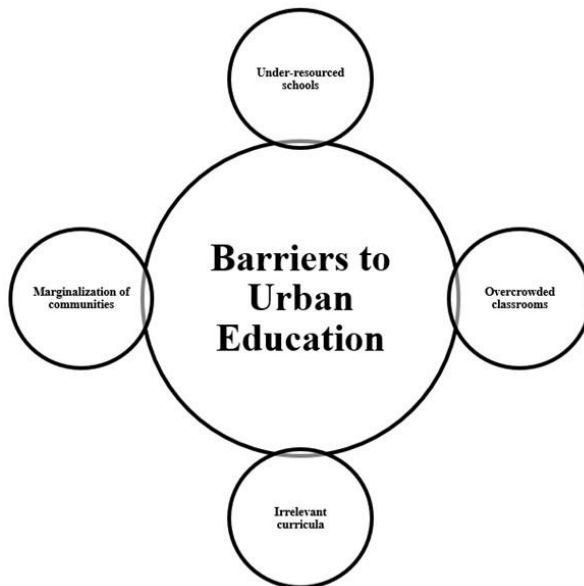
When schools shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, formal instruction ceased in classrooms, but education attempted to continue at home, although this was often limited by unequal access to electronic devices and internet connectivity (SMERU, 2021; Save the Children International, 2020). In numerous urban poor communities, these constraints forced mothers to assume roles as de facto teachers, navigating learning without formal recognition, training, or institutional support. Reports from Indonesia, Kenya, and Brazil document how mothers improvised lessons using household materials and storytelling, highlighting both pedagogical agency and systemic neglect (Andrew et al., 2020; Maloiy and Wawire, 2021; Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024).

They cobbled together informal instruction while contending with overlapping challenges such as food insecurity, job loss, or emotional distress. Research drawn from selected studies in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa illustrated how mothers, even without digital tools or qualifications of their own, drew on everyday intuition to make sense of stories, household objects and moral conversations through which they taught (Andrew et al., 2020). Education here was moulded by exigency, creating what Seong Pek and Wong Mee Mee (2020) term ‘resilience pedagogy’. These maternal labours, as documented in the reviewed cases, reveal both individual dedication and systemic

neglect. The obstacles to education were systemic, from overcrowded housing to lack of school communication.

Figure 1 was developed through a thematic synthesis of recurring constraints identified across the secondary dataset. These constraints, such as digital exclusion, overcrowded housing, limited institutional support, and gendered care burdens, were coded inductively from NGO reports, media narratives, and testimonial accounts. The figure visualises how these intersecting structural factors shape the conditions under which maternal pedagogical practices emerge in low-income urban contexts, rather than representing a causal or predictive model. Figure 1 visualises the key structural conditions identified through thematic analysis that shape the emergence of maternal pedagogical practices in low-income urban contexts.

Figure 1. Structural conditions shaping maternal pedagogical practices in low-income urban contexts (author’s analytical synthesis based on thematic coding of secondary sources)



Rather than depicting a causal model, the figure functions as an analytical framework and heuristic that situates maternal teaching practices within intersecting dynamics of institutional neglect, gendered care responsibilities, and broader socio-economic constraints shaping educational provision in low-income urban contexts. This outline shows that mothers' educational labour during school closures emerged not from absence but from systemic neglect. Faced with marginalisation and institutional failure, they reimagined teaching under pressure. Yet, their efforts remained largely invisible, often framed by deficit narratives rather than recognised as acts of resilience and innovation. This reflects forms of symbolic and structural erasure, in which teaching under poverty is commonly perceived as reactive rather than pedagogical (Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024). Grassroots testimonies, such as a mother using rice grains to teach maths, illustrate how education is instead shaped by care, creativity, and determined improvisation under constraint. The table below was developed through a comparative synthesis of illustrative examples drawn from the analysed sources to show how recurring structural challenges are met with contextually grounded pedagogical responses by mothers across different urban settings. Rather than providing exhaustive coverage, it foregrounds patterned practices that demonstrate maternal pedagogical agency expressed through improvisation, care, and critical awareness.

Table 1. Illustrative structural challenges and maternal pedagogical responses in selected urban contexts (synthesised from Andrew et al., 2020; Maloiy and Wawire, 2021; and Sugiyo, Pranoto and Pupala, 2023)

Region	Common Challenges	Typical Responses by Mothers
Indonesia	Limited digital access, crowded living conditions	Use of household objects for teaching, storytelling
Brazil	Unreliable electricity, lack of printed materials	Improvised teaching with food items, moral instruction
Kenya	Economic precarity, absence of school communication	Community learning groups, oral lessons
Philippines	Overlapping work and childcare duties	Flexible scheduling, value-based teaching

By juxtaposing structural challenges and pedagogical responses, the table supports the analysis by highlighting patterned forms of maternal pedagogical agency expressed through improvisation, care, and critical awareness under conditions of constraint, rather than offering exhaustive or representative comparison across contexts. As the table demonstrates, these routine acts of resistance challenge prevailing stereotypes that situate poor mothers as uninvolved in education. Instead, they enact a certain practice of inventive and critically engaged teaching forged in necessity and care. The variety of responses also imply the value of community-based curriculum in creating education amidst systemic abandon.

Theme 2: The home as a strategic learning space

Low-income urban homes in media discourse are routinely represented as inappropriate for learning because they are often overcrowded, noisy, and resource-free. But this perspective overlooks the inventive ways in which mothers turn domestic settings into lively learning spaces. When school is interrupted, as during COVID-19, the home does not stop educating; it adjusts. As bell hooks (1994: 45) explains, it becomes a ‘site of resistance and creation’, the result of an education that arises out of need and nurture. Mothers have reimagined physical

space with intention during lockdown in Indonesia, Brazil and Kenya, countries where multiple studies have documented the educational responses of low-income families amid school closures (Andrew et al., 2020; Maloiy and Wawire, 2021; Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024). Kitchens have taken after writing stations, porches are like storytelling circles and alleyways turned into math labs (Maloiy and Wawire, 2021). Such spatial relocations are not accidental but indicative of what Oladi (2025: 19) identifies as ‘micro-pedagogical agency’: the strategic process of teaching within limits.

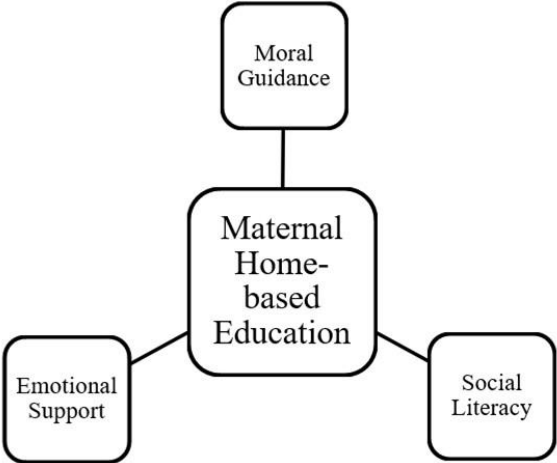
The home provides emotional shelter and cultural embedding, even more than physical reclamation. Mothers leveraged the mundane such as rice grains, cooking utensils, and daily routines, to foster learning and grit during school closures. For example, one Jakarta-based mother shared: ‘Then I teach my children why we have to keep learning, even when the world feels broken. Knowledge resides in our lives, not just in books’. And the theme reflects Freire’s conviction that education starts from experience (Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024; Andrew et al., 2020). They are not alternative schools; these homes operate as learning ecologies, developed systems embedded in people, schedules, icons and feeling. They contest hegemonic binaries of formal and informal education. As Archibald, Graham and Larsen (2021) contend, community-based learning sites such as the home are not second, but first in line, more so in regions of the global South. And so, the home becomes not only a shelter, but also an intentional, symbolic and affective classroom curated by often unrecognised mothers whose work is profoundly pedagogical. As shown in Table 2, these practices demonstrate the educational roles embedded in home settings, highlighting how care, creativity and perseverance underpin maternal pedagogies.

Table 2. Informal educational practices by mothers during COVID-19 (adapted from Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024 and Andrew et al., 2020)

Practice	Pedagogical Function	Reported Locations
Using rice grains for counting	Numeracy and fine motor development	East Jakarta, Indonesia
Singing local rhymes	Language development and memory	Nairobi, Kenya
Cooking-based math	Applied arithmetic and measurement	Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Storytelling with moral reflection	Ethical reasoning, cultural literacy	São Paulo, Brazil

These four examples reflect maternal labour and pedagogical agency in adversity. Though often seen as improvised, home-based teaching embodies a critical, situated pedagogy that challenges narrow institutional definitions of learning. While research often focuses on mothers’ roles in literacy or numeracy, less attention is given to their broader educational work. Within low-income households, mothers frequently take on roles that go beyond academics. This includes moral guidance, emotional support, and social literacy, intentional, everyday practices rooted in care, survival, and relational knowledge, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Pedagogical dimensions of maternal home-based education (developed by the author based on a thematic synthesis of Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024; Andrew et al., 2020; and Seong Pek and Wong Mee Mee, 2020)



These pedagogical dimensions amount to more than mere coping mechanisms: they are affective, ethical and communitarian ways of teaching. There is moral instruction through storytelling and example-setting, social literacy develops through face-to-face interaction in the family context as well as caregiving routines; emotional support keeps motivation going in the absence of formal schooling. The joint effort provides an inspiring reimagining of what qualifies as education.

Theme 3: Resistance narratives - anger, frustration, and teaching anyway

Underneath each act of informal teaching on the part of low-income mothers there is a rich emotional terrain: anger at systemic neglect, grief over lost educational opportunity, frustration at being blamed and yet fierce determination to keep teaching. This emotional labour is not incidental but essential to how learning takes place within the home. However, in mainstream discussion it tends to be omitted, and emotion itself is often considered irrelevant for critical teaching (Xiong et al., 2021). For a lot of mothers, teaching during school closures was

defiance more than it was simply duty. Media accounts from southeast Asia and Latin America covered how mothers struggled with digital exclusion, how their children were at risk of dropping out of school, and how families coped with daily difficulties such as food shortages, unstable income, and lack of access to childcare (Chmielewska et al., 2021). Mothers raged against government failures and despaired over the absence of meaningful virtual learning, but they made do anyway, building games, repurposing household objects, and telling stories.

This labour of feeling is pedagogical. It nourishes learning not only with content but also presence, care and stability. One mother, in a sit-and-listen testimonial video, shared:

“I was angry, angry at my school for not providing any help, and angry with myself for not being able to provide wonderful lessons. But I continued to sit with my daughter every morning anyway; no one else would do it” (Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024: 97).

These words capture what Kassaye (2024) calls affective resistance, resilient action forged in moral imperative and emotion. These stories contradict the traditional heroic mother, one who is endlessly nurturing, self-sacrificing, and emotionally available, regardless of her own needs. Instead, they reveal what Federici (2018) refers to as the exploitation of care: those systems relying on unpaid, undervalued emotional labour. These women are not teaching out of adaptive strength but because they will not be abandoned. Anger is redefined here not as a breakdown, but as political consciousness. This article re-theorised maternal emotion as a productive pedagogical force, rooted in the refusal to accept institutional neglect, sustained through radical care, and motivated by a commitment to justice.

Theme 4: Media representations: from victimhood to educational agency

Popular narratives play a powerful role in shaping who is recognised as an educator and what is defined as educational labour. For economically disadvantaged mothers, this recognition has been inconsistent and often problematic. On one hand, mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted their resilience, often framing them as heroic figures keeping families afloat amid crisis (Chmielewska et al., 2021; Save the Children, 2020). Such

portrayals often reduce women's roles to simplistic stereotypes, either tragic victims or saints of suffering (Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024). A review of media coverage from 2020 to 2023, including sources like the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, *The Jakarta Post*, and *Kompas*, revealed that depictions of mothers frequently oscillated between heroic endurance and helplessness, with little middle ground or structural critique. Fathers and male caregivers were largely absent, reinforcing gendered assumptions in caregiving.

These reductive tropes were echoed in academic and NGO literature, which, while sympathetic, often failed to challenge the conditions that create such burdens. As Frawley (1993) notes, these discursive containers make suffering palatable without confronting the systems that produce it. However, alternative narratives are emerging. Independent and community-based media such as *The Conversation*, *Kompasiana*, and *Magdalene.co* have featured mother-led education stories that disrupt dominant framings. First-person testimonies and local forums reveal that mothers were not merely coping, but actively shaping educational environments, creating informal curricula, setting routines, and fostering emotional growth in the absence of formal guidance.

As highlighted in the discourse analysis, linguistic framings, such as referring to mothers as 'left behind' versus 'holding things together', play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of maternal educational labour. As Van Dijk (2016) argues, discourse doesn't just reflect reality, it constructs it. To achieve representational justice, we must shift our view of low-income mothers from objects of concern to producers of knowledge, reimagining who teaches, where, and how learning takes place.

Discussion

The educational disruptions that necessitated parental teaching are not only symptoms of isolated institutional failures, but manifestations of a broader meta-crisis rooted in the logics of neoliberalism. As Andreotti (2011) notes, neoliberal frameworks in education promote individual responsibility, market-based reforms, and the outsourcing of public duties to private actors, including households. This ideological shift has led to the erosion of public education systems through austerity, privatisation, and managerial accountability, disproportionately

burdening marginalised communities. Within development education, this dynamic is viewed as a structural injustice that reshapes the very conditions under which learning occurs (Bourn, 2014). As states retreat from their social responsibilities, the work of sustaining education is offloaded onto families, particularly mothers, who are expected to fill systemic gaps without resources or recognition. This displacement of responsibility constitutes a key site of contestation in critical development education and underlines the urgent need to reframe maternal educational labour not as a coping strategy, but as a politically situated response to neoliberal neglect.

Before the empirical analysis, our article raised two key questions: who is recognised as an educator? And who decides what counts as educational labour? Mainstream discourse often limits teaching to credentialed professionals in formal institutions, sidelining the roles of parents, especially mothers, as informal or secondary. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic and the everyday realities of urban poor families reveal that learning continues beyond classrooms, shaped by routines, cultural practices, and care. This article highlights how low-income mothers engage in complex, creative pedagogies, challenging structural neglect. Their contributions, though widespread globally, remain marginalised by classed and gendered educational frameworks.

Mothers as everyday educators

Drawing on testimonies, NGO reports, and community narratives, this article highlighted how poor mothers do not merely support formal education but actively shape pedagogical processes in their homes. While mainstream discourse often frames them through a lens of deficiency, the evidence revealed how they construct learning spaces grounded in care, storytelling, and moral instruction (Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024; Save the Children, 2020). Interpreted through a Freirean teaching framework and intersectional feminist theory, these actions constitute not passive coping mechanisms, but intentional forms of educational resistance and cultural reinvention.

At its heart, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) issues a call to construct education from lived contexts. This vision is reflected in the everyday practices of mothers who turn their homes into spaces of learning, care, and

resistance. Teaching multiplication with rice grains, reading stories between chores and talking ethics over breakfast are all examples of praxis, the joining together of reflection and action as a response to injustice. These are not casual acts born of panic or helplessness. They are grounded, as radical domestic pedagogies, in love, necessity, and critical insight.

Transforming the home into a learning space

The home, traditionally framed in policy and educational discourse as a private or apolitical space (Hill, 2015; Antony-Newman, 2019), instead becomes a site of resistance. Mothers transform kitchens, staircases, and porches into informal classrooms that mirror what Archibald et al. (2021) describe as learning ecologies, networks outside formal schooling that profoundly shape children's growth. Within these spaces, education is communal, emotional, and deeply feminised.

Emotion as pedagogy

The emotional world these mothers inhabit is a form of education in itself, teaching values, endurance, and meaning. Kassaye (2024) calls this a process of *affective justice*, where emotion becomes political. When mothers continue to teach despite lacking resources, they are not just resisting poverty, they are reshaping the definition of education. Yet, these women are rarely acknowledged as knowledge holders. Media often swings between sympathy and blame, rarely recognising mothers' intellectual or pedagogical contributions (Robbe, De Wilde and Sanchez, 2024; Chmielewska et al., 2021). Their voices are also largely missing from policy. True educational equity requires not just hearing them but involving them as co-creators in transforming how we define and deliver learning.

A call to reimagine education

This article went beyond critiquing institutional neglect; it offered a proposition: to recognise the pedagogical value of caregiving under constraint and to shift the narrative from blame to co-creation. As Freire (1970: 87) wrote, 'to speak a true word is to transform the world'. The mothers described in this article spoke such words not through formal curricula, but through daily acts of love, resistance, and unrecognised brilliance in kitchens, alleyways, and bedtime stories. UNESCO's (2020) *Education in a Post-COVID World* calls for the inclusion of informal and community-based learning within broader education systems and

policy frameworks. Similarly, Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar* policy encourages student-centred learning rooted in local knowledge and family engagement. Recognising maternal pedagogies within these frameworks reinforces the need to value, not replace, care-based educational practices already thriving at home.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this article held important implications for development education practice. The findings suggest that development education initiatives should move beyond school-centred and institution-led models of learning to recognise and engage with existing home-based pedagogies. Maternal practices documented in this article exemplify key development education principles - critical consciousness, relational learning, and agency rooted in lived experience, that can inform community-based programmes, participatory curriculum design, and educator training. Development education practitioners can learn from these practices by valuing emotional labour, storytelling, and everyday problem-solving as legitimate pedagogical tools rather than supplementary or informal activities.

More explicitly, the maternal pedagogies documented in this article exemplified core principles of development education by fostering critical consciousness through learning grounded in lived experiences of inequality, enabling agency as mothers actively designed education under constraint, and sustaining collective learning through relational practices of care and shared problem-solving. For development education practitioners, these findings highlight the value of recognising and working with existing home-based pedagogies rather than displacing them with externally designed interventions. From a policy perspective, strengthening development education requires acknowledging mothers as knowledge holders and integrating their pedagogical insights into community-based programmes and equitable education planning, without instrumentalising unpaid care labour.

Conclusion

This article offered a simple yet urgent insight: we must expand our understanding of who counts as an educator. In communities marked by poverty and systemic neglect, mothers are not peripheral, they are central actors in education. Their homes transform into classrooms, where care, storytelling, moral guidance, and

resilience form the curriculum. These everyday practices are not supplementary but fundamental to knowledge transmission. Yet, formal education policies rarely reflect this reality, continuing to privilege institutional learning while marginalising domestic, informal pedagogies. To create more just and inclusive systems, we must move beyond symbolic appreciation and embed the lived knowledge of mothers into educational planning. Their understanding of children's needs, cultural continuity, and survival strategies is not only valuable, but essential. In many low-income settings, mothers are already innovating, adapting, and sustaining education under pressure. As Freire reminds us, education is never neutral. These women embody its liberatory potential: quiet, persistent, and profoundly transformative.

From a policy and practice perspective, these findings call for a reorientation of development education and educational planning towards greater recognition of maternal pedagogical labour. Policies aimed at educational equity should acknowledge homes as active learning sites and involve mothers as knowledge holders rather than passive beneficiaries. Development education programming can build on this insight by supporting community-based learning initiatives, strengthening linkages between families and local education actors, and designing interventions that complement rather than displace existing care-based pedagogies.

Recognising and supporting maternal education practices is not merely an act of inclusion; it is a necessary step toward more just, context-responsive, and resilient educational systems in times of crisis. Seen through the broader dynamics of the meta-crisis, the educational labour of low-income mothers underscores how crises are increasingly managed through informal, feminised, and unrecognised forms of care. While such practices sustain learning in the short term, they also reveal the unsustainability of policy regimes that normalise institutional withdrawal and rely on private households to absorb public failure. Recognising maternal pedagogies therefore requires not only symbolic inclusion, but a critical interrogation of the political and economic conditions that render such labour necessary.

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Perspectives

FROM SILENCE TO ACTION: TAKING A COLLECTIVE TURN IN GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION TOWARDS SOLIDARITY *WITH* AND *FOR* PALESTINE AND PALESTINIANS

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Abstract: For more than two years now, the world has witnessed and allowed Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people. The disregard for international law and human rights, through continued economic and diplomatic ties with Israel, especially in Western liberal democracies, testifies to the prioritisation of self-interest by states, corporations, and universities. Building on earlier discussions in Issue 39 of *Policy and Practice* that called attention to silences around Palestine in global citizenship education (GCE), this article examines how Palestine and Palestinians have been addressed within recent scholarship in GCE, human rights education, and related educational fields. We analysed patterns of engagement, omission, and constraint to consider how responsibility and action are articulated or absent within the field by reviewing relevant publications from 2024-2026.

Drawing on Shatarra and Saleh's (2024) distinction between solidarity *for* and solidarity *with* Palestine and Palestinians, we argue that currently there are limited spaces within GCE that engage with the oppression of Palestine and Palestinians. We, therefore, call for a more critical and accountable GCE; one that develops pedagogies of resistance rooted in the reality of Palestinians and aims to empower people everywhere, as suggested by the work of the Palestinian scholar Munir Fasheh (1990) and centralised with the concept *sumūd*. This

requires naming the entanglements between Zionism and Western supremacy and situating the elimination of Palestinians within longer histories of European colonisation and imperialism. We seek a collective turn within GCE that aligns with Palestinian calls for solidarity and centres listening and dialogue with Palestinians, collective learning, and action.

Key words: Global Citizenship Education; Palestine; Solidarity; Silence; Scholasticide.

Introduction

Over the past two years, most Western states have defended and enabled a genocide against the Palestinian people (Albanese, 2025), following more than a century of colonisation and dispossession (Khalidi, 2020). The repression of civic space and suppression of free speech in democratic countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom enacted in defence of Israel, has exposed the rhetorical and structural contradictions of liberal democratic commitments to human rights (European Civic Forum, 2024). Global citizenship education (GCE) positions itself as a field grounded in defending and promoting human rights, values and commitments to social justice, decolonisation, and global solidarity (August-Mowers and Waghid, 2025). The ongoing destruction in Palestine, identified as acts of genocide in Gaza and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank (Albanese, 2025; Human Rights Council, 2025) alongside the longer history of Palestinian dispossession and settler-colonialism (Krebs and Olwan, 2012), constitutes a critical test of how these commitments are implemented.

We, as early career scholars in GCE who have participated in local Palestinian solidarity actions within our institutions and as education practitioners, share the increasingly explicit critique of the field that exposes its hypocrisy: employing value laden terms without accompanying actions (McCloskey, 2025; Murphy, 2024; O’Toole, 2024; Stein, 2024). This collective inaction of the field reveals a tension between the values that many leading GCE scholars and networks profess and what they are willing to confront publicly. In this article, we lay out recent publications on GCE and Palestine, while also highlighting calls for solidarity by Palestinian scholars and showcasing examples

that shed light on a possible way forward. The aim of this article is to move the GCE sector from silence to action.

Debates around Palestine have become increasingly polarised and institutionally constrained, which is also visible within GCE scholarship and networks as engagement with Palestine has been uneven and politically contested (Murphy, 2024). This dynamic is particularly evident within universities in the global North, where expressions of academic solidarity have remained limited and often faced institutional repression (Badaan and Abu Moghli, 2026). Where solidarity with Palestine has been articulated, it has largely been driven by students, who occupy the most precarious positions and face the highest risks (Ibid.). For a field that frequently invokes emancipatory and decolonial ideals, this pattern of actions failing to match rhetoric raises important questions about how solidarity is conceptualised and enacted within GCE. As McCloskey (2025) notes, despite its normative commitments, the GCE sector has struggled to publicly recognise Palestinians as an oppressed population deserving of global solidarity. The question, therefore, shifts from whether Palestine is addressed to how responsibility, complicity, and action are framed within GCE under current political conditions and how we can do better.

Central to our examination is the distinction articulated by Palestinian scholars Shatara and Saleh (2024) between solidarity *with* and solidarity *for* Palestine and Palestinians. Solidarity *with* entails working alongside Palestinians in collective struggle, grounded in relationality and shared political commitment. Solidarity *for* refers to actions that disrupt the erasure of Palestinian voices within curricula, research, and institutional structures. It also requires situating Palestine within longer histories of colonial and imperial power, including the entanglements between Zionism and Western supremacy, as part of a broader examination of how educational discourse engages structures of domination (Ibid.). Drawing on Palestinian calls for solidarity, we argue for spaces within GCE that centre listening and engage in dialogue with Palestinians, while grounding this work in practices of care, responsibility, and collective accountability.

Our reflections draw on recent English-language publications in GCE, human rights education (HRE), and related fields, which we examined to trace patterns in how Palestine is engaged, framed, or avoided in education, and how responsibility and action are articulated in relation to the ongoing genocide. We highlight selected publications to illustrate these broader trends. The analysis was carried out by a collective of five early career scholars working in GCE within European academic institutions and positioned outside Palestinian lived experience, without direct personal or familial ties to the region. This positionality affords relative institutional safety in addressing politically contested issues, while also shaping the limits of our understanding. Our engagement with Palestine has developed through multiple and varied sources, including formal education, mainstream and digital media environments, academic discourse, and sustained dialogue with Palestinian scholars, activists, and solidarity movements. Acknowledging this positioning is essential to clarify the standpoint from which this examination proceeds. Many educators working within GCE may share similar starting points. From this location, we do not seek to speak for Palestinians, but to listen, learn, and act in solidarity, resisting the erasure of Palestinian voices within education, particularly GCE.

In the remainder of the article, we will first outline what has been written within GCE research in relation to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. This includes both studies conducted in Palestine, notably in the occupied West Bank, as well as reflections from academia and empirical studies on the approaches taken in schools in Western countries. Secondly, we emphasise calls for solidarity made by Palestinian scholars in the past decades, linking these with the silences in the field of GCE to suggest a move towards collective action within the field.

Palestine and global citizenship education: education under occupation

Our literature mapping explored how Palestine and Palestinians have been taken up within GCE, human rights education, and related educational fields between 2024 and 2026. These publications were reviewed to see what the field engages with and what it leaves out, to understand how responsibility and action can be articulated. A number of publications centred on *scholasticide* as a framework for understanding the systematic destruction of Gaza's education system (Phipps, 2024). Originally coined by Palestinian theorist Karma Nabulsi, (Ahmad and

Vulliamy, 2009) the term refers to the deliberate obliteration of Palestinian educational institutions dating back to the Nakba in 1948. Authors have framed systematic attacks on schools, universities, educators, and students as integral to Israel's genocidal project rather than collateral damage (Al-Natour, 2024; Sammak and Brown, 2024). Sammak and Brown (2024) stressed that Gaza's universities were central sites of Palestinian knowledge-making and argued that their destruction denies young people access to self-determined education. Ibrahim and Heleta (2025: 39) situated scholasticide within broader efforts to undermine 'survival and existence of Palestinians as a people', while Giroux (2025) conceptualised it as an ideological assault on Palestinian history and identity, showing how genocide operates through the erasure of knowledge, memory, and future-making.

Two GCE studies have been conducted in the occupied West Bank focusing on experiences of GCE in the midst of conflict, curfews, resource scarcity and political violence. Drawing on their study at An-Najah National University, Barham et al (2025) traced how students and policymakers conceptualised global citizenship through political engagement, care about the environment and cultural awareness in a context where 'rights and justice are not just abstract concepts but everyday concerns - yet the core values remain global' (Barham et al., 2025: 8). They concluded that GCE can affirm students' political agency and form a dynamic relation between national resistance and global citizenship, enabling them to interpret their lived oppression through global solidarity frameworks.

Extending the discussion of education under occupation, Van Teeffelen and Giacaman (2025) foregrounded the Palestinian concept of *sumūd* (steadfastness) as a pedagogical framework for (global) citizenship education grounded in hope, agency, and collective dignity. It rejects passivity, emphasising long-term agency, cultural continuity, and refusal of dispossession while sustaining pride in Palestinian identity. They situated *sumūd* within GCE by drawing connections to Indigenous and grassroots traditions of resistance, positioning Palestinian educational practices within wider efforts for justice, peace and human dignity. Pedagogically, *sumūd* enables community-based learning through storytelling and connects education to activism and environmental care rooted in land and memory (Ibid.). These publications show how GCE can

function as a pedagogy of resistance amidst unimaginable suffering. Arguably, this potential lies in GCE as a pedagogy that promotes global solidarity by incorporating the fate of Palestine and Palestinians as a real case of injustice, and by embracing *sumūd* to promote hope and agency as core values of resistance.

Palestine and global (citizenship) education: teaching Palestine

Most studies connecting GCE and solidarity for Palestine identified patterns of individual, systemic, and institutional silence across the field (Al-Natour, 2024; Khoo, 2024). They also documented forms of institutional repression, including censorship and disciplinary measures (Calleja et al., 2024). Criticism of Israel's violations of human rights is frequently conflated with antisemitism, through legislative frameworks or the adoption of the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition, alongside campaigns that label Palestine-related scholarship, teaching, and campus activism as antisemitic (Jaffee, 2024; Tatour, 2024). At the same time, Baak, Mayes and Rizvi (2024) noted that the restrictions on critical discussions have generated new forms of pedagogical engagement, most visible through student encampments and mass protests. These have been described as sites of hope and solidarity, where activism and shared sense-making are grounded in responsibilities towards ending the genocide in Gaza (Giroux, 2024; Houlette, 2025; Kenway and Maher, 2024; Tshishonga, 2025).

Beyond higher education, attention was also given to how Palestine is represented or erased across schooling and wider pedagogical contexts. Focusing more generally on K-12 teaching in the United States (US), Garcia et al (2025) demonstrated the longstanding erasure of Palestine within the last 40 years of educational research. Their review showed how Palestine was often framed as an abstract controversy, debate topic, or generic case for teaching 'critical thinking' rather than a real place with over five million inhabitants, a long history and socio-cultural context. In particular, studies where students would be meaningfully engaged with Palestinian histories, cultures, or everyday life were missing (Ibid.). Within human rights education, a subsection of GCE, Palestine has recently been discussed. De Vries (2026) noted how taking a critical approach led students to question the gap between human rights ideals and political realities when they understood how power structures obstruct the realisation of human rights in

situations such as that in Gaza. Liddle's (2026) article on teaching about Gaza in UK secondary schools highlighted structural pressures including enforced 'neutrality' and the need to cover 'both sides', teachers' concerns of appearing antisemitic, as well as outright institutional bans on talking about Palestine. Teachers were also uncertain about having 'sufficient' or 'accurate' knowledge themselves, while they perceived students heavily influenced by social media and their community background, making the matter emotionally charged, and students' knowledge basis potentially formed by disinformation.

While Liddle (2026) suggested a human right based pedagogical approach to avoid accusations of partisanship, Herrera and Peters (2025) pushed further by framing global pedagogy itself as a mode of solidarity. In this dialogic article they argued that educators, must actively confront denial and complicity by engaging directly with evidence of atrocities in Gaza and the role of Western states through the supply of weapons and diplomatic support, and corporations and universities in sustaining the genocide in Palestine. For them Palestine functions as a 'canary in the coalmine': the silencing of genocide is 'a diagnostic for a wider authoritarian turn that seeks to foreclose the very possibility of critical, transnational solidarity' (Ibid.: 178). Herrera and Peters (2025) thus stressed the need to build solidarity across contexts and to understand pro-Palestine resistance as a part of a broader struggle against neofascist mechanisms of suppressing critical thinking, education and dissent. To counter this, they called for classrooms to function as repositories for 'dangerous counter-memories', systematically preserving and integrating in teaching digital evidence such as citizen journalism, satellite imagery, or testimonies from the ground.

To facilitate this, Herrera and Peters (2025) also proposed a 'fugitive pedagogy', using encrypted platforms for organising or creating educational content, and learning about the algorithms of social media platforms to subvert their control. They identified strategic ambiguity as valuable: by avoiding explicit references to Palestine, they argued, students could still learn analytical tools for recognising settler colonialism and state violence everywhere by prioritising voices from the global South, Indigenous communities, and occupied territories. Teaching about Palestine belongs within GCE as a pedagogy grounded in human rights aiming at collective resistance. While institutional demands for 'neutrality'

and false accusations of antisemitism constrain educators, the literature points to creative practices that show how this potential can be realised.

Moving forward: calls for solidarity by Palestinian scholars

As noted above, there is limited solidarity with Palestine and Palestinians within academic educational circles. Yet Palestinian scholars have been clear about the kind of solidarity necessary - and expected - from their critical colleagues. Badaan and Abu Moghli (2026: 5) distinguished between conditional and unconditional solidarity, defining the former as solidarity 'rooted in specific conditions, contingent on the behaviour of those we are standing in solidarity with', and the latter as 'rooted in an ethical or moral commitment to justice [...] motivated by ideological alignment with the cause/issue'. They found that unconditional solidarity was practised mostly by those with the least privilege and the most risk: students. In contrast, most repression of pro-Palestinian solidarity is carried out by those with the most power and privilege: academic institutions. Among individual academics and collectives, the scholars identified mostly performative solidarity, in the form of whitewashed statements which use words such as 'conflict' or 'crisis' rather than naming this as a form of settler colonialism and genocide. In their theoretical framework, Badaan and Abu Moghli (2026: 6) provided guiding principles for unconditional academic solidarity which 'entails supporting Palestinians in their struggle for liberation from settler colonialism, as aligns with the Palestinian "thawabet الثوابت" or the national constants/red lines which cannot be compromised in this liberation struggle'. They were clear about the kind of solidarity that was needed: 'unwavering, historically and politically grounded, and disruptive. It requires centring Palestinian voices, dismantling colonial frameworks, and leveraging institutional power to end complicity in genocide' (Ibid.: 16).

Whereas Badaan and Abu Moghli address academic solidarity more broadly, Hajir and Qato (2025) focus on the lack of solidarity within the field of education, particularly among scholars engaged in critical pedagogy and decolonisation. They centre scholasticide in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, framing it as a long-standing mechanism within Israel's genocidal violence against Palestinians. According to Hajir and Qato (2025), universities and scholars in the global North are complicit in this scholasticide through four practices: i)

silence; ii) suppression of solidarity by academic institutions; iii) the application of concepts such as ‘complexity’, ‘nuances’, and ‘reflexivity’ in order to avoid pronouncing any judgement against a settler colonial machine that has been ethnically cleansing for over 70 years; and iv) promise and threat of theories. The use of such strategies is not new and has been deployed by oppressors to justify oppression throughout time. Hajir and Qato (2025) highlighted the emptiness of theories that lack the political dimensions, praxis, and struggles from which they are drawn. When scholars over theorise without grounding their work in the lived realities of the oppressed, terms like ‘justice’ and ‘equity’ lose their transformative potential.

Originally written in 2021, Shatara and Saleh (2024) reissued a direct call for educators to enact upon solidarity with and for Palestine and provided guidance for enacting solidarity with and for Palestinians. Firstly, educators could listen and dialogue with Palestinians, along with engaging in critical reflections on who they are working with and their stance regarding Palestine. Secondly, Palestine should be considered as part of the interconnectedness of collective struggles against systems of oppression; therefore, Palestine and Palestinians belong in all curricula, teaching, and research. This to counteract attempts to erase Palestine from our collective knowledge by media, government agencies, and curriculum guidelines. It is, hereby, important to acknowledge Israel as ‘a settler-colonial nation-state and occupation regime’ to ‘counter an ahistorical and decontextual “both sides” approach’ (Shatara and Saleh, 2024: 406). Lastly, educators and scholars need to work toward humanising Palestinians, by teaching about the joy, empathy, and care that Palestinians have for their land and people.

Moving forward: community education

Munir Fasheh is an influential Palestinian educator who has articulated a vision of education grounded in the lived realities of oppression and resistance. In an article from 1990, reissued in 2025, Fasheh outlined a blueprint for an education that empowers people everywhere, grounded in the oppression faced by Palestinians. Fasheh (1990) made a distinction between an education rooted in Western hegemony, often presented as universal, ethically neutral, and superior, but deeply implicated in systems of domination, dispossession, and violence; in contrast to a form of community education grounded in the concrete needs,

knowledges, and resources of communities. Community education aims to provide learners with the freedom to imagine alternatives and build the capacity to disrupt existing structures in order to reorganise social life in response to collective problems and needs (Ibid.).

Fasheh based his educational vision and practice on core Arabic principles such as *mujaawarah*, *muthanna*, *yushen* and *ahaali*. *Mujaawarah*, which roughly translated into English is about ‘being together’, provides a kind of learning that has relevance to both the teacher and the student, because ‘it is based on collective thinking and reflecting situated in specific contextual concerns, instead of merely abstract analytical/critical thinking’ (Fasheh, Abtahi and Chronaki, 2017: 1). Another core principle is *muthanna*, whose meaning can be captured in the phrase ‘you are, therefore I am’, and to embody *muthanna* is only possible by developing a pluralistic attitude grounded in humility (Ibid.). A concept closely related to developing such an attitude is *yushen*, which refers to the worth of a person that has nothing to do with professionalism, wealth or status, but is grounded in the practice of living together with others (Sukarieh, 2019). A particularly useful concept for GCE is *ahaali*, which signifies a community in which one is among ‘themselves and with the place, culture, and collective memory’ (Ibid.: 9) which we can contrast to the traditional Western concept of citizenship as a relationship among people formed by institutions. As GCE scholars, and empathetic individuals, we feel the need to listen and engage in dialogue with these solidarity calls from Palestinians to support the liberation of Palestine by taking a stance in the cultural struggle against colonial ideologies.

Promising practices

Despite the institutional silences and suppression documented in previous sections, practices of solidarity with and for Palestine and Palestinians have emerged across academic and educational contexts over the past two years. These practices have opposed colonial ideologies by supporting the Palestinian struggle for liberation and resisting the normalisation of Zionism in academic institutions and classrooms in the global North. While these examples are necessarily partial and geographically specific, they offer important insights into how solidarity can be enacted within GCE and related fields.

In several European countries, academic solidarity networks have formed explicitly to challenge their institutions' complicity in genocide. One example is from Poland, Akademia dla Palestyny (2024), who beyond condemning the assault on Gaza and Western double standards and calling for an immediate ceasefire and justice-based peace, actively mobilises protests and coordinated academic action. In Finland, Researchers for Palestine (2025) at the University of Helsinki engages academics through events, reading initiatives, and calls for academic boycott while documenting the institutional repression of Palestine. Another example comes from England, where BDS@UCL (Boycott Divestment Sanctions @ University College London) brings together students and staff to campaign for the university to adopt Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS, 2026) principles, linking the struggle for Palestinian liberation to broader institutional transformation (Badaan and Abu Moghli, 2026). From the same institute originated the academic network SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) Forum for Social Justice, (2025) which has created sustained spaces for dialogue with Palestinian educators through regular webinars. These sessions feature Palestinian scholars and practitioners reporting from Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora, ensuring that those most directly affected by genocide and scholasticide can speak for themselves rather than being spoken for (Hajir and Qato, 2025).

Parallel movements have emerged among educators working in primary and secondary education. Teachers for Palestine networks in Belgium (2024), the Netherlands, Ireland, and Italy have created communities of practice where educators can collectively address teaching about Palestine and resisting Zionist influence in their schools. These networks provide resources for teaching about settler colonialism, the Nakba (Catastrophe), and ongoing dispossession in ways that are grounded in Palestinian voices. They also offer solidarity and guidance for teachers who face institutional pressure or accusations of bias when including Palestine in their teaching. The existence of these networks demonstrates the possibility of collective action even in contexts where individual educators may feel isolated or vulnerable.

In the United States, the critical educational movement Rethinking Schools has shown a sustained commitment to teaching about Palestine. Their

publication of a dedicated resource book, *Teaching Palestine* (Bigelow, et al, 2025), alongside continuous coverage in their journal, provides educators with practical materials grounded in critical pedagogy. These resources situate Palestine within frameworks of settler colonialism, Indigenous resistance, and international solidarity movements, offering pedagogical approaches that embrace complexity without defaulting to false equivalencies or ‘both sides’ narratives. The materials also emphasise joy, culture, and Palestinian resilience alongside documenting violence and dispossession, working to humanise Palestinians in ways that counter dehumanising media representations (Fasheh, 1990).

The Irish development education sector has also taken important steps towards solidarity. Development education organisations in Ireland have organised webinars, published resources, and created spaces for educators to engage with Palestine as central to questions of global justice rather than as a peripheral or controversial addition (McCloskey, 2025). This work has involved both documenting Ireland’s journey towards greater institutional recognition of Palestinian rights and providing practical support for educators navigating institutional resistance.

These examples share several common features that offer guidance for GCE practitioners seeking to enact solidarity. First, they are collective rather than individual, recognising that institutional change requires organised action and mutual support. Second, they explicitly name settler colonialism, genocide, and institutional complicity rather than adopting the euphemistic language of ‘conflict’ or ‘crisis’ (Hajir and Qato, 2025). Third, they centre Palestinian voices and scholarship, working with rather than for Palestinians (Shatara and Saleh, 2024). Fourth, they connect Palestine to broader struggles against interconnected systems of oppression, refusing exceptionalism while honouring specificity. Finally, they recognise solidarity as ongoing praxis rather than a one-time statement, requiring sustained commitment and willingness to face institutional consequences (Badaan and Abu Moghli, 2026).

We would like to close this section by offering a short list of reflective questions drawing on the HEADS UP framework (Andreotti De Oliveira, 2012) and its later adaptation by Pashby and Sund (2019) as a starting point for

examining the knowledge, assumptions, and silences that shape how Palestine and Palestinians are approached in teaching and dialogue. We propose a list of questions that foreground history, power, language, and responsibility. While not exhaustive, they offer an entry point that educators can adapt and develop within their own contexts:

- What do I know about Palestine, and how has this knowledge been formed?
- Am I aware of the Nakba and its continuing significance for displacement, land dispossession, refugeehood, and Palestinian life across the occupied West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the diaspora?
- Do I understand contemporary events as part of longer historical trajectories of settler colonialism, occupation, and resistance, rather than as isolated or exceptional moments?
- How do I describe what is happening in Palestine: as a conflict, a war, a humanitarian crisis, ethnic cleansing, or genocide? And what assumptions are embedded in these terms?
- Whose interpretations do I rely on and do they include Palestinian scholars, legal experts, United Nations bodies, and human rights organisations?
- Where do I primarily get my information about Palestine? Do I listen mainly to mainstream Western media, national news outlets, or do I engage with Palestinian journalists reporting from the ground, non-Western or independent sources such as *Al Jazeera*, *Middle East Eye*, *Mondoweiss*, *Declassified UK*, *MintPress News*, *The Canary*, or *Zeteo*?
- Have I noticed deliberate patterns in media language, for example Western reporting ‘deaths’ rather than ‘killings’, or ‘airstrikes’ rather than ‘bombing of civilian areas’, and how might such language shape understandings of agency and responsibility?
- Do I consider questions of accountability, international complicity, and responsibility in my engagement with Palestine?
- Am I open to being challenged to unlearning taken-for-granted assumptions, and to sitting with discomfort, uncertainty, and the absence of easy solutions?

Conclusion

We set out to examine how GCE has responded to Palestine and the ongoing genocide by reviewing recent publications in GCE and related educational areas. While a few publications engaged with Palestine, and some articles may still be in the publication process, this topic remains far less prominent than expected, considering that GCE is a field that positions itself as committed to social justice, decolonisation and solidarity.

Palestinian scholars have provided clear guidance on what unconditional solidarity requires: centring Palestinian voices, naming settler colonialism and genocide explicitly, and taking sustained collective action that accepts institutional risk. We acknowledge the tensions inherent in this work: the fear of professional and personal consequences in terms of professional career and personal safety, the pressure to remain 'neutral', and the complexity of navigating institutional repression. These tensions and risks are real, but we believe they cannot justify inaction when genocide is unfolding. In a world increasingly shaped by disregard for international law, violence, dispossession, and supremacy, GCE can become a space where we collectively resist these forces rather than accommodate them. Our call is simple. Listen to Palestinians, learn from their pedagogies of resistance and joy, and act in solidarity. We aim to do so through our collective, joining wider efforts to put GCE's commitments to justice and solidarity into practice at a time when they matter most.

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BRIDGING THE POLICY AND PRACTICE DIVIDE: INTEGRATING CRITICAL LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY AND DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION WITHIN ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGE POLICY

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Abstract: This article considers how language instruction functions as an instrument for the expression and action of power dynamics and identity negotiation in the wider trajectory of development. Focusing on Ethiopia, a nation with over 80 spoken languages, the piece carefully analyses the persistent gap between the nation's inclusive education policy and its inconsistent application in practice. The article also contends that integrating critical language pedagogy (CLP) with development education (DE) closes the policy and practice divide. Based on Freire's (1970) idea of teaching and learning as critical enquiry that enables students to challenge injustice and shape their own realities, CLP frames language education as a social interaction, power distribution and competition. DE also employs this core concept through critical analysis aimed at promoting global justice, sustainability and civic responsibility. Though Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy endorses mother-tongue instruction besides English aptitude, challenges such as the lack of trained teachers, resource limitations and an examination-focused curriculum continue to limit deep learning.

By synthesising various policy documents and theoretical reflections, this article advocates an approach, which involves several aspects of teacher professional development, syllabus design, community and institutional participation. It argues that integrating CLP's and DE's principles can promote language classrooms based on discussion, critical literacy and ethical reflection on values, thereby changing language pedagogy into both an intellectual and political enactment. This article ultimately delineates language pedagogy as a means for critical enquiry and significant change, proposing that placing CLP firmly within

Ethiopia's language education system can improve language justice, interactive learning and viable development that provides useful insights for other multilingual nations looking to integrate their policy guidelines with liberatory pedagogical practices.

Key words: Critical Language Pedagogy; Development Education; Ethiopia; Language Policy; Freire; Multilingualism.

Introduction

Language education is innately subjective and is not a neutral and technical process (Ricento, 2000a). As Heugh (2009: 68) prompts us, 'language policy is never ideologically innocent', since choices about the medium of instruction and syllabus design reflect how power is distributed and exercised in historical and political traditions. In nations like Ethiopia where more than 80 languages are spoken, language education interconnects with justice, identity and development issues (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh, 2012). It can either promote inclusion and cohesion or, conversely, preserve marginalisation and cultural subservience. Freire (1970: 34) framed this double function, arguing that education either serves as a tool to facilitate conformity or it becomes a 'practice of freedom'. After the 1991 political shift, which restructured state power from a centralised system to ethnolinguistic federalism, Ethiopia's constitution recognised language diversity and introduced a bilingual policy that endorsed mother-tongue instruction in primary education. Simultaneously, it also promoted English as the medium of instruction for secondary and tertiary levels. The reason for this introduction was both pedagogical and political. More importantly, learning in students' first language is believed to improve understanding, cognitive and identity development, while English aptitude facilitates the exchange of information in social and economic situations (Baye, 2010). As Heugh (2011b: 226) states, this bilingual policy aimed to 'reconcile the local and the global within a single educational vision'.

However, the process of putting these principles into practice is carried out inconsistently. For instance, schools face shortages of trained teachers and materials (Negash, 2019). Classrooms are characterised by mechanical learning and preparing students on test-taking skills with no critical enquiry

(Gebreyohannes, 2020). Students often engage only in cursory activities without understanding the content or reflecting on its social consequences and political implications. This ‘policy-practice gap’ (Vujcich, 2013: 21) reveals how structural and educational barriers challenge Ethiopia’s intentions for inclusive education. Though the policy promotes language equity, in reality English hegemony continues, given its global status and the high-stakes tests that have significant effects on students’ future careers (Heugh, 2011a; Vujcich, 2013). Accordingly, many students experience limited comprehension and active learning, and the educational advantages of mother-tongue instruction remain under-realised (Baye, 2010). As Heugh (2011b: 234) warns us, ‘the dominance of English undermines the pedagogical advantages of mother-tongue education’. So, integrating CLP’s principles can change classrooms into places where language learning becomes a means for reflection, empowerment and independent learning.

The interconnectedness and interdependence of the global education system make it even more difficult to understand and handle. The prevalent promotion of English as a medium of instruction and standardised tests, often encouraged by international programmes, risks marginalising local languages and knowledge systems. As Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012: 69) argue, ‘uncritical adoption of dominant languages in education constitutes a form of epistemic violence’. Alternatively, CLP provides an option promoting multilingualism that values both universal competencies, Indigenous hands-on knowledge systems and local identities. Recognising that language reflects beliefs, values and power dynamics, CLP carries out DE’s ethical and honourable aims of civic responsibility, critical consciousness and social justice (Bourn, 2015). As Bourn (2015: 47) emphasises, DE needs to ‘engage learners in understanding the interconnections between local and global problems and in taking actions to bring about change’. CLP thus offers the educational means of interaction, reflection and learners’ autonomy by which DE’s change ambitions can be made real. Likewise, Ricento (2000b: 5) remarks that language policy ‘privileges certain ideologies while marginalising others’.

Therefore, evaluating languages as a social practice enables students to question inequality and ethically engage with the world (Norton, 2010; Janks, 2012). This article addresses the following central question: how can CLP,

integrated with DE, close the divide between Ethiopia's language policy and practice? Addressing this question requires three interconnected analyses: outlining the theoretical foundations of Freirean education, CLP and DE; evaluating the policy-practice gap in Ethiopian language education; and suggesting practical directions for improvements through continuous professional development (CPD), curriculum improvement and community participation. These analyses project language education not simply as a technical endeavour but as an equity-oriented practice in Ethiopia's development trajectory. By linking policy, pedagogy and practice, this piece advocates for an education programme that teaches language as a means of cultivating critical literacy: the ability to read and rewrite the world.

Freire's critical pedagogy, critical language pedagogy and development education as a theoretical model

Freire (1970) contends that education that fails to consider the pervasive and deep-rooted situations within the wider educational institution and the sociopolitical contexts that shape it would lead to domination rather than liberation. Freire's criticism of the banking model, in which students passively receive knowledge, discloses how conventional teaching and learning reproduces social hierarchies and silences voices that raise critical questions and evaluate information, thus 'negating education and knowledge as processes of enquiry' (Freire, 1970: 72). In contrast to banking education, he promotes a dialogic and problem-posing pedagogy based on praxis (reflection and action), by which teachers and students collaboratively create meaning and knowledge, develop critical consciousness and resist the powers that attempt to preserve and uphold inequality. As he observes, education 'either serves domination or liberation' (Freire, 1970: 79).

Expanding this concept, CLP situates language as a social and ideological practice rather than an impartial communication medium (Pennycook, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Norton and Toohey, 2004). It exposes how hierarchical structures deeply rooted in established customs and historical practices breed inequities, while also promoting critical language awareness that enables learners to interrogate whose languages and identities are legitimised and heard and whose are marginalised and silenced (Canagarajah, 1999; Janks, 2010). When connected with DE, CLP creates a global network of interconnections, fairness

and equity while ensuring the long-term continuity of the system. DE promotes ethical global citizenship and educational interventions targeted at positive change (Andreotti, 2006; Bourn, 2015; McCloskey, 2014). Working in harmony, Freire's critical pedagogy, CLP and DE provide an effective and logically dependable model for restoring Ethiopia's multilingual classrooms as places of enquiry, empowerment and meaningful, lasting change, where language becomes both a means for learning and an instrument for liberation.

Freire's canonical work remains basic to CLP, providing not only a criticism of language teaching methods but a conceptual rethinking of human engagement with language. He challenges conservative and submissive teacher-student interactions by proposing a pedagogy of love based on hope and trust in the inherent ability of humans to grow, because 'dialogue cannot exist without humility, love, faith in humanity and hope' (Freire, 1998: 40). This love is based on moral principles and responsibility rather than emotional sentiment or fantasy, and it affirms students as rational beings capable of transforming their realities. For Freire (1970), teaching should be an act of shared cognition between teacher and student rather than a one-way transfer of information, in that 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other' (Freire, 1970: 72).

In bilingual policy contexts like Ethiopia, this approach holds deeper meaning. It positions students as collaborative creators of knowledge who can resist restrictive social hierarchies and engage in instruction as an emancipatory process rather than assimilation. Language education thus becomes a site where power is exercised and identities are negotiated. Ricento (2000a: 3) notes that 'language policy and practice are never ideologically innocent'. Norton and Toohey (2004: 19) similarly contend that classrooms reproduce inequality when they disregard socio-political issues, while Crookes (2013: 45) indicates that language pedagogy must integrate 'the social, cultural, and political dimensions of communication'. The rationale in this article echoes Ethiopia's multilingual education experience, where tensions continue between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh, 2012). Although mother-

tongue instruction is the official policy, shortages of trained teachers and an exam-centred curriculum restrict analytical interaction (Baye, 2010).

Freire's focus on dialogue offers a means to support inclusive education by affirming linguistic and cultural diversity as legitimate elements of the learning process, thereby mitigating entrenched inequalities. Overall, Freire's pedagogy advocates education as a change catalyst and emancipatory process. By emphasising interaction, reflection and collective enquiry, it provides the ethical and philosophical foundation that later informed approaches such as CLP and DE. While Freire did not work within CLP, his principles underpin its critical orientation by framing language learning as a social, political and transformative practice-core commitment that both CLP and DE draw upon to bridge the gap between policy intentions and meaningful change (McCloskey, 2014; Bourn, 2015).

Critical language pedagogy (CLP)

CLP extends Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy to language education, understanding language as a social practice shaped by power dynamics, ideology and identity rather than as a neutral communication apparatus (Pennycook, 2001; Norton and Toohey, 2004). In this view, language classrooms are spaces for critical enquiry and engagement where students examine how language practices either reinforce or resist inequality and develop the autonomy to act upon social problems. As Pennycook (2001: 6) states, language education should not only interpret the world but also attempt to transform it, recognising that teaching is 'never a neutral enterprise'. Conspicuously, language is instilled with ideology: the social structures, words and usages of a language naturally carry and transmit the underlying beliefs, values and hierarchies of the society that uses it. In this sense, CLP positions students as collaborators in knowledge creation who analyse how language forms sometimes reproduce, and at other times challenge, prevailing power relations (Norton and Toohey, 2004; Crookes, 2013). Fundamental to this pedagogy is critical literacy, which is the ability to speak, read and write in ways that interrogate everyday discourses and transform the world for the better. Janks (2009, 2012, 2013) conceptualises this through four interconnected aspects, hegemony, access, diversity and design, which together promote fairness, equal rights and the transformation of the educational system.

CLP therefore pushes language pedagogy further than grammatical or communicative ends toward nurturing critical consciousness and learner autonomy. It encourages students to link learning content with their lived realities to expose the systemic inequalities that language reveals (Crookes, 2013). In contexts like Ethiopia, where English symbolises global mobility yet deepens social divides, CLP enables teachers and students to uncover what Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012: 69) call ‘linguistic imperialism by substitution’, thereby reclaiming language and language expression within the education process (Canagarajah, 1999).

Development education

Development education is a critical educational movement that situates learning within global interdependence and highlights how inequalities are produced and sustained. Rather than treating development issues as neutral or purely technical problems, it adopts a transformative stance, encouraging learners to question the social, political and economic forces that shape relationships within and between countries. Bourn (2015: 47) describes DE as an approach that ‘enables people to understand the links between their own lives and those of people throughout the world and to act towards achieving a more just and sustainable world’. This idea directly echoes Freire’s (1970: 36) emphasis on education as ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’, aligning DE with the Freirean understanding of education as praxis. Building on Freire’s focus on dialogue and action, DE promotes interaction, participation and learner autonomy, aiming to move beyond simple awareness-raising toward informed, ethical and responsible action (McCloskey, 2014). As Andreotti (2006) argues, DE’s strength lies in its critique of neoliberal models of development and in its promotion of critical global awareness and alternative visions of collective responsibility and sustainability. Recent evaluations of DE, like those conducted by the Irish Development Education Association and the Development Awareness Raising and Education Forum, show that DE initiatives are frequently supported by non-governmental organisations and policy frameworks that emphasise human rights, international justice and sustainable development (Daly and Regan, 2022). These agendas have contributed meaningfully to establishing DE as a legitimate and policy-recognised field of educational practice.

Andreotti (2011) cautions, however, that when DE principles become embedded within institutional policies on education and development, there is a risk that the broader education system may unintentionally depoliticise the approach. This can occur when political agency and collective action are understated in favour of technocratic, expert-led interventions that present information as objective and value-neutral. Such tendencies may weaken DE's transformative and liberatory potential, reducing it to a set of transferable skills rather than a critical engagement with power, inequality and global interdependence. In essence, DE provides a space for ethical and critical participation, inviting learners to examine issues of power and justice in an interconnected world. It functions both as an extension of Freire's critical pedagogy and as an international educational movement, advancing his liberatory ideas through collective efforts toward global justice, critical consciousness and transformative social action (McCloskey, 2015).

Synthesis: A Freirean bridge between CLP and DE

Freire's critical pedagogy offers the fundamental theoretical underpinning for both CLP and DE. Each builds upon his conception of education as a 'practice of freedom' (Freire, 1970: 81), linking reflective practice with an intent to change social realities. CLP applies this idea to language, showing how linguistic practices can reproduce or contest power structures. DE, on the other hand, extends Freire's notion of praxis into the domain of global development, connecting education to international issues of justice, sustainability and collective responsibility (Bourn, 2015; McCloskey, 2014). Taken together, CLP and DE illustrate what Janks (2012) describes as the movement from critical literacy to critical action, in which students examine not only how language constructs inequality but also how global political and economic systems such as neoliberalism, colonial legacies and class structures sustain it. Therefore, incorporating Freire's theoretical insights into language and development education transforms classrooms into spaces of interaction, negotiation and active participation (Norton and Toohey, 2004). Within this dynamic, teachers assume the role of what Giroux (1988: 127) calls 'transformative intellectuals', mediating between linguistic empowerment and global critical awareness.

In the Ethiopian context where language education intersects with social hierarchy, multilingual governance and wider global aspirations this combination of policy insights and theoretical literature offers a coherent educational philosophy. It synthesises Freire's liberatory ethics, CLP's critique of language, identity and power, and DE's commitment to addressing the root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice. As DE is fundamentally grounded in Freirean pedagogy, both approaches share the aim of promoting transformative educational experiences that blend critical reflection with socially responsible action. Ultimately, CLP and DE each draw on Freire's critical pedagogy through their shared commitment to dialogue, reflection and social transformation. While CLP focuses on how language practices shape and are shaped by power in specific social and linguistic settings, DE extends this orientation to the global level by fostering critical global awareness and encouraging engagement with the structural economic, political and social conditions that produce inequity. Collectively, they demonstrate the development of the Freirean concept of education from classroom-based critique to international praxis, positioning education as a means to question and transform linguistic, cultural and economic systems. Within this framework, CLP develops critical literacy as a form of consciousness-raising about power through discourse, whereas DE cultivates critical global understanding highlighting how local lives are linked to global forces and how collective action is required for fairness and sustainability (Bourn, 2015; McCloskey, 2014; Crookes, 2013). Both approaches enable students to become agents of knowledge creation and transformation, recognising that their local experiences are inseparably connected to international problems, global power relations and political structures.

The policy and practice divide in Ethiopia's language education

Ethiopia's language education policy exhibits significant contradictions. On the one hand, it is among Africa's most inclusive policies on paper, while on the other, its implementation remains inconsistent and uneven. Article 5 of the 1995 Constitution (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995) recognises all Ethiopian languages as equal and grants regional states authority over the language of instruction. Similarly, the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) (Ministry of Education, 1994) operationalises this principle by introducing mother-tongue instruction in primary schools and English as a medium of instruction at tertiary

level. The policy aimed to balance local empowerment with global participation, enabling students to engage with their communities while preparing for international opportunities. As Heugh (2011b: 26) notes, the ETP sought ‘to reconcile pedagogical effectiveness through mother tongue with the pragmatic necessity of English for higher education and international communication’. Despite these intentions, persistent systemic and socio-political challenges have limited the policy’s effectiveness. Shortages of contextually appropriate teaching resources and insufficient professional support constrain the delivery of effective bilingual education (Baye, 2010). Furthermore, curriculum design often prioritises standardised testing and content coverage over creativity, critical thinking and socio-political consciousness, thereby exacerbating inequalities and privileging learners with greater linguistic and economic capital (Gebreyohannes, 2020; Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh, 2012).

Regional differences further intensify the policy-practice divide. While the federal system allows language autonomy, regions vary widely in teacher training, curriculum development, syllabus design and provision of instructional materials (Vujcich, 2013). Some regions have fully implemented mother-tongue programmes, whereas others lack the capacity to enforce the policy effectively, undermining the equality objectives of the ETP (Heugh, 2011b). Historical legacies also continue to influence public attitudes. Centralisation and Amharic hegemony have contributed to a perception among many parents that proficiency in English or Amharic supports social mobility and economic advantage (Baye, 2010; Heugh, 2009). These societal preferences push schools to prioritise hegemonic languages, weakening support for mother-tongue instruction (Gebreyohannes, 2020). The dominance of English in secondary and tertiary education further complicates the situation, as teachers struggle to maintain mother-tongue literacy while preparing students for English-medium advancement (Vujcich, 2013). Closing the policy-practice gap requires more than amendments to the policy itself. It necessitates a systemic overhaul, including enhanced teacher training, the development of culturally responsive curriculum, equitable distribution of resources, and sustained community participation. Only through such coordinated efforts can Ethiopia realise the transformative potential of its language policy, improving both educational quality and language justice (Heugh, 2011b; Baye, 2010).

Strategies for integration: Bridging the policy-practice divide in Ethiopia

Closing Ethiopia's language policy–practice divide requires a purposeful integration of CLP and DE philosophies. These approaches link language empowerment with social transformation, positioning language pedagogy as a means of promoting justice and critical consciousness rather than neutrality (Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 2001; Heugh, 2011b). The strategic areas below outline how Ethiopia can translate policy intentions into effective classroom realities. To achieve this, integration must involve coordinated and sustained actions across the education system to address the current implementation gap. The following four interrelated areas propose practical mechanisms through which Ethiopia can convert policy standards into meaningful pedagogical practice.

Teacher Professional Development (TPD)

Educators are central to policy implementation, and the quality of their training directly influences classroom effectiveness and learning outcomes. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should therefore prioritise multilingual instruction, critical literacy and learner-centred pedagogy (Heugh, 2011). Training must also prepare educators to navigate Ethiopia's dual language requirements: supporting mother-tongue instruction while strengthening English proficiency that is, students' abilities to speak, read, write and understand English with confidence. In addition, CLP- and DE-informed training encourages educators to cultivate critical awareness, enabling learners to question the political hierarchies and cultural norms embedded in language use and language education (Norton and Toohey, 2004; Crookes, 2013). Professional learning structures such as peer collaboration, expert mentoring and academic learning communities can further support reflective practice and help teachers adapt pedagogical approaches to their specific contexts.

Curriculum and pedagogical improvement

Integrating CLP and DE into the core curriculum requires shifting from fragmented, content-heavy syllabi toward hands-on and enquiry-based pedagogies. Educational approaches that emphasise debate, project-based learning and problem-solving tasks promote critical engagement with real-world issues (Janks, 2012; McCloskey, 2014). Using socially meaningful and contextually relevant

materials such as those reflecting Indigenous knowledge, local experiences and global challenges strengthens learner engagement and makes education more widely significant. A well-structured progression from mother-tongue literacy to English proficiency should be designed to support students' cognitive, linguistic and critical development in ways that align with development education objectives. This means building strong foundational learning in the mother tongue while gradually expanding English skills, enabling learners to participate confidently in both local and global contexts.

Resource provision and infrastructure

CLP and DE delivery rely upon access to and availability of suitable education resources and infrastructure. For instance, schools need textbooks, supplementary materials and digital resources both for mother tongue instruction and for English classes, complemented by home developed content that upholds cultural meaningfulness and international application (Tonegawa, 2025). Investment in libraries, digital platforms and cooperative learning venues that promote experiential teaching and learning methods, which are central to critical and multilingual education should be encouraged.

Community and stakeholder participation

Community and stakeholders' continuous cooperation and participation should also be extended beyond schools. It should include parents', communities' and policymakers' participation in discussion about the educational and social value of mother-tongue instruction, English proficiency, CLP and DE (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh, 2012). Relationships among schools, universities and non-governmental organisations may also simplify the exchange of information and culturally suitable and significant resources, strengthening the social network that sustains multilingual and critical education.

Policy alignment and monitoring

Institutional intersection and consistent monitoring are also vital for transforming CLP principles into practice. Education authorities should establish mechanisms for evaluating implementation, identifying barriers and adapting strategies to regional contexts (Heugh, 2011b). Feedback from educators, students and the

community at large should inform adaptive policy cycles that continue to respond to language and cultural realities.

Promoting learner autonomy

At the heart of CLP is the development of learner interdependence and active participation. Students should be enabled to question how language builds social hierarchies to investigate local issues and greater global concerns of inequities (Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 2001; McCloskey, 2014). Activities like student-led study, community discussions and collective problem-solving can change classrooms into places of social learning and ethical development. Generally, incorporating the concepts of CLP and DE into Ethiopia's language education system requires coordinated improvements in teacher training, curriculum redesign, equitable resource distribution, community participation and good governance. Such integration not only improves language proficiency but also cultivates critical awareness and civic responsibility, promoting Ethiopia's broader goals of equity, development and fundamental change in the basic structure of the language education (Heugh, 2011; Gebreyohannes, 2020).

Conclusion

This article has surveyed and critically examined the interconnections among Ethiopia's language policy, CLP and DE, with particular attention to how CLP can help narrow the persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Ethiopia's language education landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. While national policies recognise the importance of mother-tongue instruction and the role of English for international participation, implementation continues to be constrained by limited resources, insufficient teacher preparation, rigid curricular structures and exam-driven instruction (Heugh, 2011b; Baye, 2010). These conditions reproduce student passivity and socio-cultural inequalities, underlining the need for pedagogical reform.

CLP reframes language education as an interactive, socially negotiated process that promotes dialogue, autonomy and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 2001). When connected with DE, which emphasises global awareness, social justice and collective responsibility (McCloskey, 2014; Bourn, 2015; Andreotti, 2011) learning is positioned as both a cognitive and political activity. Together, these perspectives highlight that language teaching is not

merely about skill acquisition but also empowering students to interrogate power structures, challenge inequities and participate ethically and critically in a globalised world.

Ethiopia's experience therefore illustrates that well-written policy documents alone are insufficient without structural and strategic transformation. Effective implementation requires continuous teacher development, participatory and context-responsive curriculum design, pedagogies that value critical engagement, equitable resource distribution and strong collaboration among stakeholders (Heugh, 2011b). Such measures foster learning environments grounded in dialogue, cooperation and enquiry conditions essential for cultivating socially responsible and critically aware graduates. The implications for DE are particularly significant. Using language education as a platform for critical and ethical engagement can help nurture learners who are linguistically proficient, socially conscious and development-oriented. This approach advances the cognitive, cultural and socio-political dimensions of education while aligning with Ethiopia's broader development goals. Moreover, Ethiopia's experience offers valuable insights for other multilingual nations, demonstrating how integrating CLP and DE can promote inclusive and equitable learning that shapes how students perceive, interpret and act upon the world.

Ultimately, closing the policy-practice divide requires a comprehensive and interconnected strategy that embeds CLP principles within language teaching while reinforcing DE's focus on global consciousness and civic responsibility. When effectively implemented, this integration can transform classrooms into spaces of dialogue, participation and social action strengthening learning outcomes, institutional effectiveness and sustainable development (Heugh, 2011; McCloskey, 2014).

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POVERTY IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A SYNTHESIS OF EVIDENCE AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

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Abstract: This article presents a summary of a systematic literature review of research that reported on poverty in Northern Ireland since 2020. It also makes some international comparisons to set poverty in Northern Ireland within a wider world context. Five major databases were systematically searched: Scopus, Web of Science, Social Policy and Practice, PsycINFO, and Medline, plus a number of non-governmental organisation (NGO) and government websites. A total of 622 studies and reports were retrieved from academic, government, policy, and non-statutory sources. These studies were exported to Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre (EPPI) Reviewer (Version: 6.16.0.0) for screening and data extraction. Subsequently, 92 records underwent full-text screening, with 53 meeting the inclusion criteria and being incorporated into the evidence synthesis. Findings indicated that child poverty, health poverty, food poverty, energy poverty, educational outcomes, housing and homelessness, employment poverty, and the cost of living were all significant issues surrounding poverty in Northern Ireland. Comparisons of key poverty indicators in Northern Ireland with G12 countries, with constituent regions of the UK and the Republic of Ireland indicated that Northern Ireland has high levels of poverty on a number of indicators including low household income, shorter life expectancy from birth, and there was evidence that low wages of workers were contributing to high levels of poverty. The policy and political context are discussed, and recommendations are made for policymakers to consider.

Key words: Poverty in Northern Ireland; Systematic Review of Evidence; International Comparisons of Poverty Indicators.

Introduction

Poverty is a critical social issue with profound negative impacts. Despite extensive research on economic growth and development, economists have yet to find a definitive way to make poor countries prosperous, leaving poverty as the reality for billions (Azariadis and Stachurski, 2004). In 1995, the United Nations (UN) adopted two distinct definitions of poverty. One of these, absolute poverty, is characterised as a condition marked by severe deprivation of fundamental human needs, including access to adequate food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, healthcare, shelter, education, and information. This definition emphasises that absolute poverty is not solely determined by income but also by the availability and accessibility of essential services (UN, 1995: 75). According to the UN another form of poverty is overall poverty, which involves a lack of income, resources, and access to basic services, leading to hunger, poor health, inadequate housing, and social exclusion. It occurs globally, from widespread deprivation in developing countries to isolated poverty amid wealth in developed nations, and can result from economic downturns, disasters, or social marginalisation (Ibid.: 75).

For many years, approaches to poverty in the realm of international development and policymaking were humanistically limited, focusing solely on economic growth as the primary goal of development and measuring quality of life only through per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Nussbaum, 2006). Poverty occurs when individuals, families, or groups lack the resources necessary to access typical diets, participate in common activities, and enjoy standard living conditions and amenities, resulting in a level of deprivation so severe that they are effectively excluded from normal societal patterns and activities (Townsend, 1979). According to Sen (1973), one reason poverty persists is its intrinsic link to inequality: even when average income levels rise, disparities within a society can still result in significant levels of poverty. Furthermore, the socially accepted minimum standard of living, which helps define the ‘poverty line’, is often influenced by the average income, meaning poverty measures may also capture elements of relative inequality (Sen, 1973; Piketty, 2014). On Piketty’s analysis (2014), inequality is not an accident but the result of capitalism which, without state intervention and high progressive income tax, threatens democracy and may result in extreme inequality.

The United Nations acknowledges that income alone does not constitute the ultimate goal but serves as a means to achieve the broader objective of human development. To this end, non-economic factors such as a healthy life, women's status/gender equality, and standard of living also play a vital role. To promote this holistic approach, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) annually publishes the Human Development Report, ranking over 100 countries based on the Human Development Index (HDI). This index not only considers gross national income (GNI) per capita (normalised to a minimum of \$100 and a maximum of \$75,000), a life expectancy index (measured by life expectancy at birth) and an education index (composed of expected years of schooling, compared to mean years of schooling) (UN, 2023; 2024). A country's or region's level of achievement in a specific area (such as income, literacy, or life expectancy) is typically assessed using the average value of that outcome. However, this approach overlooks the potential inequality in how that outcome is distributed among different population groups or geographical areas within the country.

This disparity is evident in Northern Ireland, which, despite being part of the United Kingdom, has long been recognised as one of its most deprived regions (Monteith and McLaughlin, 2020). Despite this, it has not been prominently featured in discussions on poverty measurement or the development of poverty alleviation policies (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Poverty in Northern Ireland leads to young people growing up in segregated communities characterised by high rates of disability, chronic physical and mental health issues, and persistent unemployment, perpetuating intergenerational poverty (Horgan, 2011).

This article sets out the findings of a systematic literature review of reports and research on poverty in Northern Ireland published between 1st January 2020 and 31st December 2024. It then goes on to summarise how poverty in Northern Ireland compares to the G12 countries (with England, Wales, Scotland and North Ireland reported separately) and the Republic of Ireland. The study was commissioned by the Centre for Global Education, a non-governmental development organisation based in Belfast, funded by the Halifax Foundation Empower Programme and carried out by researchers in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. The evidence will be examined to identify the main drivers and indicators of poverty, as well as

the recommendations or interventions proposed to address the issue. Additionally, the review will explore the connection between poverty and broader economic and social structures between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, UK, Europe, and the global levels to enhance the understanding of the causes of poverty and inequality. What follows is a summary of a more substantive report on the evidence surrounding poverty in Northern Ireland. The full report can be accessed at: https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/656343973/Poverty_in_NI_16_SEPT_2025.pdf

Methodology

A systematic literature review is a rigorous and structured approach to synthesise the existing literature, followed by a predefined protocol to ensure reproducibility, transparency, and minimisation of bias in the selection and inclusion of relevant literature (Guillaume, 2019). It involves the identification of relevant databases, selection of studies according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter irrelevant literature. Relevant data is extracted and summarised, while the quality and reliability of the included studies are critically appraised. The findings are then systematically synthesised to provide a structured overview of the evidence. Finally, the results are presented, highlighting key trends, insights, and research gaps that inform future research.

Research questions and databases

The systematic evidence synthesis was carried out to explore the following questions: what does the published literature indicate are the main drivers of poverty and long-term trends and indicators in Northern Ireland?; and how does poverty at a local (Northern Ireland) level connect with macro and international poverty trends in the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Europe, and globally? For this systematic literature review, we selected five prominent academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed scholarly work. In addition to these, we incorporated government and policy databases, as well as reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international bodies, to provide a broader contextual understanding and enable cross-sectoral comparison. This multi-source approach allows us to triangulate findings, identify gaps between academic research and policy or practice, and enhance the robustness and

relevance of our review outcomes. Full details of the databases used in the search strategy and the selection process can be found in the main report (Ozkaya, Ain and Thurston, 2025).

Search Criteria

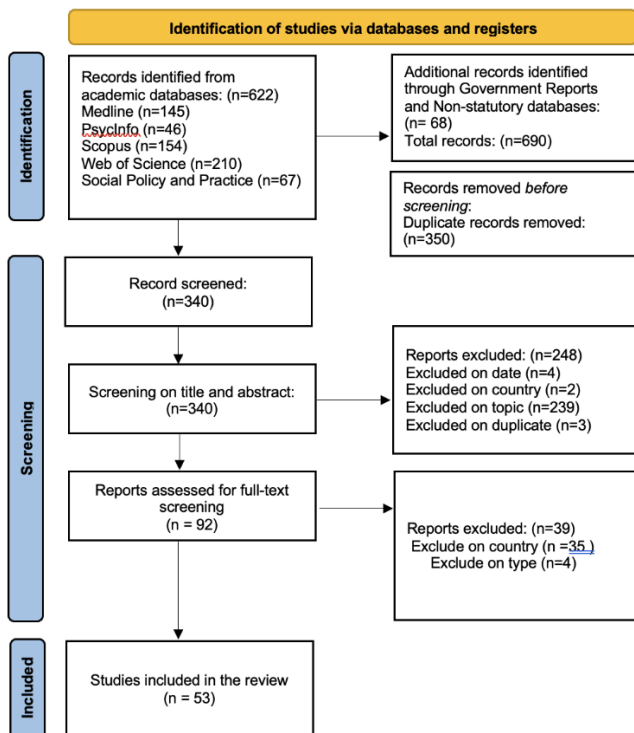
The search criteria were confined to papers:

1. Published studies, reports, and articles published from 2020 to 2024 in English.
2. Geographically focused on Northern Ireland, with secondary comparisons to the UK, the Republic of Ireland, the EU, and global data.
3. Addressed poverty, its drivers, trends, or policies in Northern Ireland.
4. Sourced from governmental reports, peer-reviewed journals, NGO reports, and reputable policy analysis.

For government, statutory, and non-statutory databases, we conducted a comprehensive search to identify documents related to poverty. Unlike academic databases, these repositories do not feature search engines that allow for structured query strings. Therefore, we manually examined archives containing relevant documents and reports to ensure a thorough and exhaustive search. Search strategies used for searching records from databases can be found in the full report (Ozkaya, Ain and Thurston, 2025). Figure 1 below sets out the process of identifying, screening and decision-making regarding inclusion/exclusion of research reports.

Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram (PRISMA, 2025)

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only



Selection of studies

This review examined all available evidence on poverty in Northern Ireland, including its prevalence, severity, and lived experiences. It also assessed various interventions and services aimed at reducing poverty, including government initiatives that provide support to those affected and targeted interventions for individuals experiencing poverty. To manage the anticipated large volume of studies and maintain a focus on Northern Ireland, the search was limited to English-language peer-reviewed publications, government reports, and non-

statutory literature. The review included all studies on poverty in Northern Ireland, regardless of methodology.

In total, 622 studies were recorded from academic, government and policy databases, as well as non-statutory databases. Studies were exported to the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI) Reviewer Version 6.16.0.0 for screening and data extraction. Three hundred and fifty duplicates were found and removed. Two reviewers conducted initial screening of titles and abstracts, and 219 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Ninety-two records were reviewed for full-text screening, and fifty-three records met the inclusion criteria and were included in the evidence synthesis. The PRISMA flow diagram for this process is presented in Figure 1. Inter-rater reliability was undertaken on 50 manuscripts to check for agreement on inclusion. Kappa was =1.0, indicating complete agreement between the reviewers.

Thematic analysis of reports

Data on poverty in Northern Ireland reported in these publications was focussed across eight thematic areas:

1. Child poverty
2. Health poverty
3. Food poverty
4. Energy poverty
5. Educational outcomes
6. Housing and homelessness
7. Employment poverty
8. Cost of living

As this research revealed, 18 percent of children live in relative poverty in Northern Ireland with 8 percent of these living in persistent poverty (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). A large scale study using data from 11,114 children from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland reported that after controlling for age of children, number of children in household, number of adults in household, presence of a disabled person, qualifications of adults and whether

adults were in work, children in Northern Ireland were significantly more likely to live in poverty than those in the Republic of Ireland. The magnitude of this difference was expressed as 7 percent. This major study was significant due to the excellent scientific statistical analysis and the sample size, indicating that results could be generalised to the whole populations of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Russell et al., 2025). Child poverty is driven by the high cost of living (food, fuel, childcare), inadequate welfare policies (e.g., two-child benefit limit), lone parenting and large families, disability in households, policy failures and lack of a cohesive anti-poverty strategy, and educational disadvantage and poor mental health. The former United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has been particularly critical of the UK Government's policy on welfare reform (Alston, 2018). In this report, Alston reported that the Universal Credit policy had an impact on claimants' mental health, finances and work prospects. Alston (2018: 3) reports that:

“The government has made no secret of its determination to change the value system to focus more on individual responsibility, to place major limits on government support, and to pursue a single-minded, and some have claimed simple-minded, focus on getting people into employment at all costs. Many aspects of this program are legitimate matters for political contestation, but it is the mentality that has informed many of the reforms that has brought the most misery and wrought the most harm to the fabric of British society. British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach apparently designed to instil discipline where it is least useful, to impose a rigid order on the lives of those least capable of coping with today's world, and elevating the goal of enforcing blind compliance over a genuine concern to improve the well-being of those at the lowest levels of British society”.

Such criticism highlights the role of neoliberal framing of poverty in government. Neoliberalism has been described as a political-economic regime (Hayek, 1944) in which human relations are defined by competition, citizens are primarily consumers, and the poor can make market decisions to improve their lives. However, neoliberalism also suggests that the poor are deficient individuals

who do not take responsibility for their fate or for the conditions in which they live (Feldman, 2019: 341). Neoliberalism has been a driving force in welfare reform in the UK (Ibid.: 344), yet it fails to account for the systemic barriers that exist for people living in poverty. While it may promote economic growth, neoliberalism also increases inequality, increasingly to dangerous levels, and concentrates capital accumulation in the hands of the few (Piketty, 2014). These have been reported to be pervasive and to prevent 'free-choice' in lifestyles (Card and Hepburn, 2023) and economic mobility (Beni, 2025). There are reports that neoliberalism is responsible for increasing inequality between those living in poverty and the rest of society so that members of society living in poverty are 'left behind' and their plight is 'ignored by people in power' (Stiglitz, 2024).

Political parties must move away from neoliberalism and its framing of inequality, which recasts it as a virtuous outcome of people getting what they deserve (Monbiot, 2016). Of course, poverty existed before neoliberalism became a mainstay of government economic and social policy. Intergenerational poverty was recognised by Lewis (1959) as being a significant barrier to mobility out of poverty long before Thatcher and Reagan adopted neoliberalism (Monbiot, 2016). As adopting neoliberal policy has failed to address the issue of poverty effectively, the logical conclusion must be that there should be a focus on changing socio-economic and political structures and providing financial intervention to remove poverty. Only then can behaviours change (Moore, 2001).

Life expectancy is lower in deprived areas, minus seven years for males and minus four years for females (Carson, Blakely and Laverty, 2021). Poor health outcomes linked to food insecurity, provision for mental health issues, and poor access to wider health services. For instance, Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) had a waiting list of 2,251 in 2023 (Reimagine Children's Collective, 2023). Poverty for those with intermediate immigration status is higher e.g., increasing numbers of newcomers are reported to find themselves destitute with a high odds ratio (2.9) of becoming homeless when compared to the settled population of Northern Ireland (O'Hara and Orr, 2021). Those in poverty experience higher prevalence of ill health, difficulty and delays in accessing treatment and poorer health outcomes (Mallorie, 2024). Health intersects with other effects of poverty, such as food insecurity. The highest

comorbidity between food and diet-related health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, is strongly linked to areas of high poverty in England (House of Commons Library, 2025). Similar patterns exist in Northern Ireland, where many poor health outcomes are situated in the north, west and east of Belfast and Foyle (Derry/Londonderry) areas, such as the highest alcohol related mortality (west Belfast and Foyle) and chronic heart disease (Belfast east) (Russell, 2012). These figures represent systemic failures by the Northern Ireland Assembly to address the underlying causes of poverty and implement effective public policies that enable health-related behavioural changes to occur.

Low household income is driving rising food insecurity, especially post-COVID and during school holidays. Other contributory factors are health issues, poor access to affordable food, and welfare reforms that reduce the income of the poorest in society. The number of food parcels delivered to families with children was 55,571, and those without children was 21,286 (an increase of 86 percent since 2019), and the very large increases in use of foodbank and food parcels by families in Northern Ireland's highest poverty areas reflect this food insecurity (Trussell Trust, 2025a). Trussell Trust (2025b: 30) estimates that the cost of food poverty in terms of cost to the NHS, losses to the economy and fiscal costs equate to £2 billion per annum. The report states that food insecurity significantly impacts on mental and physical health with people facing hunger 24.3 percent more likely to need the use of an ambulance, 24.3 percent more likely to have attendance at Accident and Emergency, 11.5 percent more likely to need a GP appointment and 10.1 percent more likely to need a hospital admission (Ibid.: 35). Food insecurity and fuel poverty go hand in hand (Ibid.: 23). Often families find themselves tied into both forms of poverty simultaneously. Forty-five percent of households in Northern Ireland are fuel poor (Mudie, 2023). There is a high reliance on unregulated home heating oil, poor insulation and energy efficiency in many homes, and rural areas are disproportionately affected by these factors.

There are significant educational attainment gaps between those living in poverty and those who are not. Comparing Free School Meal student attainment with non-Free School Meal, shows a 25-percentage point gap in school attainment in favour of non-Free School Meal students. The underlying causes

of this gap may include poverty-related cognitive delays, lack of digital access (especially for migrants), and the continued use of attainment selection in the grammar school system, favouring wealthier families who can pay for tuition and preparation for the transfer test. This results in the underrepresentation of students on free school meals in selective grammar schools (Borooah and Knox, 2015). At the last school meals survey 31.6 percent of students in secondary school were in receipt of free school meals, whereas 11.6 percent of students in grammar schools were in receipt of free school meals (Northern Ireland Statistical Records Agency, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). If opportunities for social mobility through education are to be realised, then grammar schools must do more to ensure that they take a representative sample of free school meals students.

Poverty is exacerbated for those who rent a home with 43 percent of social renters and 35 percent of private renters living in poverty (Department for Communities, 2024). Issues within the rental market include overcrowding, poor housing quality, rising rents and housing insecurity and homelessness among No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) families and travellers (JRF, 2024). Employment does not guarantee that families will escape from poverty. The mean wage in Northern Ireland is low compared to that of other comparable countries. Groups particularly affected by this include unpaid carers (Carers NI, 2022), disabled individuals, ethnic minorities and young people (JRF, 2024). The high levels of poverty reported in Northern Ireland are set against a backdrop of high inflation, stagnant wages, and inadequate benefits. Twenty-five percent of people in Northern Ireland were reported to earn less than the living wage, £9.30/hour in 2021 (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). All these factors deepen poverty.

It is important to understand that poverty in Northern Ireland is situated within a post-conflict society. The troubles brought additional challenges to those living in poverty in Northern Ireland that did not occur in the rest of the UK or the Republic of Ireland. Whether that be the loss of economic capital through death, with 45 percent of people experiencing the death or injury of someone they knew personally (Tomlinson, 2013), or the collapse of the industrial heart base happening as violence increased in Northern Ireland (Smyth, 2020). Patterns of highest deprivation and highest death rate are linked to areas of greatest

segregation during the troubles (Smyth, 2020), persist even today (Department for Communities, 2024).

International comparisons

In this research, we selected the Group of Twelve (G12) countries comprising Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (for which we identified data from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the Republic of Ireland as a comparative framework for examining poverty in Northern Ireland due to their economic prominence and global impact. The G12, consisting of some of the world's leading economies, provides a solid benchmark for evaluating social and economic indicators. These nations not only encompass a variety of economic systems and welfare models but also offer a comprehensive view on how developed countries tackle socio-economic issues. By comparing Northern Ireland's poverty metrics with those of the G12, the other regions/countries of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland (17 countries/regions in total), we aim to place the region's social inequalities within a wider international context, providing detailed insights into the effectiveness of current policies.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of these policies, we carried out a comparative analysis focusing on several key indicators of poverty and socio-economic well-being. These indicators include average income, which reflects the overall economic status of households; child poverty, given its long-term effects on social mobility and well-being; education levels, as they are directly linked to employment opportunities and income stability; life expectancy, serving as a measure of health and living standards; and unemployment rates, which greatly influence income stability and social inclusion. By analysing these variables, we sought to uncover patterns and disparities between Northern Ireland, the G12 countries, and the Republic of Ireland, thereby providing evidence-based recommendations for addressing poverty in Northern Ireland. Data was drawn from the UK Office for National Statistics (2024), The World Bank, World Data Info (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d), Eurostat, Worldometer (2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e), the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In terms of main international comparisons, it was noted that Northern Ireland ranks 16th lowest out of 17 countries when looking at the mean household income of workers (\$36,900). In comparison, those in the Republic of Ireland have \$78,970 (3rd highest), and in Belgium, the figure is \$54,580 (8th highest) (Our World in Data, 2024). Northern Ireland has the lowest unemployment rate of these countries (1.6 percent) (Clark, 2025), compared to 4 per cent in the Republic of Ireland, 4.5 per cent in England and 7.3 per cent in France (Eurostat, 2025). Northern Ireland ranks 14th of 17, having one of the lowest life expectancies at birth (measured in years expected to live) compared to Japan (85 years), Spain (83 years) and the Republic of Ireland (82.7 years) (World Bank, 2025).

When it comes to child poverty Northern Ireland ranks 7th lowest out of the 17 countries with 18 percent of children living in poverty (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). This is lower than England, which is 30 per cent (Brown, 2024), but higher than the 15.2 per cent figure for the Republic of Ireland (Social Justice Ireland, 2023), and the US (12.4 percent) (Shrider and Creamer, 2023). Measures of educational attainment are important as it is widely reported that education can provide a means to escape poverty and lead to increased levels of health (Tahir, 2022). Lower educational outcomes are inextricably linked to poverty (Ibid). In education, Northern Ireland ranks 10th highest in mathematics and 9th highest in reading attainment scores according to PISA 2022 measures (OECD, 2023a). Compared to other European education systems, Northern Ireland's performance was mixed. Countries like Switzerland (2nd in maths, 10th in reading) (OECD, 2023c) and the Republic of Ireland (4th in maths, 1st in reading) (OECD, 2023b) surpassed Northern Ireland. However, Germany (OECD, 2023d) and France (OECD, 2023e) had maths scores nearly identical to Northern Ireland's, with slightly lower reading outcomes.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland with measurable targets. The Department for Communities (2024) report that 349,000 people live in poverty in Northern Ireland. Once the final version of the anti-poverty strategy is adopted then the framework for action needs to be resilient and robust in the face of a changing and sometimes unstable

political climate in Northern Ireland. This means a cross-community, cross-party approach to poverty developed and approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly that develops long-term solutions to poverty by developing a clear plan to eradicate poverty by the provision of financial aid packages to ensure all households have a monthly income of greater than £373 per week (the figure set by the government as being the threshold for living in poverty or not living in poverty). For this to happen there will need to be reform of welfare policies and a movement away from neoliberal ideology underpinning these policies. At the same time thought will need to be given to addressing health inequalities with significant financial investment into life-changing interventions in the poorest areas of Northern Ireland, where health inequalities are greatest. It will be almost impossible to address health inequalities in Northern Ireland without addressing food poverty and ensuring that all families in Northern Ireland can live without food insecurity.

There are excellent data sets and a large number of published research reports on poverty in Northern Ireland. It is proposed that undertaking historical and planned future high-quality analysis of Northern Ireland longitudinal data sets (e.g., health data, benefits data, school attainment data, population census data) to examine patterns of poverty and inequality, looking at how public policy and government decisions have influenced outcomes, and make similar comparisons to England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and suitable international countries. Only through doing this will the government here be able to make informed assessments as to whether policy has had the desired impact.

Help for working families is essential to break poverty cycles. Investment in, and support for, affordable childcare to ensure parents (especially those who may be primary caregivers) can take their place in the workforce and, by being economically active, increase their household income. Ensuring there is affordable and effective transport and digital connectivity is also essential to ensure workers can afford to get to work, and make effective use of work from home policies. This ultimately would lift many families out of poverty. At the same time improving the quality and availability of housing, ensuring affordable rental property is well insulated, energy efficient, and free from damp and mould. This would reduce poverty, improve the health of the renting population and their

children, and help the government meet targets on carbon emissions. Finally, one of the most important areas for breaking inter-generational cycles of poverty is education. Improving access to all forms of education, especially for disadvantaged groups, where publicly funded schools should educate a representative section of the communities they serve. In essence, the Northern Ireland Assembly should set quotas for free school meal entry for grammar schools that are representative of the geographic areas in which they are situated.

The Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy draft proposal has now been published and is subject to a consultation period (Department for Communities, 2025). However, the draft Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy has already been heavily criticised by Peter Bryson, the Head of Save the Children Northern Ireland, who was quoted as commenting,

“It (the draft Northern Ireland Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy) has no clear priorities, budget, action plan, milestones, or accountability for its delivery. It recycles existing commitments, with no real clear link drawn to a deeply flawed description of the current drivers of poverty. There's no evidence that lessons have been learnt from past initiatives, no serious assessment of the drivers of poverty, and no engagement with the lived experience of children, families and communities” (McCarthy, 2025).

Initial analysis of the draft strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025) indicates that the present draft lacks targets and milestones and will struggle to address issues of poverty in Northern Ireland in its current form.

Poverty has long been a persistent presence in society. However, the neoliberal political policies implemented by successive UK governments, and indeed the Northern Ireland Assembly, have correlated with increased poverty levels for children and working adults (Department for Communities, 2023). Further work is required to examine poverty and inequality and investigate their causes. While low wages have been cited as being the major contributory cause (Doorley, Gubello, and Tuda, 2024), it is clear that welfare reform has coincided with increased poverty, increased inequality and reduced social mobility

(Department for Communities, 2023). There may be a need to levy additional tax on those who are most affluent in society. This has led to calls for increased taxation on extreme wealth to increase funding for public services that can help to tackle persistent poverty (Oxfam, 2025). However, this would require devolving more powers to Stormont from Westminster (Devlin, 2022). Only when there is coordinated, sustained cross-community, cross-sectoral and cross-party support for an effective anti-poverty strategy will these persistent deprivations be addressed.

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CLIMATE INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

COLETTE SAUNDERS

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Abstract: This Perspectives article addresses an aspect of development education practice focussed on climate change. The article will serve as a blueprint upon which a workshop offering will be developed for early childhood care and education (ECCE) students. The aim of the workshop is to support students to engage with climate injustice and to recognise it as a form of inequality experienced by children. It also aims to empower students to view themselves as advocates for young children's climate and environmental rights. The issues of climate injustice and inequality in early childhood were chosen for this workshop offering for two important reasons. Firstly, General Comment No. 26 of UNCRC (OHCHR, 2023) outlines that all children have rights in relation to the environment and climate, but due to the devastating impacts of climate change in many global contexts, these rights are not being upheld. Secondly, climate injustice and inequality are also areas of focus in Trócaire's climate and environmental justice strategy (2024-2028) (Trócaire, 2024), which emphasises that certain social groups which include children, are more susceptible to the risks posed by climate change than others.

There are five key points that I wish to explore in the article and build into the workshop offering and they are as follows: exploring the links between development education (IDEA, 2017) and Aistear (NCCA, 2024), the early childhood curriculum framework; engaging students in learning about children's rights in relation to climate and the environment by introducing General Comment 26; exploring how a lack of realisation of children's rights is an example of inequality; introducing students to the concept of intergenerational climate justice; and directing students' attention to the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, n.d.1).

Key words: Development Education; Aistear; Children’s Rights; Climate; Environment.

Development education and Aistear

As Trócaire’s Development Education Officer for the Early Years, my role is focused on raising awareness of and engaging early childhood professionals in learning about development education concepts in a way that is meaningful to their professional practice. Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2024) along with other professional practice frameworks, guidance, regulation, initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) are integral parts of this practice, however for the purposes of my workshop and this Perspectives article, Aistear will be the focus. Early childhood has been described as ‘marking the beginning of the ... young child’s learning journey’, therefore the framework was called ‘Aistear’ which is the Irish word for journey. Young children embark upon this learning journey with support and guidance from early childhood professionals who view them as agentic, competent and confident learners (NCCA, 2009: 6; NCCA, 2024: 9). The workshop offering, which is underpinned by this Perspectives article, will also take the early childhood professional on a learning journey of their own where they will encounter the ‘educational process’ associated with development education.

Development education has been described by the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) as ‘an educational process which seeks to increase awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live ...’ (IDEA, 2017: 7). The workshop introduces students to the core concepts which comprise development education, listed below. This introduction is then followed by creating links to their professional practice and identifying strategies to use when applying this new knowledge in a professional context. Research undertaken by Ruane et al (2010) established that effective strategies to use with young children to support their engagement with global issues were photographs, storytelling, participatory activities and discussion (Ruane et al., 2010: 43-69). It was noted also that ‘the synergy between the content with which children were engaging and the approach used [by educators]

to engage children in critical thinking of the content was an important consideration' (Ibid.: 73).

To support students in the approach they use, the development education concepts are mapped to the relevant principles and themes of Aistear and strategies are shared which incorporate the use of Trócaire's early childhood resources. For example, the 'Early Childhood Global Goals Photo Pack' (Trócaire, n.d.), the interactive and participatory 'Early Childhood Tree of Water Justice' resource (Trócaire n.d.1), and the recently published children's story book *Julio and Grandfather Wind* (Saunders, 2025). The mapping and the practical application of the strategies subsequently feed into discussions related to the core concepts that develop during the workshops. The core concepts are: exploring inequalities at local and global levels; taking a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach; recognising diverse perspectives related to development; considering the everyday reality for people experiencing poverty; and valuing our unique identity and encouraging us to respect the unique identity of others (Trócaire, 2009; Trócaire, 2018; IDEA, 2017: 7; Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25). For the workshop, two of the nine Aistear principles are identified as resonating most clearly with the development education core concepts, these principles are 'Agentic Global Citizens' and 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' (NCCA, 2024:16).

The first Aistear principle 'Agentic Global Citizens', states that:

"Babies, toddlers and young children are agentic, competent and confident global citizens. Being agentic means they have voice and influence and that they can make choices about and in their learning. Babies, toddlers and young children have the right to be cared for, nurtured and supported to grow and develop. They can experience democracy by having their voice heard and respected by educators who support active participation. Listening to and learning to respect others and their views is a key part of this. As citizens of the world, babies, toddlers and young children have deep connections with people and the environment, valuing justice and human rights" (NCCA, 2024: 16).

In the workshop setting and using small working groups, parallels are drawn between the Aistear principle ‘Agentic Global Citizens’ described above and the development education concepts ‘considering the everyday reality for people experiencing poverty; and valuing our unique identity and encouraging us to respect the unique identity of others’ (Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25).

Links to the relevant Aistear themes are then explored. These themes are provided within the early childhood curriculum framework to ‘describe what ... young children will learn in order to support the development of important dispositions, attitudes and values, along with bringing these skills, knowledge and understanding to life’ (NCCA, 2024: 21). When considering the themes in this context, connections become evident between the Aistear themes of Identity and Belonging, and Wellbeing (Ibid.: 22-25) and the development education concepts of ‘everyday realit[ies] for people experiencing poverty’ ... alongside [the significance of] ‘valuing our unique identity [and that] of others’ (Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25).

The second Aistear principle ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ states that:

“All ... young children have the right to equality of opportunity, to be treated fairly and without discrimination. They have the right to access and participate meaningfully in experiences to fulfil their potential as unique individuals. Equity in early childhood is about fairness in addressing any challenges that a ... young child might experience because of their background or ability. Diversity of self, family, baile (the Irish word for home) and community are respected and celebrated while also noticing and valuing ... similarities and connectedness. Inclusion means each ...young child is supported, empowered and enabled to participate and progress in meaningful early childhood experiences” (NCCA, 2024: 16).

In this instance too, and using small working groups, parallels are drawn between the Aistear principle ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ described previously, and the development education concepts ‘exploring inequalities at local and global

levels; taking a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach; and recognising diverse perspectives related to development’ (Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25). Links between these core concepts and the relevant Aistear themes are considered too and once again connections are seen as extending to the Aistear themes of Wellbeing and Identity and Belonging (Ibid.: 22-25).

As the students work through the connections between the Aistear principles, themes and the development education concepts, they are presented with learning provocations. They are asked to: consider what a lack of support for children’s learning and development might look like; consider a more restricted understanding of the child which does not view them as agentic, competent and confident; and reflect on what *not* upholding children’s rights might result in. The learning provocations are then directed into a more critical space and further questions are posed such as: ‘Have children’s rights been upheld in the context of the concept being considered? Who stands to gain and who loses out by maintaining the current status quo? What needs to change? And how can such change be effected so that all children in any global context are afforded learning and development opportunities on a par with others?’

How lack of realisation of children’s rights in relation to General Comment 26 is an example of inequality

At this point in the workshop, attention shifts towards the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, n.d.). The UNCRC is introduced in its thematic areas of survival rights, development rights, protection rights and participation rights (Freeman, 1996 cited by Barnardos, 2018: 1-2). The development education concepts are then explored through the lens of children’s rights. For example, students are asked to consider the concept ‘exploring inequalities at local and global levels’ and reflect on how these inequalities may manifest if survival rights, development rights, protection rights and participation rights are not upheld by countries and governments who have ratified the UNCRC (United Nations, n.d.). Exploring inequalities at local and global levels is then teased out by drawing attention to General Comment 26 of the UNCRC. General Comment 26 was written by the Committee on the Rights of the Child to explain how children’s rights are related to the environment and climate change, and what governments must do to protect them (OHCHR, 2023).

How equality is defined in the early childhood context is outlined initially and it is the definition outlined in the Charter that is shared with students. Equality has been defined in the Diversity, Inclusion and Equality Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education as:

“the importance of recognising, respecting, and accepting the diversity of individuals and group needs, and of ensuring equality in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families ... Equality of participation is particularly relevant when working with children ...” (DCYA, 2016: vi).

Inequality, therefore, may be inferred from this definition as a lack of recognition, respect and acceptance of individual and group needs, and a lack of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families. Ongoing inequality such as this has been described by UNICEF as needing to be approached from within a rights-based perspective (UNICEF, n.d.1).

Children and climate injustice

To help students understand the concept of climate injustice and how it relates to children, firstly climate justice and what it means is considered by referring to two important reports published in the last three years. These reports are UNICEF’s ‘Innocenti Report’ and the IPCC’s (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) ‘6th Assessment Report’. Key takeaways published in the 2022 UNICEF ‘Innocenti Report’ defined climate justice as follows: i) climate justice means linking human rights with development and climate action [across and within low, middle and high income countries] (Metreau, Young and Eapen, 2024); ii) climate justice means having a people-centred approach to climate action; iii) achieving climate justice means understanding that not everyone has contributed to climate change in the same way; iv) pursuing climate justice means combatting social injustice, gender injustice, economic injustice, intergenerational injustice and environmental injustice; and lastly, v) climate justice requires a systems transformation (UNICEF, 2022).

In relation to the key takeaways in ‘iii’ and ‘iv’ above which comprise the definition of climate justice, the Working Group II (WGII) contribution to

the ‘Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 6th Assessment Report’ (IPCC, 2023: 4), presented a series of frequently asked questions (FAQ’s) one of which, FAQ 3, resonated with key takeaways ‘iii’ and ‘iv’. FAQ 3 asked ‘How will climate change affect the lives of today’s children tomorrow, if *no* immediate action is taken?’ The response highlighted that today's children and future generations are more likely to be exposed and vulnerable to climate change and related risks such as flooding, heat stress, water scarcity, poverty and hunger than current generations. An example shared by the WGII publication illustrated that children aged ten or younger in 2020, are predicted to experience a fourfold increase in extreme events due to climate change if temperatures increase up to 1.5°C by 2100, with this prediction rising fivefold, if temperatures increase up to 3°C. The publication also emphasised how a person aged fifty-five in 2020 would not experience the same increases in exposure to extreme events caused by climate change in their lifetime as children aged ten or younger in the same year (IPCC, 2023: 4). The extreme events, such as flooding, heat stress, water scarcity, poverty and hunger, experienced by children living in low-income countries (Metreau, Young and Eapen, 2024), have been described as ‘disproportionately affect[ing] children’ (Gibbons, 2014: 23) for reasons which, for the most part, are outside of their control. These circumstances have led to an urgency in seeking intergenerational climate justice (UNICEF, n.d.2; Stone and Lofts, 2009; Rogers, 2023; and Arnot et al., 2024).

Intergenerational climate justice

The workshop discussion then moves in the direction of seeking to determine the level of knowledge in the room relating to the term intergenerational and how this term relates to the impacts of climate change on young children. An anonymous Mentimeter is shared with students so they can share their thoughts (Mentimeter, 2025) and this is followed by sharing the definition itself. The word ‘intergenerational’ refers to something which exists or occurs between generations (Merriam-Webster, 2025). This definition is then supported with reference to Gibbons (2014) who provides an insightful discussion on climate change, children's rights, and the pursuit of intergenerational climate justice which will underpin the learning related to this area. Gibbons (2014: 20) explains how the ‘lifestyles and decisions of today’s adults, and those of the past two generations, have inalterably changed the life prospects’ for those yet to be born.

Gibbons also argues that climate justice not only extends across time and generations, but geographic space. Another significant point draws attention to the fact that children today, and future generations, have a claim to climate justice within and among their own countries as outlined in the UNCRC (Ibid.: 20). The significance of every child's right to climate justice has been further elucidated upon by General Comment 26, implemented by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in May 2023, which seeks the enforcement of their right to climate justice to the maximum extent (OHCHR, 2023: 2). But as highlighted in publications such as the 'Innocenti report' (UNICEF, 2022) and the IPCC (2023) assessment report, these rights are not being fully realised in certain contexts and are leading to ongoing challenges related to climate injustice and inequality in early childhood.

SDGs and sustainability

The last part of the workshop asks the students to consider how they might support children to have their rights in relation to climate and equality met so that their needs in the present are addressed without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987: 16). At this point, students' attention is directed towards the SDG's or Global Goals. In total there are 17 SDG's that comprise the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which was agreed in 2015 and built on over four decades of work by United Nations and its member states. The goals are described as:

“an urgent call to action by all countries, developed and developing, in global partnership. [The goals] recognise ending poverty and deprivations must go hand in hand with strategies that improve health, education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth, all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests” (United Nations, n.d.1).

As a development education officer working for an NGO which recognises the SDGs as a helpful framework to use when engaging students with development education concepts, it is important to highlight that the SDGs are not without their challenges. The United Nations Human Rights Council

published a Special Rapporteur report in 2020 which spoke to these challenges (Alston, 2020). The report describes the SDGs as especially valuable in contexts, such as my workshops, in which they provide an entry point for discussions on contentious issues, but [country] results in relation to meeting the targets and indicators associated with the SDGs have been described as deeply disappointing (Ibid.: 10). A concluding point to the report suggests that supporters of the SDGs should acknowledge that there is a ‘deep deficit of political motivation’ which is constraining the progress of key goals in the areas of, among others, inequality and climate change. However, the report calls for ‘new strategies, genuine mobilisation empowerment and accountability’ to avoid Governments and international organisations ‘sleepwalking towards assured failure’ (Ibid.: 20).

Hickel (2018: 873-874) discusses what he argues to be a significant contradiction within the SDGs which resonates with the points presented above by Alston (2020) described as ‘the two sides of the SDGs’. One side intimates a ‘call for humanity to achieve harmony with nature and to protect the planet from degradation’ with specific targets identified in SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) (United Nations, n.d.6). This call echoes a point made in the Foreword to the Brundtland Report titled *Our Common Future*, which describes ‘the *environment* as where we all live; and *development* as what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode’ (Brundtland, 1987: 7, author’s emphasis). The other side of the contradiction draws attention to ‘continued global economic growth equivalent to 3% per year’, as outlined in SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). SDG 8 proposes that such growth is required to ‘promote sustained, inclusive and economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’ (United Nations, n.d.7). However, empirical data strongly indicates that such growth will negate the carbon budget of 2°C rendering SDG 8 incompatible with sustainability objectives (Hickel, 2018: 875-879). This contradiction is also at odds with the guiding principles of the Brundtland Report which described sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Brundtland, 1987 :15). Therefore, it is necessary to be mindful that until the SDGs are recalibrated in the manner suggested by Alston (2020), Hickel (2018)

and others, a caveat must apply to the interpretation and application of the Global Goals 2030 Agenda. To this end, the challenge for now is to reflect on ways in which the overall package for 2030, including targets and indicators, can be reshaped and supplemented if it is to be effective (Alston, 2020: 14).

This workshop and Perspectives article have come about to a certain extent because of such reflection. For the purposes of this workshop SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG13 (Climate Action) are the primary focus because of their clear links to the workshop content. Students are asked to consider how they may promote and address the rights of young children (SDG 4, Target 4.7) so that their needs today are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987: 15). They are asked to contemplate how they might empower and promote the social, economic and inclusion of all [including children] irrespective of status (SDG 10, Target 10.2) and lastly they are asked to reflect upon what they could do to improve education and raise awareness around climate change (SDG 13, Target 13.3) (United Nations n.d.2; United Nations n.d.3; United Nations n.d.4). For this reflexivity (Bolton, 2009: 13) to emerge, the educator as described by Freire, which in the context of this Perspectives article refers to the students participating in the workshop, must be willing to co-create [and commit to] the learning experience (Freire, 2017: 54) if they are to successfully encourage the participation of children. ECCE students ideally should engage with the workshop in a way which enables them to ‘question their own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions ... how [they] relate to others ... and begin critically tak[ing] circumstances and relationships [with young children] into consideration ... (Cunliffe, 2009 cited in Bolton, 2009: 13).

An important question to consider at this point is how students may be supported to engage with climate injustice and to recognise it as a form of inequality alongside their roles as advocates for young children’s climate and environmental rights. The answer for me will always be through education. It is in everyday interactions with children, for example, storytelling, imagery, small group activities and circle time that early childhood professionals may support children in their role to ‘address issues relating to their active role as citizens’

(Bamber, 2020: xxiv). In professional practice this may take the form of drawing on ‘perceptive teaching skills’ as described by Dolan (2014: 1) and ‘teachable moments’ as explored by Ephgrave (2018: 1-7) when encountering opportunities to introduce ideas about children’s rights in relation to equality, the environment and climate change. A helpful quote from the United Nations which touches on this transformative nature of education is as follows: ‘Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies’ (United Nations, n.d.5). From my own learning experiences, I will also add that students also need a certain willingness to ‘embrace ambiguity’ (Feldman, 2023) to help them engage in co-creating the learning experiences as described by Freire above.

Conclusion

This Perspectives article and subsequent workshop were written with specific intentions in mind. Firstly, to support students to engage with climate injustice and to recognise it as a form of inequality experienced by young children. And secondly, for ECCE students to view themselves as advocates for young children’s climate and environmental rights, so that young children become equipped to embrace their custodianship of the planet for their own generation and for the generations yet to come (Brundtland, 1987: 15). To enable me to do this, my background in ECCE was very much to the fore. I drew on this knowledge initially, when I introduced the development education concepts to students by enabling them to draw parallels between the concepts and Aistear, and later through exploring the links to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child.

This Perspectives article has hopefully demonstrated how I intend to engage ECCE students in learning about development education concepts in a way that is meaningful to their professional practice. Recognising opportunities to bring children along on this learning journey will continue to be a key skill for those working with young children because, as Montessori wrote, ‘children have an absorbent mind. They absorb knowledge from the environment without fatigue ... This is the moment in the life of man when we can do something for the betterment of humanity’ (Association Montessori Internationale, 2025). I will finish with a quote I came across while studying for my global citizenship

education certificate. The quote serves as a helpful reminder to me when compassion fatigue sets in and I question why climate injustice and inequality need to be challenged, and governments taken to task for their reticence in certain global contexts regarding these issues:

“Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents,
it was loaned to you by your children.
We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors,
we borrow it from our Children” (#53 Proverb, 2024).

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REIMAGINING URBAN PLANNING EDUCATION IN THE META-CRISIS: PEDAGOGICAL PATHWAYS FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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Abstract: The contemporary meta-crisis - marked by climate breakdown, widening social inequalities, democratic erosion, and the commodification of higher education - demands a radical rethinking of how we educate future urban planners. Urban planning education, traditionally rooted in technocratic and formalist models, often privileges economic growth and instrumental evaluation frameworks over critical reflection, social justice, and ecological sustainability. This article argues that development education (DE), grounded in Freirean praxis, provides a vital pedagogical lens to reshape planning education so that it can respond meaningfully to interconnected crises. Drawing on global debates and case studies from the global South, the article explores how urban planning curricula can shift from narrow professional training to spaces of critical pedagogy that interrogate systemic drivers of inequality, ecological degradation, and authoritarian governance. It analyses the performativity of neoliberal teaching practices in planning schools - where employability targets and growth metrics override transformative dialogue - and highlights how DE-inspired approaches can re-centre values of participation, equity, and interdependence.

The article further considers the policy context shaping planning education, particularly the pressures of results-based management, accreditation systems, and global ranking regimes. It argues for new policy frameworks that legitimise alternative pedagogies, strengthen alliances between DE and urban planning educators, and support partnerships with social movements advocating for the right to the city, climate justice, and democratic accountability. In advancing this perspective, the article situates urban planning education within the broader struggle for emancipatory pedagogy, proposing that the integration of development education principles into planning curricula offers both a critique of

the present and a pathway to reimagining education as a site of resistance and reconstruction in times of crisis.

Key words: Development Education; Urban Planning Education; Meta-Crisis; Critical Pedagogy; Social Justice; Neoliberalism.

Introduction

Urban planning education is increasingly situated within a contemporary meta-crisis, characterised by climate breakdown, widening socio-spatial inequalities, democratic erosion, digital disruption, and the marketisation of higher education. These crises are not discrete or episodic but deeply interconnected, producing systemic challenges that resist technocratic and sectoral solutions and demand interdisciplinary, reflexive, and ethically grounded responses. Cities - particularly in the global South - have become key arenas where these overlapping crises are most visible, manifesting through informal urbanisation, ecological stress, housing precarity, and governance failures. Despite this context, urban planning education continues to be largely shaped by technicist, managerial, and growth-oriented paradigms. Planning curricula often prioritise spatial optimisation, regulatory compliance, and employability outcomes, while marginalising critical reflection on power, justice, and ecological limits. Accreditation regimes, global ranking systems, and results-based management further reinforce instrumental approaches to teaching and learning, narrowing the ethical and political scope of planning education and discouraging pedagogical innovation, reflexive practice, and long-term societal engagement.

This article argues that development education - grounded in Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1994) offers a necessary framework for reimagining urban planning education in times of meta-crisis. Rather than treating planning as a neutral technical profession, DE foregrounds structural inequality, historical responsibility, participation, and transformative action. Drawing on global scholarship and illustrative examples from the global South, the article positions urban planning education as a potential site of resistance and reconstruction, capable of preparing future planners to engage meaningfully with uncertainty, injustice, and socio-ecological transformation while fostering democratic

accountability, critical citizenship, and long-term urban resilience across diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

Cities are not merely spatial or economic systems but developmental environments in which childhood, social identity and public life are continuously shaped. The literature on human-centred and child-friendly cities illustrates how urban environments profoundly structure well-being, equity and participation, particularly for vulnerable groups (Brown et al., 2019). Such perspectives resonate with the normative and emancipatory aims of development education, which positions learners as critical agents capable of interrogating structural power relations and imagining more just futures. Drawing on Freirean traditions, development education conceives learning as dialogical, reflexive and transformative rather than technocratic or instrumental (Freire, 1994). In this sense, reimagining planning education through a development education lens foregrounds the ethical, cultural and ecological dimensions of urbanisation that are often marginalised within dominant planning curricula shaped by neoliberal performativity.

Urban planning education is increasingly being reframed through the lens of development education (DE), which emphasises critical consciousness, ethical agency, and transformative social learning rather than narrow skills development. Recent DE scholarship has argued that education in the twenty-first century must cultivate the capacity to engage with structural injustices, planetary emergencies and democratic erosion (McCloskey, 2025; Gamal et al., 2024). Importantly, this perspective challenges planning's technocratic self-image and reasserts the pedagogical role of higher education as a space for social critique and civic formation. As Giroux (2025) notes, critical pedagogy inspired by Paulo Freire foregrounds the ethical and political stakes of education during 'dark times', calling for forms of learning that resist authoritarianism, marketisation and epistemic erasure.

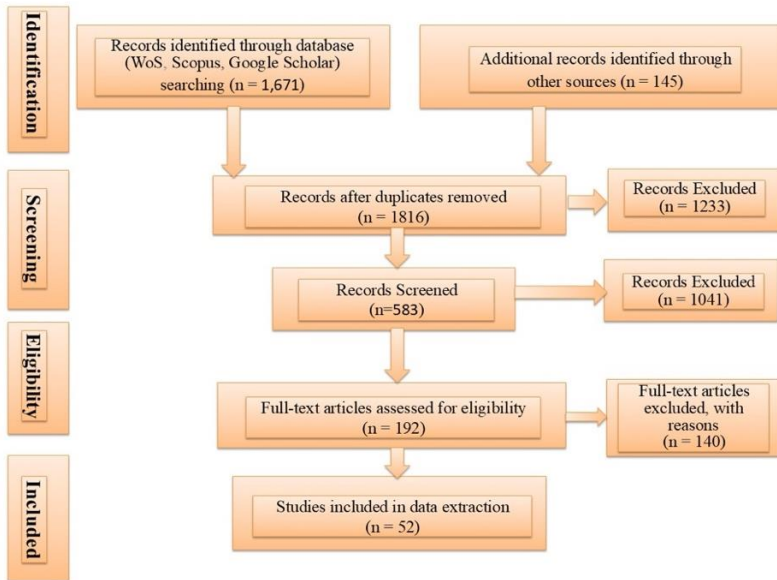
Within this context, hope has re-emerged as a key pedagogical category. Rather than representing naïve optimism, hope in DE is conceptualised as a form of critical praxis tied to agency, solidarity, and structural transformation (Bourn, 2025; Dolan, 2025). This understanding resonates strongly with the challenges

facing contemporary urban planning, where climate breakdown, democratic erosion, digital disruption and socio-spatial inequalities demand more than technical instrumentality - they demand pedagogies capable of preparing learners to act with responsibility and imagination amid systemic crisis. Such a normative reorientation aligns with the Freirean tradition of 'educational hope' as a basis for confronting structures of domination and imagining alternative futures (Freire, 1994; McCloskey, 2025). By situating planning education within this broader educational horizon, this article argues that DE provides a compelling paradigm for reimagining planning curricula in the meta-crisis.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach guided by the PRISMA framework as shown in Figure 1. The PRISMA flowchart shown in Figure 1 illustrates the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion used to select and synthesise relevant literature on urban planning education and development education.

Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart adopted for this research (Page et al., 2021)



Systematic literature review

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) design guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. Although PRISMA is most commonly used in health research, it is increasingly applied in urban studies and education research to enhance transparency, replicability, and methodological clarity. In this article, PRISMA is employed as a structuring and reporting framework, adapted to suit the interpretive and critical epistemology of development education rather than a positivist evaluative model. The review focuses on synthesising scholarship at the intersection of urban planning education, meta-crisis, pedagogy, and development education. A comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science (Core Collection), and Google Scholar to ensure disciplinary diversity and coverage of both peer-reviewed and influential interdisciplinary literature. The search strategy used Boolean combinations of keywords related to planning

education, crisis conditions, and pedagogy, including: urban planning, education, meta-crisis, polycrisis, critical pedagogy, development education, and education for sustainable development. Searches were limited to English-language publications from 2000 to 2025, reflecting the period in which critical pedagogy, sustainability education, and neoliberal critiques of higher education gained prominence in planning and urban studies.

The study selection process followed the four PRISMA stages illustrated in the attached flowchart: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Following initial identification across databases, duplicate records were removed. Titles and abstracts were then screened to exclude studies without an explicit educational or pedagogical focus. Full-text screening assessed eligibility based on predefined inclusion criteria, prioritising studies that engaged with planning education, pedagogy, crisis narratives, social justice, sustainability, or governance. Studies limited to purely technical planning analysis or professional training without pedagogical reflection were excluded. The final corpus of studies included in the synthesis spans diverse geographical contexts, with strong representation from the global South.

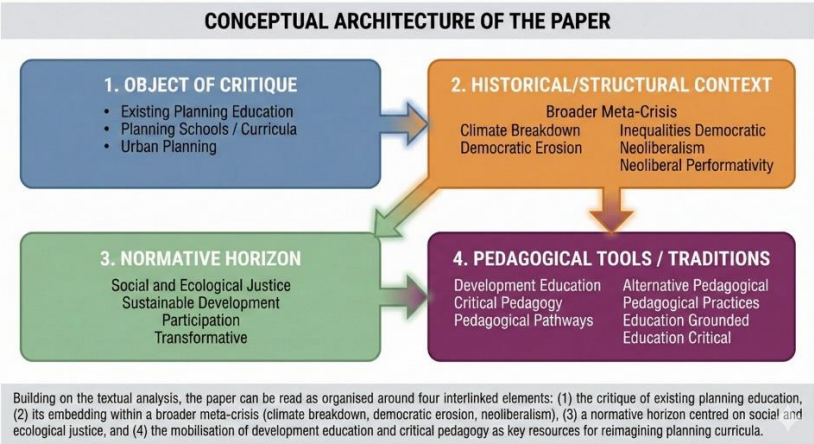
Data extraction focused on qualitative and conceptual attributes, including pedagogical orientation, engagement with crisis narratives, relevance to development education principles, and implications for planning education. A thematic synthesis approach was used to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and emerging pedagogical shifts. Consistent with development education principles, the review adopts a normative-critical stance, recognising education as a political practice shaped by power and institutional structures. As a review of published literature, no ethical approval was required; however, principles of academic integrity and transparency were rigorously maintained.

Conceptual architecture of the article

To guide the analytical and argumentative structure of this article, Figure 2 presents a conceptual architecture that organises the article around four interlinked elements. First, it identifies the object of critique, namely existing planning education, planning schools, and dominant curricular models. Second, it situates these objects within a broader historical and structural context defined

by climate breakdown, democratic erosion, socio-ecological inequality, and neoliberal performativity - conditions that collectively constitute the contemporary meta-crisis. Third, the figure foregrounds a normative horizon centred on social and ecological justice, sustainable development, participation, and transformative change. Finally, it highlights relevant pedagogical tools and traditions, including development education and critical pedagogy, which provide the conceptual and methodological resources for reimagining planning curricula. Together, these four elements provide an integrated framework for understanding the tensions, possibilities, and strategic interventions explored in the remainder of this article.

Figure 2: Conceptual architecture of the article (conceptualised by author)



As shown in Figure 2, building on the textual analysis, the article can be read as organised around four interlinked elements: (1) the critique of existing planning education, (2) its embedding within a broader meta-crisis (climate breakdown, democratic erosion, neoliberalism), (3) a normative horizon centred on social and ecological justice, and (4) the mobilisation of development education and critical pedagogy as key resources for reimagining planning curricula. This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and critical methodology, consistent with the epistemological foundations of development education and critical urban theory. Rather than employing empirical hypothesis testing, the study draws on critical

literature synthesis, policy analysis, and reflective engagement with planning education practices across diverse contexts. The methodological approach comprises three interrelated components. First, a thematic review of interdisciplinary literature was undertaken, spanning urban planning, development studies, sustainability education, and critical pedagogy. This body of work was analysed to identify dominant pedagogical paradigms, emerging critiques, and alternative educational approaches relevant to planning education in the context of the meta-crisis.

Second, the article engages in contextual analysis of global case-based research, particularly from the global South. Studies examining urban sustainability, liveability, participatory governance, child-friendly cities, and socio-environmental planning were used illustratively to demonstrate how planning challenges intersect with education, governance, and social justice concerns. Third, the article employs a normative-critical analytical lens, informed by Freirean pedagogy and development education principles (Freire, 1994). This lens enables reflection on how neoliberal policy frameworks, accreditation systems, and institutional metrics shape planning education, while also identifying pedagogical pathways that support emancipatory learning. The methodology is therefore explicitly value-driven, recognising education as a political and ethical practice rather than a neutral technical activity.

Findings and analysis

To organise and interpret the diverse body of scholarship identified in the systematic review, the selected literature was synthesised into a set of analytical themes that align with the conceptual architecture of this article. Table 1 presents this thematic synthesis, structuring the literature across interconnected domains including sustainability evaluation, neoliberal performativity, pedagogical innovation, socio-technical transformation, and critical development education perspectives. This approach enables a multi-level reading of the field, demonstrating how research on urban planning, education, and sustainability is evolving from technical and evaluative frameworks toward more reflexive, justice-oriented, and future-focused pedagogical paradigms. Table 1 provides a foundation for the deeper thematic discussion that follows in this section.

Table 1: Thematic synthesis of literature at the intersection of urban planning, pedagogy, and development education

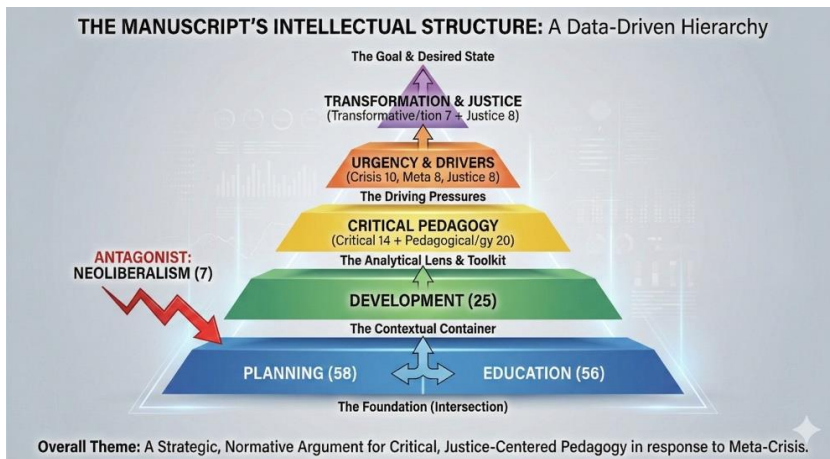
Theme	Core Focus	Key Studies	Synthesis Insight
Data-Driven Hierarchy of Research	Indicators, sustainability metrics, liveability	An (2024); Akbar et al. (2025); Aldossary et al. (2023); Chi and Mak (2021)	Sustainability and liveability are predominantly framed through quantitative and evaluative lenses.
Conceptual Pairing of Themes	Sustainability–equity–education–governance	Cano-Ortiz et al. (2025); Chan et al. (2023); Maqbool et al. (2025); Alméstar et al. (2022)	Literature links sustainability with justice, education, and governance, aligning with DE’s normative framing.
Planning Education under Neoliberal Performativity	Marketisation, skills-first curricula, accreditation	Bunnell (2022); Liu and Yau (2020); Pan et al. (2020); Meade (2024)	Neoliberal logics constrain critical reflection and narrow planning pedagogy.
Urban Complexity–Pedagogy Disconnect	Inequality, class, ecology, governance	Brakman et al. (2025); Holgersen (2020); Debie and Mengistic (2025); Drillet et al. (2020)	Planning curricula struggle to reflect socio-spatial and ecological complexity.
Alternative Pedagogical Practices	Active learning, community engagement, SDGs	Anand et al. (2022); Lee and Li (2025); Alméstar et al. (2022); Robinson et al. (2023)	Evidence of participatory and justice-oriented pedagogies aligned with DE principles.
Digitalisation, Governance and Spatial Justice	Smart cities, ICT, participation	Oliveira et al. (2020); Dehghanpour-Farashah et al. (2025); Casagrande and Horn (2024)	Planning increasingly understood as a socio-technical and governance-driven practice.
Digital Ecosystems and Future Competencies	AI, digital twins, networked learning	Sharma (2026); Yue et al. (2025); Casado-Mansilla et al. (2023); Ogheneakoke et al. (2025)	Future planners require digital, ethical, and interdisciplinary competencies.
Critical Pedagogy and Meta-Crisis	Hope, polycrisis, Freirean critique	Freire (1994); McCloskey (2025); Dolan (2025); Giroux (2025); Wheatley (2024)	DE provides ethical, political, and affective resources for crisis-literate pedagogy.
Care, Children and Situated Knowledge	Child-friendly cities, vulnerability	Brown et al. (2019); Kim et al. (2020); Anwar and Selim (2025)	Ethics of care and lived experience expand legitimate planning knowledge.
Territorial Sustainability and Transitions	Urban growth, green infrastructure	Beer et al. (2022); Alzaim et al. (2024); Sapena et al. (2020)	Planning education must address socio-environmental transitions adaptively.
Governance and Civic Agency	Participation, community mobilisation	Latocha and Kaczmarek (2020); Dehghanpour-Farashah et al. (2025)	Participation framed as civic literacy and democratic competence.
Methodological Framework	Systematic review standards	Page et al. (2021)	Provides methodological foundation for PRISMA-guided SLR.

The thematic synthesis in Table 1 reveals several important trends that shape contemporary debates in planning education. First, the dominance of evaluative and indicator-based studies underscores a data-driven orientation in sustainability and liveability research, reflecting a lingering technocratic paradigm. Second, critical scholarship highlights the mismatch between these technocratic tendencies and the socio-political complexities of urbanisation, raising concerns about neoliberal performativity and the narrowing of pedagogical imagination. Third, emergent work on alternative pedagogies, digitalisation, and development education points to a growing recognition of planning education as a normative and transformative project rather than a purely technical discipline. Taken together, these trends indicate a field in transition - one that is gradually expanding its analytical lens to incorporate questions of justice, participation, agency, and crisis responsiveness. The following sections examine these thematic clusters in greater depth, with attention to their implications for reimagining planning education in the context of the contemporary meta-crisis.

A data-driven hierarchy of research

To further clarify the internal logic of the article and the thematic organisation emerging from the literature, Figure 3 presents a data-driven hierarchy of key concepts derived from the review of urban planning pedagogy. This hierarchical structure captures how discussions within the literature tend to cluster around foundational themes of planning and education, before extending into development, critical pedagogy, and ultimately questions of urgency, justice, and socio-ecological transformation. By visualising these relationships, the figure demonstrates that planning education is situated at the intersection of sectoral knowledge (planning), pedagogical systems (education), and normative agendas (justice and transformation), while neoliberalism operates as a persistent antagonist shaping both context and practice. Taken together, these thematic layers offer an empirical basis for understanding how the field conceptualises its challenges and potential responses within the contemporary meta-crisis.

Figure 3: Theme from the literature review on urban planning pedagogy (created by author)



As shown in the Figure 3, a focused keyword analysis around the core concepts in the title (planning, education, crisis, pedagogy, development, justice) shows that the manuscript consistently emphasises ‘planning’, ‘education’, and ‘development’, while also repeatedly mobilising a critical vocabulary (‘critical’, ‘pedagogy/pedagogical’, ‘crisis’, ‘meta’, ‘neoliberal’, ‘justice’). This indicates that the argument is not merely about curricular content, but about the political and ethical reorientation of planning education in the context of a broader meta-crisis. The analysis reveals a clear intellectual hierarchy underlying contemporary debates on urban planning education, structured around the intersection of planning and education and progressively oriented towards transformation and justice. At the foundational level, urban planning and education emerge as mutually constitutive domains. Planning provides the spatial, institutional, and governance contexts within which urban challenges unfold, while education shapes the epistemologies, values, and competencies through which these challenges are interpreted and addressed. Empirical studies on sustainability, liveability, and urban governance consistently demonstrate that planning outcomes are deeply influenced by

educational capacity, professional training, and institutional learning cultures (Akbar et al., 2025; Chan et al., 2023; Chen and Peng, 2025).

Situated above this foundation is development, which acts as the contextual container linking planning and education to broader socio-economic and political processes. Development is not treated as a linear or purely economic trajectory but as a contested field shaped by inequality, power relations, and environmental limits. The literature shows that urban development projects often reproduce exclusion when education and planning are framed within neoliberal growth paradigms (Liu and Yau, 2020; Maqbool et al., 2025). This reinforces the need for pedagogical approaches that foreground justice and sustainability rather than market efficiency. At the analytical core of the hierarchy lies critical pedagogy, which functions as the primary lens through which the meta-crisis is interpreted. Critical and participatory educational approaches enable planners to interrogate dominant narratives, challenge technocratic neutrality, and recognise cities as socio-political constructs (Lee and Li, 2025; Cano-Ortiz et al., 2025). This pedagogical layer is driven by urgency and crisis, including climate breakdown, democratic erosion, and social fragmentation, which demand immediate yet reflective responses from planning education.

At the apex of the hierarchy is the normative goal of transformation and justice. The synthesis of planning, education, development, and critical pedagogy points towards an educational project that prepares planners not only to manage urban systems but to actively contribute to equitable, inclusive, and sustainable urban futures. This hierarchical structure underscores that responding to the meta-crisis requires more than curricular reform; it necessitates a fundamental reorientation of planning education towards emancipatory and justice-centred praxis.

Conceptual pairing of themes and frequencies

To deepen the analysis of how urban planning pedagogy is framed within the literature, Figure 4 presents a mapping of key conceptual pairings and their frequencies. These bigram clusters reveal how certain themes consistently co-occur, illustrating both the dominant concerns of planning education and the emerging critical orientations shaping the field. At the centre of this network,

planning education frequently pairs with concepts from urban planning, development education, and the meta-crisis, indicating a growing recognition of planning curricula as embedded within wider socio-political and developmental debates. Surrounding clusters link pedagogy with emancipatory practices, the meta-crisis with concerns about climate and democracy, and planning with sustainability and development agendas. Together, these pairings show how contemporary scholarship is reorganising planning education around issues of justice, crisis, and transformative pedagogy.

Figure 4: Key conceptual pairings - interconnected themes and frequencies (created by author)

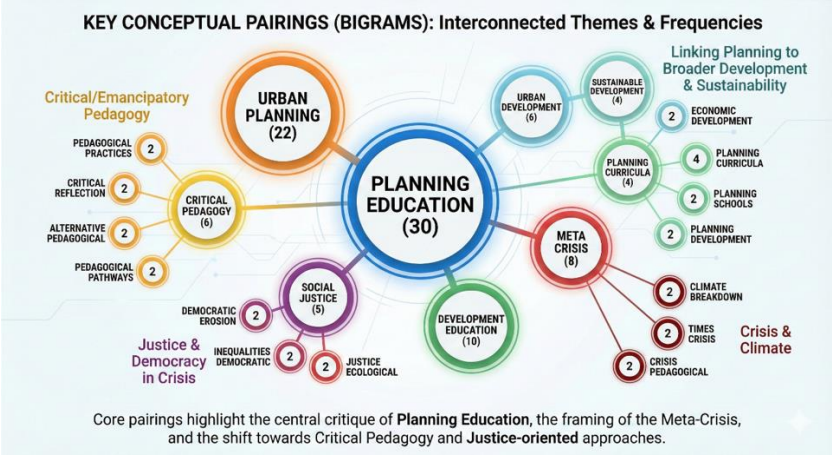


Figure 4 presents a phrase-level analysis that highlights recurring collocations closely aligned with the article’s central argument. Terms such as planning education, urban planning, and development education emerge as dominant bigrams, indicating that planning curricula are consistently framed as a form of development education. Frequently associated phrases including meta-crisis, critical pedagogy, social justice, democratic erosion, and climate breakdown further situate the pedagogical argument within a broader critique of neoliberalism and planetary crisis. The bigram analysis reveals a dense network of interconnected conceptual pairings shaping contemporary debates on planning

education. At the centre of this network lies planning education as a nexus linking urban planning, development education, social justice, and crisis-oriented pedagogies. The frequency and co-occurrence of these terms suggest a shift away from viewing planning education as a purely technical or professional domain, towards understanding it as a contested pedagogical space with normative and political dimensions.

One prominent cluster links urban planning with critical and emancipatory pedagogy, reflecting a move away from instrumental teaching models towards dialogical, reflective, and transformative learning. This challenges conventional studio- and skills-based approaches and aligns with development education's emphasis on critical consciousness and power relations. A second cluster connects planning education with development education and social justice, highlighting growing concern with democratic deficits, inequality, and ecological injustice. The prominence of the meta-crisis within the network underscores how climate change and systemic instability are increasingly embedded within pedagogical debates, prompting calls for adaptive, ethically grounded, and justice-centred planning curricula.

Planning education under neoliberal performativity

The analysis reveals that contemporary urban planning education is increasingly shaped by neoliberal performativity. Universities are under sustained pressure to demonstrate efficiency, competitiveness, and labour-market relevance, resulting in curricula structured around measurable learning outcomes, employability skills, and accreditation compliance. Such conditions prioritise standardisation and short-term performance indicators, often at the expense of reflexive and critical learning. As a result, pedagogical conformity is rewarded, while experimentation with alternative pedagogies is often discouraged, as these may not easily align with audit cultures and outcome-based assessment regimes. Within planning schools, this performativity frequently translates into an emphasis on technical tools, spatial modelling, and policy evaluation frameworks, while a deeper interrogation of political economy, inequality, and ecological ethics is marginalised. Entrepreneurial urbanism, smart city technologies, and market-led regeneration are commonly presented as normative or inevitable trajectories of urban

development, despite substantial evidence of their uneven social and spatial impacts (Liu and Yau, 2020; Pan et al., 2020).

Studies of planning curricula further indicate that sustainability and social justice are often incorporated as add-on modules rather than as structuring principles, reinforcing a depoliticised understanding of planning practice (Wang et al., 2025; Lee and Li, 2025). From a development education perspective, this neoliberal framing constrains the capacity of planning education to engage critically with power, governance, and democratic accountability, thereby limiting its potential to respond meaningfully to the meta-crisis (Sharma and Dehalwar, 2023).

Disconnection between urban complexity and pedagogy

A second finding concerns the persistent mismatch between the complexity of contemporary urban challenges and the pedagogical approaches commonly employed in planning education. Research on urban sustainability and liveability consistently emphasises the centrality of residents' perceptions, social equity, gender inclusion, and ecological integrity in shaping urban outcomes (Akbar et al., 2025; An, 2024; Chan et al., 2023). Yet, within many planning curricula, these dimensions remain peripheral, often treated as supplementary themes rather than as foundational lenses through which urban problems are understood and addressed. The literature further demonstrates that indicator-driven and technocratic planning approaches frequently fail to capture lived realities, particularly in rapidly urbanising and resource-constrained contexts of the global South (Aldossary et al., 2023; Chi and Mak, 2021). Such approaches tend to abstract cities into measurable variables, overlooking everyday experiences, informal practices, and power asymmetries. This pedagogical gap suggests that planning education is not adequately equipping students to understand cities as contested, political, and relational spaces, thereby limiting their ability to engage meaningfully with issues of justice, vulnerability, and democratic governance (Liu and Yau, 2020; Cano-Ortiz and Cano, 2025).

Emergence of alternative pedagogical practices

Despite these constraints, the analysis identifies a growing body of scholarship pointing towards alternative pedagogical practices that challenge technocratic and

performative models of planning education. Active learning approaches, community-engaged studios, sustainability-oriented curricula, and participatory planning exercises demonstrate the potential for more reflexive and justice-oriented education. These practices emphasise dialogue, experiential learning, and ethical responsibility, aligning closely with development education principles. Empirical studies show that project-based and Sustainable Development Goals' (SDG)-aligned learning can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, enabling students to critically assess real-world planning interventions and their social consequences (Lee and Li, 2025). Similarly, schools and higher education institutions are increasingly recognised as levers of urban transformation, particularly when educational programmes are embedded within local climate action and sustainability initiatives (Alméstár et al., 2022). Research on participatory governance and community engagement further demonstrates that involving citizens and intermediary actors in planning education enhances students' understanding of power relations and inclusivity (Anand et al., 2022; Dehghanpour-Farashah et al., 2025). Collectively, these pedagogical innovations suggest a gradual but significant shift towards planning education that is not only technically competent but also socially responsive and transformative.

Expanding the analytical lens: digitalisation, governance, and socio-spatial justice

The extended analysis highlights how digitalisation, governance restructuring, and socio-spatial inequality are reshaping both urban development and the pedagogical demands placed on planning education. Research on labour sorting, entrepreneurial urbanism, and growth-oriented policy agendas demonstrates that contemporary urban transformations are increasingly driven by market rationalities that privilege competitiveness over equity (Brakman et al., 2021; Bunnell, 2022; Beer et al., 2022). These dynamics underscore the need for planning education to critically engage with political economy rather than merely operationalising policy tools. Several studies emphasise the growing influence of digital and smart-city infrastructures on urban governance. While digital platforms, urban informatics, and planning support systems offer opportunities for efficiency and participation, they also risk deepening exclusion when deployed without critical oversight (Geertman and Stillwell, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2025). From a pedagogical perspective, this necessitates integrating critical

digital literacy into planning curricula, enabling students to interrogate algorithmic power, data bias, and surveillance urbanism (Sharifi et al., 2025).

The literature also reveals the importance of relational, place-based, and socially grounded planning approaches. Studies on urban nature, green infrastructure, and community animation demonstrate that urban sustainability is deeply shaped by cultural practices, everyday experiences, and local knowledge systems (Drillet et al., 2020; Galan, 2020; Latocha and Kaczmarek, 2020). Case-based research from Indigenous and marginalised urban contexts further challenges universalised planning models and highlights the epistemic value of alternative urban imaginaries (Casagrande and Horn, 2024; Silva, 2020). Finally, emerging work on educational innovation and participatory learning indicates that gamification, remote experimentation, and outcome-based curriculum networks can support engagement when aligned with ethical and social objectives (Bradecki et al., 2025; Casado-Mansilla et al., 2023; Schubert et al., 2020). However, without a development education lens, such innovations risk reinforcing instrumentalism. Collectively, these studies reinforce the argument that planning education must evolve into a critically informed, justice-oriented pedagogical project capable of responding to the complex governance and technological dimensions of the meta-crisis.

Digital ecosystems, pedagogical innovation, or future competencies.

These findings also suggest that planning education must engage more directly with transformations occurring at the intersection of technology, governance and social learning. In rapidly changing urban systems, digital infrastructures, data-driven planning tools and simulation environments are reshaping how sustainability and mobility challenges are understood and addressed, raising new ethical and pedagogical questions. For example, emerging work on generative AI, digital twins and sustainable logistics demonstrates how planners increasingly operate within hybrid socio-technical systems that demand integrative and anticipatory competencies (Sharma, 2026). At the same time, studies of digital platforms in higher education show how social learning, peer-to-peer interaction and networked knowledge production influence student engagement and critical consciousness (Ogheneakoke et al., 2025). Together, these developments reinforce the argument that development education offers valuable pedagogical

resources for preparing planners to navigate uncertainty, contestation and socio-technical complexity rather than merely applying pre-defined tools or compliance frameworks.

The findings from the literature reveal a growing convergence between planning pedagogy and development education, particularly around themes of power, equity, and socio-ecological justice. DE scholars have long argued that education cannot be divorced from histories of colonialism, neoliberalism and structural inequality (Meade, 2024; Wheatley, 2024). This critique mirrors recent debates in planning education around the limitations of value-neutral and market-driven curricular models that sideline questions of justice, participation and epistemic diversity. The literature also demonstrates that DE explicitly centres the experience and knowledge of marginalised groups, which aligns with planning reforms calling for grounded, community-engaged and global South-informed approaches to teaching and learning.

Another key finding relates to the role of silence and erasure within pedagogical processes. Gamal, Hault and Taylor (2024) argue that DE confronts 'grammars of silence' that obscure structural violence and limit the political imagination. Similar patterns are evident in planning curricula, where dominant design and governance paradigms often marginalise informal settlements, Indigenous planning traditions, migrant experiences, and grassroots knowledge systems. McCloskey (2024) shows that DE scholarship increasingly engages with migration and transnational displacement - issues that are equally central to contemporary urbanisation and yet remain underrepresented in mainstream planning pedagogy. These convergences reinforce the potential of DE to expand the epistemic and ethical scope of planning education.

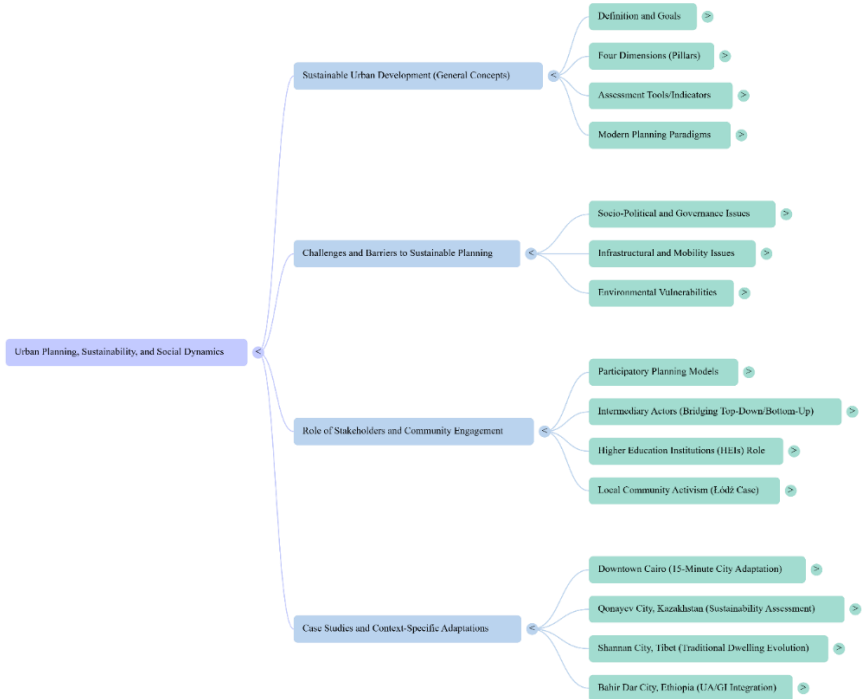
Discussion

The thematic synthesis presented in Table 1 offers important insights into how the current literature conceptualises the relationship between urban planning, sustainability, and pedagogy within the broader context of the contemporary meta-crisis. Notably, the concentration of research within data-driven sustainability and liveability assessments underscores an enduring technocratic orientation, where quantitative evaluation frameworks are privileged over normative, socio-political,

and cultural dimensions of urban transformation. At the same time, the presence of scholarship critiquing neoliberal performativity reveals growing unease with the instrumentalisation of planning education and its narrowing intellectual horizon. Equally significant is the emergence of studies that explore alternative pedagogical practices, digital governance ecosystems, and socio-spatial justice - all of which signal a gradual broadening of the field toward more reflexive, participatory, and justice-oriented approaches. Meanwhile, the clustering of critical development education and Freirean scholarship indicates an expanding recognition of the pedagogical stakes of urbanisation, particularly in relation to agency, critical consciousness, and political hope. Taken together, this article demonstrates that while planning scholarship remains anchored in evaluative and technical paradigms, there is a clear intellectual trajectory toward integrating critical pedagogy, ethical reflection, and socio-ecological responsibility, thereby providing fertile ground for reimagining planning education through the lens of development education.

Figure 5 synthesises the emerging themes and issues identified across the literature, highlighting how contemporary urban planning education is situated within broader debates on sustainability, governance, community engagement, and context-specific urban adaptation. These interconnected domains reveal that planning education must navigate not only technical and regulatory demands, but also socio-political tensions, environmental vulnerabilities, and the lived realities of diverse urban contexts - particularly in the global South. The thematic clusters presented in figure 5 illustrate a shift towards participatory planning models, intermediary stakeholder roles, and critical engagements with mobility, equity, and resilience. Together, these insights provide the conceptual basis for discussing how planning education can evolve to better address the complexity and urgency of urban challenges in the meta-crisis.

Figure 5: Emerging themes and issues in urban planning education (created by author).



The findings of this review highlight a fundamental tension within contemporary urban planning education: the continued dominance of neoliberal, technocratic educational frameworks versus the growing urgency for transformative, justice-oriented learning capable of responding to the meta-crisis. This tension becomes evident when urban planning education is examined across the interlinked dimensions of sustainable urban development, systemic barriers, stakeholder engagement, and context-specific adaptations, as illustrated in the conceptual framework guiding this article. At the level of sustainable urban development concepts, planning education frequently emphasises definitions, indicator-based assessments, and modern planning paradigms without sufficiently

interrogating their political and social implications. While sustainability frameworks and assessment tools play an important role in shaping policy and practice, evidence from multiple contexts suggests that indicator-driven approaches can obscure lived experiences and socio-spatial inequalities if applied uncritically (Akbar et al., 2025; Aldossary et al., 2023; An, 2024). Development education offers a critical corrective by reframing sustainability not merely as a technical goal but as a normative project grounded in equity, interdependence, and ecological responsibility (Panciroli et al., 2020). Integrating DE into planning curricula therefore enables students to question whose values are embedded in sustainability metrics and whose interests are prioritised in urban development decisions.

The discussion of challenges and barriers to sustainable planning further reveals the limitations of technocratic pedagogy. Socio-political governance constraints, infrastructural deficits, and environmental vulnerabilities are often treated as external variables rather than as outcomes of historical power relations and policy choices. Studies examining urban governance, mobility, and environmental risk demonstrate that planning failures are closely linked to institutional fragmentation, exclusionary decision-making, and market-led urbanisation (Liu and Yau, 2020; Pan et al., 2020; Maqbool et al., 2025). From a DE perspective, planning education must move beyond problem-solving exercises towards critical analysis of structural inequality, neoliberal urbanism, and the political economy of cities. This shift re-politicises planning education and challenges the false neutrality that often characterises professional training.

The role of stakeholders and community engagement emerges as a particularly important site for pedagogical transformation. Participatory planning models, intermediary actors, and community activism highlight the limitations of top-down approaches and the need for dialogical, inclusive practices. Research on local community engagement and participatory governance demonstrates that sustainable outcomes are more likely when residents are treated as co-producers of urban knowledge rather than passive beneficiaries (Latocha and Kaczmarek, 2020; Dehghanpour-Farashah et al., 2025). Higher education institutions occupy a critical intermediary position in this landscape. When universities act as facilitators of community-engaged learning, they can bridge formal planning

systems and grassroots knowledge, thereby aligning planning education with development education's emphasis on participation, reflexivity, and collective action (Anand et al., 2022; Sharma and Dehalwar, 2023).

The thematic emphasis on contextual adaptation within the literature reinforces the relevance of situated and global South-informed pedagogies. Empirical work from cities such as Qonayev in Kazakhstan, Bahir Dar in Ethiopia, and Phnom Penh in Cambodia illustrates that sustainability and liveability cannot be universalised across contexts without reinforcing epistemic hierarchies (Akbar et al., 2025; Debie and Mengistie, 2025; Chan et al., 2023). Similarly, studies on child-friendly cities, traditional dwelling evolution, and post-disaster urban recovery demonstrate how cultural practices, social norms, and historical trajectories shape urban form and governance (Kim et al., 2020; Anwar and Selim, 2025). Situated learning grounded in these contexts exposes planning students to alternative urban imaginaries that challenge Eurocentric planning models and validate experiential, Indigenous, and community-based knowledge systems.

However, the integration of development education into urban planning education faces significant structural constraints. Accreditation requirements, outcome-based curricula, and performance-driven funding models often privilege standardisation and employability metrics over critical and transformative learning. Network analyses of planning and design curricula reveal how tightly coupled educational systems can marginalise alternative pedagogies, even when sustainability and social justice are stated objectives (Wang et al., 2025). Addressing these constraints requires supportive policy frameworks that recognise pedagogical plurality and legitimise education for social transformation as a public good rather than a market commodity. Overall, the discussion suggests that reimagining urban planning education through the lens of development education is not simply a pedagogical adjustment but a structural and ideological shift. By integrating critical pedagogy, participatory engagement, and context-sensitive learning, planning education can better prepare future practitioners to navigate the complexities of the meta-crisis. In doing so, it can contribute to the cultivation of planners who are not only technically competent but also ethically grounded, politically aware, and committed to advancing just and sustainable urban futures.

Together, these insights underscore that integrating DE into planning education offers not only conceptual enrichment but also a vital political corrective. DE foregrounds participation, solidarity and historical responsibility - dimensions that are critically needed as planners navigate crises shaped by inequality, ecological degradation and authoritarian populism. As Wheatley (2024) argues, DE's task now involves reckoning with 'regrettable silences' while forging directions that confront neoliberal logics and epistemic injustice. This resonates with planning's own struggle to articulate justice-centred pedagogical pathways in a sector increasingly governed by accreditation metrics, employability discourses and managerial performativity.

Moreover, the framing of hope in DE scholarship provides a powerful entry point for rethinking planning education's social purpose. Bourn (2025) shows how 'pedagogies of hope' can be operationalised in higher education to foster agency and critical reflection, while Dolan (2025) situates hope within the affective landscape of polycrisis arguing that hopelessness is itself a political condition that education must address. In urban planning, where students confront overwhelming narratives of climate catastrophe, housing crisis and democratic decay, such a framework offers a way to bring emotional, ethical and political dimensions into pedagogical design. As Giroux (2025) emphasises, critical pedagogy must prepare learners not simply to adapt to the future but to intervene in its making. This article therefore positions DE as a strategic pathway for reorienting planning education toward transformative, justice-centred and crisis-literate practice.

Conclusions

This article has argued that reimagining urban planning education in the context of the meta-crisis is both a pedagogical and political imperative. Traditional technocratic models of planning education are increasingly misaligned with the complex, interconnected challenges facing contemporary cities. Development education offers a compelling framework for addressing this gap by foregrounding critical pedagogy, social justice, and participatory learning. By integrating DE principles into planning curricula, planning education can move beyond narrow professional training towards emancipatory learning spaces that prepare future planners to navigate uncertainty, contest injustice, and co-produce sustainable

urban futures. Such a shift does not imply abandoning technical competence, but situating it within a broader ethical and political understanding of urban development. Ultimately, education is never neutral. In times of crisis, urban planning education must choose between reproducing dominant paradigms or contributing to transformative change. Reclaiming planning education as a site of resistance and reconstruction is essential for shaping cities that are not only efficient, but just, democratic, and ecologically sustainable.

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TACKLING IMPACT EVALUATION IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION: THE CASE OF SINERGIAS ED

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Abstract: This article reflects on the activities of the Sinergias ED project, a development education (DE) initiative in Portugal, that supported alternative approaches to impact assessment amid the growing financialisation of public policies. Launched in 2013 through a partnership between the Centre for African Studies of the University of Porto (CEAUP) and Gonçalo da Silveira Foundation (FGS), the project aimed to create collaborative learning spaces between civil society organisations (CSOs) and higher education institutions (HEIs), promoting participatory action research and co-production of knowledge. Sinergias ED questions power asymmetries and the monopoly of academic knowledge, seeking to value an ecology of knowledges through a community of practice, a scientific journal, and various peer learning initiatives. Within a context dominated by linear, results-based approaches to impact assessment, the project experimented with participatory methods, including with Theory of Change (ToC) and systematisation of experiences. These instruments allowed exploration of complex, cumulative transformations at individual (micro), relational (meso), and institutional (macro) levels.

The article raises questions about how the transformative potential of collaborative DE initiatives can be understood and assessed. It considers the tensions between linear evaluation tools and the emergent, relational, and metabolic nature of learning and transformation experienced in the Sinergias ED project through the image of a DE ecosystem. It suggests that capturing the nuances of DE impacts may require methodologies that embrace plural perspectives, extended temporality, and reflexive practices. These methodologies contribute not only to an understanding of DE initiatives but also inform impact assessment practices within public policy, supporting evidence-based approaches

that account for both measurable outcomes and subtler, relational dimensions of social transformation.

Key words: Development Education; Impact Evaluation; Social Transformation; Neoliberalism; Public Policies.

Introduction

In Portugal, development education (DE) is a key pillar of foreign policy coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CICL, 2022). Since 2009, a national strategy for development education has been approved and implemented (IPAD, 2009). It is a strategy designed by a broad range of government, public institutions and CSOs operating in several domains, including those recognised as non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs). Following a 2012 report identifying a lack of national research in DE, the Centre for African Studies of the University of Porto (CEAUP) and the NGDO Gonçalo da Silveira Foundation (FGS) launched Sinergias ED in 2013. Now in its fifth funding cycle with Camões, IP (CICL, 2022), the Portuguese public institute that oversees and funds DE, the project facilitates knowledge co-creation between higher education institutions (HEI) and civil society organisations (CSO).

Adopting a critical DE framework (Andreotti, 2014), Sinergias ED challenges power asymmetries and academic monopolies by promoting an ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2007). It operates through three lines of action: regular meetings and collaborative work involving sixty members of Sinergias ED in a community of practice; collaborative knowledge production, notably through the journal *Sinergias - Educational Dialogues for Social Change* (CEAUP and FGS, 2014) with nineteen issues published to date and also through research papers and reports; and peer training and exchange of practices, notably summer schools, webinars, in-person seminars and international meetings. This article examines how the project's monitoring and evaluation (M and E) reflects participatory action research and alternative impact assessment amid the growing financialisation of public policy. It is divided into five parts: political context, the construction of the Sinergias ED's M and E system, the collaborative development of a transformational theory, the challenges of validating this theory, and a conclusion.

Financialisation of social policies and impact assessment

The emergence of Sinergias ED coincided with the effects of the 2008 international financial crisis and the subsequent 2011-2014 ‘troika’ (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) intervention in Portugal. This period was defined by the Economic and Financial Assistance Programme (EFAP) agreed between the Portuguese government and this three-headed hydra, which can be seen as a very concrete form of the organisational materialisation of the three-headed hydra of modernity proposed by Mignolo (2011: 46). The EFAP enforced financial austerity, radical cuts in public investments and expenditures, and increased fiscal pressure on work and consumption, resulting in economic and social strain (Rodrigues and Silva, 2015: 1). In 2012, the annual funding mechanism for DE projects promoted by CICL was suspended as a consequence of this austerity (Marques et al., 2025: 16).

Notwithstanding the rising poverty and unemployment rates, the ‘Portugal Social Innovation’ policy was initiated in 2014 with the objective of establishing a social investment market. This started to shift social, educational, and health services towards a more competitive model involving CSOs alongside business and financial agents. Supported by €150 million of European Union (EU) funding, this pioneering initiative within the European context (Almeida and Santos, 2018) followed a neoliberal logic (Parente, Marcos and Quintão, 2017) through four key initiatives: ‘Capacity Building for Social Investment’ preparing CSOs to engage with investors; ‘Partnerships for Impact’, aimed at scaling up socially entrepreneurial initiatives or social start-ups; ‘Social Impact Bonds’ with the focus of using private investment to finance standardised social services; and ‘Social Investment Funds’, aimed at establishing credit guarantees for CSOs (Quintão and Martinho, 2018).

Under this framework, impact assessment became paramount. Funding became increasingly tied to pre-defined indicators and ‘pay-for-success’ models, leading to the rise of technical methodologies that quantify and monetise impact, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI). In addition, a fragile evaluation culture persists in Portugal. Measuring social impact remains a highly technical task that often exceeds the capacity of CSOs. In this context, impact indicators and their measurement methodologies have become unavoidable mechanisms of

control, creating a market for consultancy services, often unfamiliar with CSOs' cultures. Nevertheless, social innovation approaches have exerted, until now, only a negligible influence on the DE sector in Portugal, in which Sinergias ED operates. Throughout its history, Sinergias ED has maintained a degree of autonomy from the neoliberal onslaught of public policy financialisation. With continuous support from CICL's DE funding mechanism, the project has prioritised: experimentation as an inherent value; collaborative learning processes and outcomes; and long-term collaborative and dialogic relationships between individuals from CSOs and HELs (Quintão and Pereira, 2024).

The financialisation of public policy and the pressure for impact assessment are global trends from which the DE sector is not immune (IDEA, 2011; 2025). While impact measurement is a legitimate tool for CSOs' self-regulation and public policy efficacy, significant questions remain and there is an absence of consensus at theoretical and methodological levels (OECD, 2023). How can these impact evaluation practices be developed within CSOs and public policies? More specifically, how can they be implemented in the DE sector?

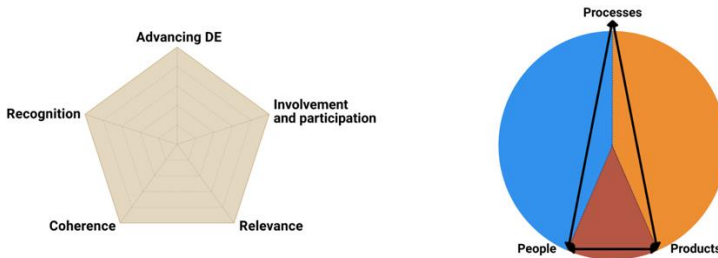
Monitoring and evaluation within the Sinergias ED project

Since 2013, Sinergias ED has tried to accommodate in its monitoring and evaluation framework both quantitative and results-based instruments, as well as qualitative and heuristic ones that could narrate and describe the experiences of the participants. The logical framework is used to monitor the performance and outputs of activities, providing data for biannual evaluation meetings and annual reports for CICL, as well as for external evaluations at the end of each funding cycle.

Following the 2016 external evaluation of Sinergias ED (Martins, 2016), a pentagonal visual tool was introduced in the M and E framework to reinforce quality assessment and to adopt a less productivist approach to outcomes. This tool evaluates five key criteria on a 1 to 5 scale: national and international recognition; advancement of DE in terms of conceptual, methodological and praxis knowledge; DE practitioners' involvement; sector relevance; and coherence with DE principles. In 2020, the third funding cycle's evaluation report (Pereira, 2021) introduced the 3P Triangle. This visual instrument has since been used to

analyse and evaluate how project performance and outputs support and balance People, Processes and Products (Quintão and Pereira, 2024). It shifted the focus toward a more holistic M and E process and created an opportunity to question and reflect on the relevance of products in the project.

Figure 1: The pentagonal quality assessment tool and the 3P triangle from Quintão and Pereira, (2024: 20).



In terms of qualitative and heuristic instruments, Sinergias ED embraced participatory action research and the systematisation of experiences to evaluate project outcomes. Drawing upon Latin American popular education (Holliday, 2018), this methodology creates meta-reflexive spaces where participants construct shared narratives concerning the project's history and the changes it fostered in terms of individual and collective learning outcomes, as well as institutional transformations. A key tool in this process is the 'timeline', used to reconstruct significant memories and lived experiences. It allows us to understand the project through a diachronic lens, rather than a synchronic one that overvalues productivity. Previous participatory systematisations (Sinergias ED, 2016; 2018; Martins and Marcos, 2021; Rosa and Franco, 2023) highlighted the project's reflexive nature and the vital impact collaboration between HEIs and CSOs had for participants. By 2021, approaching its tenth anniversary, the project's monitoring and evaluation collaborative working group (M and E CWG), that comprises members from the project team but also community members, decided to focus on implementing an impact assessment. This transition aimed to explore methodologies through a critical lens, questioning the neoliberal financialisation of public policies with its impact assessment requirements.

To facilitate this, the project team commissioned the researchers responsible for the previous evaluation reports, who had transitioned from external evaluators to active members of the Sinergias ED community, to collaborate in the design and facilitation of an impact assessment. These evaluators were already used to collaborative work and to questioning, in terms of evaluation practices, the traditional epistemological and methodological distances between external evaluator and critical friend, or between the researcher/evaluator and the object of analysis. This new phase, launched in 2021, was grounded in a Theory of Change framework.

Devising a heuristic impact assessment process: from Theory of Change to Practice of Transformation

The ToC provides a framework for hypothesising how desired change occurs over time. Characterised by a logical, deductive nature, it identifies causal relationships between activities and outcomes while outlining underlying assumptions. While rooted in a systemic paradigm that demands flexibility and complex thinking, ToC has increasingly been co-opted by neoliberal logic. In both Portuguese and international contexts, it is often used for rigid project designs where funding depends on pre-defined impacts. This application frequently conflicts with DE principles, which require emergent learning and continuous redesign.

From the outset of the impact assessment process, a fundamental question emerged concerning the nature of the theory of impact that was being co-created with the Sinergias ED community. The question that arose pertained to the categorisation of the ToC as either an *ex ante* theory of change, hypothesising future possible impacts, or an *ex post* theory systematising the impact of the project's actual DE practices and experiences over a ten-year period. The *ex post* theory was presumed to better facilitate the integration of a heuristic approach with the monitoring and evaluation practices and the critical perspectives linked to an ecology of knowledges. Consequently, an alternative approach was devised: a Practice of Transformation (PoT). This was collectively conceptualised through a combination of participatory workshops and focus groups, with the Sinergias ED community, participant observation, and document analysis of M and E instruments and reports. This collective enquiry was based

on two questions: (i) which intermediary outcomes do we identify and perceive as expectable (e.g. tangible outcomes such as inspiring methodologies integrated into our educational practices, different attitudes or a different way of creating intellectual outputs?); (ii) which impacts do we identify and perceive as expectable (e.g. long-term changes with an institutional and structural dimension)? (Quintão and Pereira, 2024: 27).

Firstly, a conceptual matrix of the PoT was outlined based on the inputs gathered from the workshops and focus groups. This matrix included objectives, activities, outputs, outcomes, impacts and indicators. It identified four primary impacts: (i) reinforcement of collaborative DE training and transformative practices in Portugal; (ii) scientific DE knowledge co-production involving CSOs and HEIs; (iii) testing alternative forms of knowledge co-creation to challenge power asymmetries between research and action; and (iv) influencing DE institutional and public policies. To capture ‘varying degrees of depth, complexity and intersectionality’ (Ibid.: 29–30) the M and E CWG added nine areas and seven dimensions to the matrix, as shown in Table 1. Rather than a linear flowchart, a system map was created to visualise the PoT. Although this reflected deep collective meta-reflection, the matrix and the map were found insufficient to fully communicate the project’s impacts, prompting a second analytical approach.

Table 1: Areas of impact and dimensions/levels of impact identified in the PoT matrix (Quintão and Pereira, 2024: 29-30)

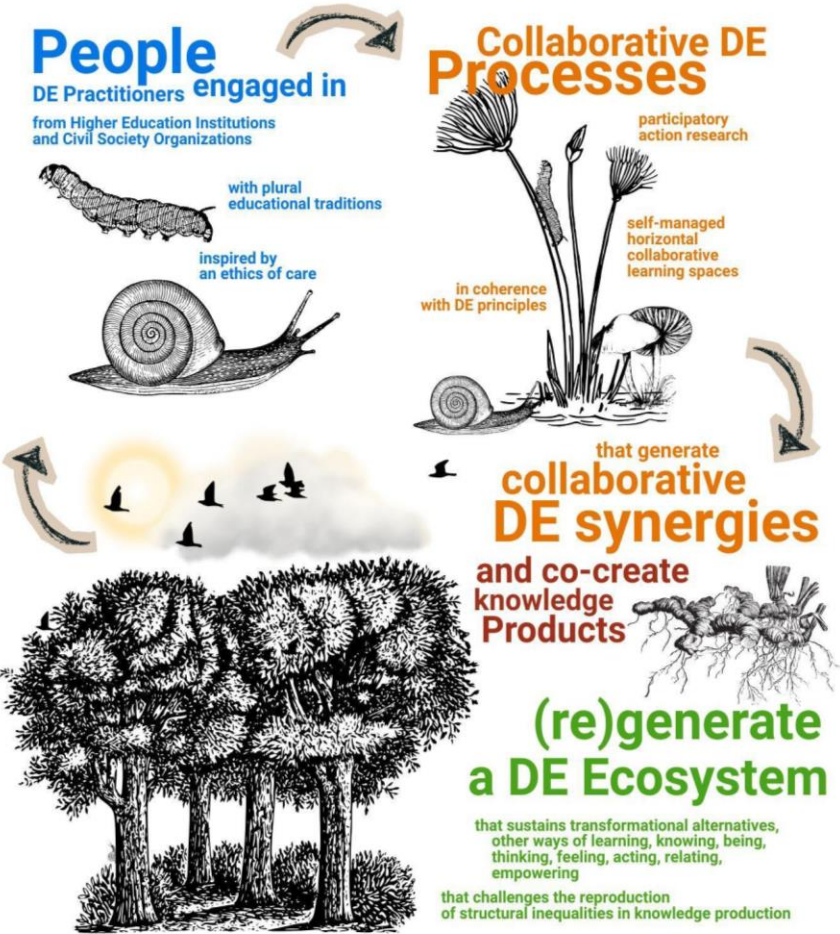
Areas of impact	Dimensions/Levels of impact
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning and questioning 2. Commitment/Engagement 3. Collaboration 4. Quality of intervention 5. Transformative capacity 6. Community 7. Alternative formats 8. Expansion of actors 9. Representations of DE 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual/Personal 2. Collaborative Working Groups (CWG) 3. Community 4. Organisational 5. Funders 6. Institutional 7. Societal

Mapping a relational ecosystem based on DE synergies: the Sinergias ED's Transformational Theory

At Sinergias ED, a core debate centres on the tendency to overvalue products while undervaluing processes, which risks commodifying education and knowledge. Sinergias ED counters this by nurturing collaborative spaces for 'viable novelties' (Freire, 2010). The project's PoT relied on a linear, cause-and-effect matrix that failed to capture transformative relationships. To remedy this, the M and E CWG reconstructed the PoT into Sinergias ED's Transformational Theory (Quintão and Pereira, 2024: 47–48), integrating the 3P triangle and longitudinal qualitative evaluation data. Drawing on Kolb and Kolb's (2013) experiential learning, the Sinergias ED's Transformational Theory recognises that impact occurs through recursive experiential spirals. Unlike linear, results-based approaches, these spirals are often erratic, requiring time across micro, meso and macro levels. This 'digestive, cumulative, metabolic process' (Quintão and Pereira, 2024: 47-48) views DE practices as part of a larger ecosystem based on an organic cycle: genesis – growth – blossoming – decay – decomposition – humus - new genesis.

The experiential spiral perspective triggered the search for other forms of thinking, perceiving and visualising change. Inspired by the work of Andreotti et al. (2019: 9) with social cartographies that can be used as palimpsestic pedagogical tools to trigger conversations, Figure 2 visually summarises this organic perspective of the Sinergias ED's Transformational Theory based on a vision of a metabolic DE ecosystem. This ecosystem is based on collaborative synergies that are cyclic, slow, digestive and transformative, rather than incremental, developmental or progressive as a positivist scalability perspective would suggest. The cycle is as follows: genesis – growth – blossoming – decay – decomposition – humus - new genesis, and so on. Its main purpose is to sustain life 'in the face of the structural inequalities that fracture the balance of humanity and the planet' and to counter 'the interests of commodified and financialised economic systems' (Quintão and Pereira, 2024: 48).

Figure 2: A visual systematisation of Sinergias ED's Transformational Theory created by the Monitoring and Evaluation Collaborative Working Group and inspired by Quintão and Pereira, (2024: 48)



This DE ecosystem functions across three interconnected levels: organisms/living things (micro level); the environment/abiotic factors controlling the structure of

the ecosystem (macro level); and the nutrient cycles and energy flows (meso level) connecting the micro and macro levels.

At the micro level, DE practitioners from HEIs, CSOs, schools and government bodies drive the ecosystem. This level focuses on individual impact: the (re)generation of knowledge, skills, and worldviews. As an assumption, we recognise that practitioners are free individuals united by a desire to co-produce knowledge, where diversity is vital for the ecosystem. What knowledge, skills, attitudes, feelings, perceptions, behaviours, experiences and worldviews are being (re)generated or reinforced?

The meso level represents the collaborative, mutualistic interactions that produce results greater than the sum of their parts. It focuses on transformative spaces that produce (re)generative learning and knowledge. These act as experimental laboratories for participatory action research and professional development. From this ecosystemic perspective, educational practices, learning and co-created knowledge are nutrients that must be digested and break down into products/resources to sustain life. As Quintão and Pereira (2024: 55) argue, a product's transformative potential depends entirely on the transformational capacity of the process that generated it. Therefore, products/resources should not be delinked from processes, but rather understood as a small part of a digestive process that gives materialisation to co-created knowledge that supports our praxis. As an assumption, we recognise that a thriving ecosystem requires a regulatory structure to manage the balance of People-Processes-Products, supported by diverse funding mechanisms. To address impact assessment at this meso level, different questions must be raised: what are the components of a transformative educational practice and product? What DE synergies exist between individuals and their organisations? What resources, knowledge and educational practices are being digested by the organisations in this ecosystem? What DE synergies and interdependencies exist between different organisations? How can products nurture this DE ecosystem and its relationships? Which relationships act as stressors on the ecosystem?

The macro level encompasses the social, economic, political, cultural and epistemological contexts. It involves public policies, funding, the relationship

between the state and civil society but also the epistemological structures that sustain our societies and civilisation. A macro level that prioritises isolated products, (a neoliberal approach) creates a competitive environment that weakens solidarity. At this level different questions arise as to understand impacts: which institutions defend and advocate for DE? What public policies exist in this sector? What funding mechanisms exist to support DE? How is our civil society structured and organised? How does our welfare state understand its relationship with civil society? How do civil society organisations understand their relationship with the state? What worldview do we create as a civilisation in relation to education, development and well-being?

Linking this theoretical framework with data from former project evaluations revealed three primary impact areas. Firstly, there are the transformative in-depth impacts on people. Thus, ‘Recognition of new learning, knowledge and methodologies; application of this learning in professional contexts; and expressed willingness and need to remain engaged’ (Pereira and Quintão, 2024: 53) are some of the indicators of impact that have emerged. The changes and transformations that occur at a micro level within the ecosystem are further reinforced, deepened and digested as people continue to engage and reflect on their learning. As a participant in the Sinergias ED community study carried out by Fernandes and Pereira indicated:

“Sinergias is a space of ongoing learning and one of the most stable and reliable processes in my professional development. The project has a very practical way of working. It conveys the idea of other forms of knowledge and knowledge production. It invites us to question what knowledge is and who produces it. How can we value this knowledge? I believe we try to put all this into practice. We learn to think together, which is different from learning alone. And we gain things that are sometimes difficult to express: the complexity of thought. The idea of complexity Edgar Morin spoke of is deeply embedded in the project’s very practice” (Fernandes and Pereira, 2020: 27).

Secondly, at meso level, the Sinergias ED community has emerged as an aggregated impact indicator of diverse transformative processes and products. The

community 'has generated a density of meaningful relationships and networks that endure beyond the activities of the Sinergias ED project itself' (Pereira and Quintão, 2024: 54). New collaborations between organisations in terms of research, new projects between CSOs and HEIs to integrate DE in the higher education system, and pedagogical, research and intellectual resources have been created based on those transformative processes. The co-created products, such as the scientific journal *Sinergias* or research papers, 'reach the "hands" (or the "minds") of those who are distant from, or unfamiliar with, the Sinergias ED project' (Pereira and Quintão, 2024: 55), (re)generating the DE ecosystem. As two participants in the Sinergias ED project indicated:

"As a research centre, we were very interested in establishing dialogue with NGOs, because this represents a connection between two territories that are often misunderstood by one another. This rapprochement helps dispel many fears, on the one hand within academia and, on the other, within civil society. It concerns languages, notions of time, and the kinds of knowledge produced" (Fernandes and Pereira, 2020: 26-27).

"When people ask me what to read, I direct them to the Sinergias website. It legitimises a framework of higher education that is not always easy to establish. There are principles - academic ones, but also those related to the free dissemination of knowledge as a global public good - of sharing, trust-building, acceptance of difference, and networking. These confer upon the project a sense of consolidation, a path that already seems to be leaving its mark" (Ibid.: 27).

Thirdly, Sinergias ED's 'quality is recognised at national and international levels' (Quintão and Pereira, 2024:54). This can be supported by institutional and political impact indicators such as the project's ability to continuously attract national and international funding. For example, the number of communications and presentations made in political and academic events where Sinergias ED is presented as an inspiring practice in DE and the collaboration of the journal *Sinergias* with other European global education and learning scientific journals. As two participants mentioned:

“Sinergias is a quality project in DE. It provides what was missing in Portugal: conceptual reflection and depth. Indicators such as the journal, the articles, the participants, the academics and invited experts - all those involved - make this quality evident” (Ibid.: 28).

“There is greater access to specialised information on DE. Previously, there were no bibliographic references in Portuguese; there was an association of DE with other things that are not DE because it was difficult to access information. Sinergias has brought the possibility of having a DE reference framework in Portugal. People have new ways of working. They can discover new concepts, new research platforms, new networks - not only at the national level, where they were already present - but also in international contexts and other international journal networks” (Ibid.: 28).

Validating Sinergias ED’s Transformational Theory and its impacts

In July 2025, a new phase of the impact assessment process began to test and validate the theory created and to collect and analyse indicators for the outlined impacts. Data from several sources from the project monitoring and evaluation system, going back to 2013, is being processed through quantitative tools to map and characterise people, processes, and products involved, including those specific to the journal *Sinergias*. This will be complemented by qualitative analysis of Sinergias ED evaluation reports (Martins, 2016; Gomes and Quintão, 2018; Fernandes and Pereira, 2020; Quintão and Pereira, 2024) and participants’ discourse and the findings will be published in a commemorative issue of *Sinergias* in July 2026. Additionally, between 2026 and 2027, and to ensure a robust, multi-perspective approach, the impact assessment will also involve external stakeholders. This will include consulting CSOs and HEIs on organisational changes, DE students on the journal’s bibliographic impact, and broader political actors on project awareness. These findings will generate an article, infographic outputs, and in-person and online sessions to discuss them.

Conclusion

In a neoliberal political context where the Theory of Change often serves as a financialisation instrument, the Sinergias ED project reimaged it as a

collaborative strategic device. Since 2023, this shift has fostered a dialogue between the existing monitoring and evaluation system and the ToC, resulting in the Sinergias ED's Transformational Theory. Currently undergoing validation, this framework explores how DE practitioners, engaged in the project, develop critical perspectives and how collaboration between HEIs and CSOs create alternative learning spaces that drive individual, organisational and structural transformation. This process revealed four primary (re)generative tensions that serve as vital sources of learning.

On a first level, the tension between a linear and progressive interpretation of change, based on a horizontal fluxogram, and the ecosystemic and digestive vision of transformation, based on a spiraled system mapping perspective with loops and multiple feedbacks. The social cartography and the biological metaphor potentiated different ways of understanding how transformation can occur, and from a linear approach, a shift was made towards a metabolic one. Secondly, the tension between the time and participatory processes required to achieve transformation and the technical and financial mechanisms available for planning, managing and assessing this transformation. Systemic change requires long-term, participatory processes, while funding favours short-term, product-oriented cycles. To foster social transformation, project management and financial mechanisms must shift to prioritise long-term collective action over immediate outputs.

At a third level, the tension between the ex ante and ex post uses of the Theory of Change. In the case of Sinergias ED, the impact assessment process began when the project celebrated its tenth anniversary. Consequently, the ToC was used from an ex post perspective and the project moved beyond monitoring to a metareflection on how experiential collaborative cycles generate alternative ways of thinking, doing and being. It became a tool to advocate for the transformational potential of collaboration between HEIs and CSOs in the field of DE. This was only possible due to a robust M and E system that balanced qualitative and quantitative indicators. Instead of demanding rigid ex ante ToC as a condition for funding, governments and other stakeholders should invest in long-term, ex post impact assessments. This could lend support to anti-hegemonic perspectives, which are becoming increasingly necessary in today's neoliberal

political context. The CICL's role in supporting the impact created by Sinergias ED over ten years has been fundamental. In a political context of advancing neoliberalism, will the Portuguese DE sector continue to have the freedom to experiment and innovate before the long-term impacts are formally proven?

Furthermore, Sinergias ED's ecosystemic and multi-level approach to DE impact assessment requires technical tools that can grasp complexity, characterise interdependencies and different types of relationships, and facilitate a rhizomatic analysis of causes and consequences. This approach highlights the tension between individual and collective agency and structural change. The individual lens on impacts cannot be the only perspective considered. A relational lens is needed to shed new light on the complexity of human agency and social transformation.

A new phase of the Sinergias ED impact assessment began this year, involving reflection on and experimentation with various indicators in order to test and validate the developed theory. It is crucial to observe, investigate and capture empirical evidence of the transformative potential of DE initiatives, as well as their impact on practitioners, learners, organisations and institutions. Such an examination is necessary in order to establish and justify the intrinsic value of DE in contemporary societies, both nationally and globally. In particular, possible cause-and-effect relationships must be explored in depth (IDEA, 2025). However, this task is already revealing new tensions. How can we create indicators that express changes in people's perceptions of life, time, and their profession? How can an indicator express the socio-emotional process of living with the tensions generated by DE processes that focus on uncertainty and critical thought? How can we characterise, understand, and describe the relational dimension of learning spaces and their impact? Can artistic expressions offer new insights into understanding, living, and being and serve as indicators? Do we risk falling into the 'trap' of 'indexing the world' (Machado de Oliveira, 2021: 21) and reproducing modern/colonial mechanisms that prioritise objective, unambiguous language over the complex reality of social transformation?

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Viewpoint

THE POLITICAL-PEDAGOGY OF DR. DIP KAPOOR: A TRIBUTE

GISELLE F. THOMPSON

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It would be insincere of me not to admit that I am still grieving Dip crossing the threshold to the afterlife on 26 August 2025. For this reason, in the tradition of Black feminist scholars (Nayak, 2019; Ohito, 2021; Williams, 2016), I have thought deeply about my grief and how I might fasten it to the 'larger fabric of my intellectual labour' (Ohito, 2021: 517) to honour someone who took it upon himself to mentor me, his junior colleague, but also show me immeasurable love, care, and concern. Dip countered Dionne Brand's assertion, made in her novel *Theory*, that in academia 'One has no friends ... One has colleagues [and] One has assassins' (Brand, 2018: 66) by rejecting the ethics of the university system that was designed to produce individuated, assimilated, and competitive people who produce knowledge for knowledge's sake (Collins, 2008; Gumbs, 2014). Dip reached across the lines of race, ethnicity, culture, age, and gender to build solidarity and coalitions with so many. He believed that our work as scholars and professors is inherently political, and therefore, must challenge and subvert hegemonic ideologies and inequitable social arrangements. To do this work, he believed that the 'voices, ideas, perspectives and theories produced by those engaged in social struggles [must not be] ignored, rendered invisible, or overwritten ... [by our] accounts as ... academic experts' (Choudry and Kapoor, 2010: 2) but centralised and amplified in our teaching and research.

In December 2025, my colleagues Sourayan Mookerjea and Dia Da Costa, hosted an event, entitled 'The Autonomous Domain of Subaltern Politics' to honour Dip at the University of Alberta. Given the current geopolitical landscape in which we live, wherein racial-colonial-neoliberal-capitalist empire continues its land grabbing, labour exploitation, displacement, dispossession,

forced migration, ecological racism and/or degradation, slumisation, and resource wars (Kapoor and Thompson, in press), the event was aptly named. The people who have been made subalterns by these processes are acutely aware of the limits of human suffering. However, meditating on subaltern autonomy calls us not to pornotrope (Spillers, 1987) these experiences, as the traditional white gaze of research would have us with its othering epistemological impositions (Wright, 2023), but recognise the ways of knowing, ingenuity, creativity, spirituality, and other forms of resistance that have sustained subaltern people throughout time and space. Dip and I conversed often about the ways in which their blood, sweat, tears, lives, deaths, and afterlives (Kapoor and Thompson, in press; Thompson, 2025) are instructive to us, and how in them lay political-pedagogies that erase the line that exists between theory and practice.

bell hooks wrote: ‘theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfils this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end’ (1994: 61). Like hooks, Dip expected that theory be pressed into the service of healing, liberation, and revolution. But he argued that theory is only ‘politically productive when made accessible’ (Kapoor, 2019: 71) through the process of ‘knowledge democracy’. That is to say, knowledge that is mobilised intelligibly to social groups and subaltern classes who are deeply impacted by casteist, racist, gendered, and other oppressions. Soberingly he remarked:

“Knowledge democracy in contexts of injustice and exploitation would need to recognize that knowledge about education, social in/justice, inequality, resistance and social revolutionary/radical change *is not the preserve of academics* and that those who experience marginalization are knowledge producers and actors in such cross-locational engagements, including activists from these contexts” (Kapoor, 2019: 69-70, emphasis added).

Learning to cede space to marginalised peoples is not a practice that many of us were taught in graduate school. This is because it is counter to the logic of academic knowledge production. As I mentioned above, we are trained to be experts, and therefore the sole producers and possessors of knowledge. However,

our disciplined forms of ‘expertise’ do not make us the arbiters of knowledge because, embedded in subaltern groups and movements are living praxes ‘politically seasoned’, as Dip wrote, and ‘powered by the strength of the suffering and injustices endured by ancestors’ (2009: 36) and the numerous plights of their progeny in the contemporary moment (Kapoor, 2009). This is vital for researchers to acknowledge in order to address political-economic and sociocultural injustices. And to researchers who choose not to acknowledge this, Dip, like only he could, indicted their self-induced ‘theoretical hearing impairment’. He argued that theoretical hearing impairments are produced by an uncritical adherence to the ‘traditional’, white, and male canons of social theorising and their associated political interests in relation to the ruling relations of capital (Kapoor, 2009).

In our conversations, Dip laid bare his concern about the compulsion, particularly of scholars who are racialised as non-white, to conform to dominant theoretical approaches because of the harms that they have inflicted on our communities (Kapoor, 2019; King, 2019). He also believed that they are unable to animate human suffering, be it manifest or latent, within the oppressive structures of the market, the modern state apparatus, and civil society (Kapoor, 2009). Even when human suffering is theorised within these boundaries, he argued, it is often reduced to a quantifiable social fact or simply made into a spectacle, whilst it is made to persist (Ibid.). This, for those who knew him well, was incongruent with his convictions.

An exceedingly kind and generous soul, he schooled me over a span of three years during *long* lunches, over countless cups of coffee/tea, during phone conversations, and on scenic walks about the political imperative of our work as scholars. He emphasised that it was our responsibility to, not only respond to human suffering, but amplify the knowledges embedded in our historical, ancestral, and cultural archives while undertaking this vocational work in the spirit of repair and redress – and using the academy’s resources to do it. For example, in Odisha, India where he co-laboured for upwards of three-decades with Dalit and Adivasi peoples, who experience caste-based discrimination, he and his interlocutors transformed, what he referred to as, ‘participatory academic research’ (*pat*) – because its academic formulation is oriented towards meeting institutional

ethics board requirements and funding agency criteria – to ‘people’s Participatory Action Research’ (people’s PAR) (Ibid.). The transition took place when community leaders realised that formal *par* meant that they were going to be studied for academic interests that were linked to the advancement of knowledge in universities in the West, although with their help in analysing their marginalisation (Ibid.). The debates about this alien exercise gave rise to people’s PAR that moved to centralise the political interests of Dalit and Adivasi communities in the research being undertaken. As a result, Dip deployed some of his research funds for ‘maximal impact of resources’ (Ibid.: 34) during the research process for necessities such as food, transportation, and mobile phones. He was also invited to help establish the Centre for Research and Development Solidarity in 2006, that was committed to Dalit and Adivasi ‘people’s knowledge, education, and social action’ (Ibid.: 32).

Undoubtably, Dip’s approach to research blurred academic lines that universities and funding bodies impose on researchers (Kapoor, 2009, 2019; Thompson, 2020). Too often, these expectations are incompatible with the cultural and political contexts of our engagements as scholars, and moreover, are tone deaf to the urgent needs of *real* people, who are more than mere ‘participants’ in our studies. As an early-career Black woman scholar, who is engaged in Black scholarship (Nyamnjoh, 2012), Dip encouraged me to follow his lead in resisting the artificial and imposed bifurcation between research and activism and knowledge production and mobilisation and stay true to my political commitments, and those of my interlocuters with whom I work in service to, and in partnership with.

Lessons from Dip’s activist-scholarship exist in his extensive body of work, which I continue to tarry with for instructions on how to be a better co-conspirator in the fight for equity and justice against racial-colonial-neoliberal-capitalist empire in African/Black cultural contexts. However, the most valued lessons, gifted to me by him, are derived from our one-on-one intellectual exchanges about the interlocking and transnational nature of oppression and the historical and contemporary resistance of subaltern people to it. Our interpersonal popular education project – that included much laughter to counter disillusionment and cynicism – invoked thinkers and revolutionaries such as

Bhimrao Ambedkar, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and other world builders whom he so admired, but to his dismay, were often obscured in development education scholarship and practice. Now, like them, he too is an ancestor, but these conversations resound in my memory and challenge me to undertake my work with integrity as he undertook his.

May the legacy of his political-pedagogy live on.

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF FASCIST PLAGUE

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Introduction

The horrors of fascism have returned, not as ghosts, but as a plague, fuelled by racial hatred and historical amnesia, infiltrating schools, universities, and the public sphere through state violence, fear, censorship, and manufactured ignorance (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024). Across the globe, fascist forces - emboldened by resurgent colonial logics, neoliberal cruelty, and virulent white nationalism - have transformed universities into battlegrounds for democracy's future. Dissent against a genocidal war in Gaza is not merely discouraged but criminalised, while political intimidation and extortion directed at major institutions (Belvedere, 2025), especially higher education, are recast as the new language of governance. In this critical moment, the urgency of defending higher education has never been clearer. As both a site of knowledge production and democratic possibility, higher education must resist becoming a tool of fascist and neoliberal control. Its role in nurturing critical thought, social responsibility, and civic courage is central to the survival of democratic values in the face of rising authoritarianism.

It is no longer enough to rehearse the familiar language of education's democratic mission or nostalgically invoke its emancipatory promise. Those ideals must be rethought and radicalised; they must be expanded, sharpened, and reclaimed as ethical and political imperatives equal to the darkness of our times, especially the threat posed by neoliberal fascism (Giroux and Karlin, 2018). In this instance, what is needed is an argument for understanding higher education not as a refuge from politics but as one of its most decisive battlegrounds, a place where public consciousness is shaped, where the struggle over truth and power unfolds, and where the pedagogical conditions for resisting emerging fascism must be forged anew. Such recognition forces us to confront the deeper forces shaping this crisis, to ask what forms of power are waging war on education and what is

truly at stake in this escalating assault? What is at stake, however, is far more than a rejection of gangster capitalism and the global misery it produces. The deeper danger lies in recognising that education has become the primary battlefield in the cultural and ideological wars waged by authoritarianism.

Neoliberal capitalism, in its fascist mutation, does not simply impoverish; it seeks to colonise consciousness, to erode the capacity for critical thought, and to replace democratic imagination with the deadening certainties of hierarchy and fear. Universities now sit at a dangerous crossroad where truth is contested, civic memory is either erased or preserved, and the formative conditions for democratic life are nourished, or systematically destroyed. To defend higher education, then, is to reclaim its power to cultivate the forms of agency, solidarity, and critical awareness necessary to challenge the lies, brutalities, racism, corruption, and manufactured ignorance that sustain authoritarian rule. It is to insist that education remain a crucial site of critique and possibility - one capable of expanding the horizon of the future at a moment when fascism seeks to close it down. Such a task demands thinking the unthinkable: not merely reforming neoliberal capitalism but abolishing it, and cultivating pedagogical spaces where new modes of agency, solidarity, value, and identity can be forged. Only through such radical reimagining can education become the ground from which democratic life is rebuilt and the struggle for a liberated future renewed.

The threat to American society is not merely external, evident in the lawlessness and militarisation that now permeate almost every aspect of public life. It resides in the pedagogical terrain itself, in the ways authoritarian movements mobilise cultural institutions, digital ecosystems, and state power to produce a public consciousness increasingly habituated to cruelty, disposability, white nationalism, and historical amnesia. Trump's educational politics, steeped in racial hatred, ultra-nationalism, and authoritarian contempt for reason, exemplify a broader global project: the transformation of education into a tool for consolidating hierarchy, manufacturing consent, and converting higher education into laboratories of indoctrination. To confront this project, it is not enough to criticise his corruption or his embrace of economic exploitation, staggering inequality, unadulterated cruelty, and racial hierarchies. We must expose the cultural fantasies and pedagogical practices that animate these policies, the false

promises of belonging they extend, and the forms of political and ethical illiteracy they cultivate.

What is required, then, is the radical reimagining of pedagogy. Higher education must reclaim academic freedom, dissent, critical thought, and democratic governance not as abstract principles but as urgent practices of resistance. This means creating pedagogical conditions that nurture individual and collective agency, reconnect critique with social change, and transform private suffering into shared political consciousness. It means building classrooms and campuses where justice can be named, where inequality can be confronted, and where democratic forms of life can be rehearsed and renewed. It also means forging solidarities among faculty, students, unions, workers, and social movements, nationally and internationally, as part of a broader struggle for equality, justice, and freedom.

The task before us is clear: for higher education to endure as a democratic public good, it must take decisive action. It must recognise that democracy cannot exist without an informed public, that justice requires a language capable of confronting and narrating injustice, and that freedom depends on a pedagogy dedicated to nurturing the fragile yet vital work of civic courage - and the refusal of complicity with the mobilising passions of fascist politics. Stephen Rohde (2025), focusing on Northwestern University, warns that universities must resist succumbing to 'Trump's ongoing campaign, steeped in hypocrisy, self-delusion, bribery, and cowardice...to dismantle the independence of American colleges and universities', for doing so would make them complicit in cementing the bigoted regime of MAGA (Make America Great Again) (Hanlon, 2025). This article explores what this struggle demands and why the fight over higher education is, at its essence, a battle for the very meaning of radical democracy.

Higher education under siege: the rise of neoliberal fascism

Across the world, universities are under siege and democracy itself is approaching a terrifying threshold. From Hungary to India to Turkey, governments are hollowing out the university's democratic mission, attacking intellectual freedom, weaponising history, policing critical pedagogy, and stripping away the civic

imagination that sustains democratic life. What's at stake is not just the pursuit of truth but the moral and pedagogical fundamentals of democracy, a delicate balance between knowledge and responsibility, learning and the courage to bear witness. In these darkening times, it is not only knowledge that is being policed but agency itself, as the lifeblood of an informed, critical, and resistant citizenry. When education is severed from its moral and civic grounding, democracy erodes. Truth becomes suspect, knowledge becomes dangerous, and educators are seen as enemies by those who fear the power of enlightened judgment and the task of holding power accountable. Once the classroom loses its capacity for moral witnessing, critical thinking, and civic courage, the conditions for domination are set. Ignorance becomes virtue, conscience is silenced, and democracy's fragile bonds begin to fray from civil and legal rights to the institutions meant to protect them. In such a climate, the struggle for education is inseparable from the collective solidarities that make democratic life possible.

Theorists as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu (2003) and Thomas Piketty (2014) have noted how neoliberalism, a predatory form of capitalism, has waged war on the welfare state, dismantled the public sphere, and hollowed out the very notion of the common good. Masked by the rhetoric of freedom and efficiency, it elevates market logic into a totalising ideology, demanding that every domain of life bend to economic imperatives. In doing so, it separates economic practices from social costs and so disparages any viable notion of social responsibility. In practice, it concentrates wealth in the hands of a financial elite, celebrates ruthless individualism, and commodifies the most sacred dimensions of human existence (Giroux and Sardo, 2018). The social wreckage it leaves behind - systemic racism, militarism, mass precarity, and staggering inequality - is not an aberration but a defining feature of a politics built on dispossession, domination, and terminal exclusion. Paramjit Singh (2025), writing in the *Socialist Project*, insightfully sums up neoliberalism's bad-faith premises and the wreckage it produces. He is worth quoting at length:

“Across the world, neoliberalism has exhausted the moral and material foundations of the liberal order that once began as a promise of equality, justice, prosperity, efficiency, and freedom. In practice, it has produced deep inequality, widespread dispossession, ecological devastation, and

the disintegration of collective life. However, neoliberalism's most enduring damage lies not only in its economic consequences but also in its epistemic effects. It has weakened the categories through which societies understand justice, equality, community, and reason.... In the neoliberal era, both dissent and reason have been profoundly degraded. Decades of globalization, financialization, and privatization have depoliticized everyday life, replacing collective struggle with individualized anxiety. The rhetoric of choice, empowerment, and personal fulfilment has displaced the language of class. Under such conditions, dissent risks becoming spectacle, and reason risks degenerating into strategy, emptying both of their transformative political content. We inhabit a world that protests incessantly, yet rarely challenges the structural roots of crisis" (Singh, 2025).

As neoliberalism decays into an upgraded fascism, its machinery of repression intensifies. No longer able to legitimate itself, it blames its failures on immigrants, Black people, and all those deemed 'other'. Dissent is criminalised, social life militarised, immigrants are abducted, and hate is normalised. Under Trump, this assault has crystallised into open warfare, rooted in the belief that critical education poses a direct threat to the authoritarian project.

The role of higher education in defending intellectual freedom

This hostility is echoed at the highest levels of the regime. J D Vance, the United States Vice President, has called higher education a 'hostile institution' (Shepherd, 2025). Donald Trump rails against colleges as 'dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics', stating that student protesters as 'radicals', 'savages' and 'jihadists' have been brainwashed by faculty 'communists and terrorists' (Agenda 47, 2023). These poisonous declarations shape policies that transform education into a site of repression, censorship, and laboratories of indoctrination. Moreover, these comments play a powerful role in crushing the critical functions of higher education, which is central to consolidating authoritarian power.

Against this backdrop, as fascist politics surges across the globe, it is crucial for educators to confront a set of urgent and unsettling questions. What does the rise of illiberal regimes mean for higher education in an age of

manufactured fear, state terrorism, and state-sponsored lies? What responsibilities fall to universities when the very idea of democracy is under siege? What happens to a society when education is disparaged for its claims on democracy, civic culture withers, and academics are told to look away? What happens when educators are pressured into refusing to speak the unspeakable? In Trump's America, and in countries around the world drifting toward fascism, silence becomes a form of complicity and inaction, a profound moral failure. The university cannot retreat into neutrality when the stakes are this high; its task is to defend the public imagination, nurture democratic agency, and refuse the tyranny that seeks to extinguish both.

Domestic terrorism and authoritarian rule

Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025 marks not only a political crisis but a profound tragedy for democracy. Under Trump, we face a terrifying new era of state terrorism (Klippenstein, 2025a) evident by the erosion of due process, mass abductions, vicious attacks on higher education, and the increasing presence of a police state (Klippenstein, 2025b). America is at war with itself at the same time as it wages war in Venezuela and threatens war on other countries in the region. Racism and hatred have moved from the shadows to the seat of power, reshaping the political landscape with brutal clarity. ICE operates as a modern Gestapo (Brody, 2025), patrolling American cities with the explicit aim of terrorising immigrants and people of colour. State violence has become a public spectacle, disinformation has supplanted truth, and the democratic bonds of shared responsibility have withered into a corrosive politics of shared fear.

Trump is unhinged in his gleeful embrace of white supremacy, a malignant worldview that saturates every policy he advances and every cruelty he authorises. His white nationalist rhetoric (Mother Jones, 2025) has grown so extreme that he publicly indulges in a fascist delirium of racial cleansing, declaring Somali immigrants 'garbage', insisting they 'contribute nothing', and claiming they come 'from a country that stinks and we don't want them in our country' (Stechyson, 2025). Such racist invective not only legitimises cruelty and a politics of disposability as governance; it also fuels his broader assault on higher education. Institutions committed to critical inquiry, dangerous memories, academic freedom, equality, justice, and pluralist imaginaries are now treated as

intolerable because they pose a direct threat to the racist hierarchies and exclusionary nationalism that anchor an authoritarian state. As Peter Beaumont (2025) noted, Trump's driving ideological conviction is that there is not enough racism in either the United States or Europe, a worldview that both fuels and legitimises his most extreme authoritarian policies.

Trump represents the endpoint of gangster capitalism, the culmination of its violence, disposability, and moral rot. He is the twenty-first-century, hyper-charged incarnation of Patrick Bateman from the film, *American Psycho*, a figure fashioned through cruelty, unchecked violence, narcissism, and the celebration of domination. Every policy Trump advances radiates this criminogenic logic, from the killing of 115 people in small boats in the Caribbean (Tait, 2025) to cutting off life-saving aid through USAID, condemning millions to misery and death (Oxfam, 2025). He is the living embodiment of a death-machine, a leader for whom state-sanctioned violence and ruthless governance become not just a tool of control but a source of perverse pleasure.

The assault on history: erasing memory and shaping power

Such hostility inevitably turns toward history, the most dangerous teacher of all. The subversive power of historical understanding, its capacity to illuminate suffering, expose injustice, and nurture democratic hope, is precisely why it has become a target for right-wing forces intent on erasing or sanitising uncomfortable truths. This is not abstract: it shapes policy. Efforts to censor critical ideas, erase episodes like slavery, and eliminate depictions of systemic racism exemplify this dangerous turn. Donald Trump has openly stated that 'he would punish schools that teach students accurate U S history, including about slavery and racism in the country' (Conley, 2024). Across the United States, an aggressive campaign is underway by right-wing groups to erase history and transform schools and universities into instruments of ideological control (Auh, 2025). Books are being banned (Berger, 2025), professors targeted, gender and ethnic studies eliminated, trans identity vilified, student protests criminalised, and honest historical narratives suppressed. This is not symbolic; it is the blueprint of fascist politics and governance, a state-sanctioned strategy to extinguish the democratic imagination.

If the emerging fascism in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere is to be confronted, critical education must again become a vital force in democratic life. Higher education has to be understood not as a problem to be tamed but as an indispensable resource for rebuilding democracies in crisis (Usher, 2025). This begins with reclaiming a language capable of exposing lies, dismantling systems of oppression, and illuminating the corrupt relations of power that shape everyday life. Hannah Arendt understood that language reveals the hidden ‘crystallized elements’ that make authoritarianism possible (Medium, 2016). The language of critical pedagogy, rooted in historical memory, justice, and ethical imagination, offers a powerful arsenal for truth-telling, resistance, and the refusal of untruths. Under such circumstances, one crucial goal of critical pedagogy is to cultivate historical awareness, equipping students to use history as a vital lens for understanding the present. Through the critical act of remembrance, the history of fascism can be illuminated not as a relic of the past but as a persistent threat, its dormant traces capable of reawakening even in the most robust democracies. In this sense, history has to retain its subversive function, drawing on archives, historical sources, and suppressed narratives to challenge conventional wisdom and dominant ideologies.

Higher education complicity: universities as enablers of authoritarianism

From Florida to Texas, far-right governors are transforming education into a vehicle for repression. Teachers are threatened with criminal charges for acknowledging gender diversity or reproductive rights. At the national level, student activists, particularly those protesting US support for Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza (Giroux, 2025a), are being surveilled, detained, and, in some cases, forcibly abducted and held in detention centres without transparency or due process (Giroux, 2025b). These actions mark a dangerous escalation in the use of state terrorism to crush dissent and stifle free speech. Under Trump, the assault on higher education has taken on the character of political extortion. Universities are threatened with funding cuts, targeted investigations, and public humiliation unless they align with the regime’s ideological demands (Rippberger, Riedl and Katz, 2025). Faced with this mafia-like pressure, many institutions, such as Columbia University (Benedict, 2025), Brown, Northwestern, and Harvard, capitulate: some pay large financial ransoms to keep research programmes afloat, submit to monitored or pre-approved syllabuses,

push faculty into self-censorship, and watch as entire fields from gender studies to critical race scholarship are eliminated.

Once considered bastions of critical thought and academic freedom, these institutions have now aligned with the very political and ideological forces they should resist, transforming into silent collaborators in the rise of fascist politics. In capitulating, they have not only abandoned the integrity of higher education but become complicit in the creeping authoritarianism that seeks to control not only knowledge but the very language of dissent. These once-revered institutions are now incubators of conformity, breeding grounds for a new authoritarian oligarchy and class of billionaires that serves power rather than truth, injustice rather than justice, racial and class hierarchies rather than equality. In the face of this onslaught, they have traded their moral compass for the illusion of survival, surrendering their role as guardians of democracy to become facilitators of its destruction. Academic freedom becomes a privilege dispensed by administrators rather than a right grounded in democratic life, and universities shrink into obedient service providers, enablers of authoritarianism rather than spaces of critique and possibility. The result is a culture of fear in which marginalised students and critical scholars endure the deepest betrayals, their histories and identities recast as political liabilities (Darian-Smith, 2025). This is the university remade by coercion, subject to racial cleansing, drained of its civic responsibility, and stripped of its public purpose. In this punitive vision, neo-fascism on steroids, education is no longer a democratic necessity; it becomes an instrument for policing memory, enforcing obedience, and erasing those who fall outside the boundaries of white nationalist belonging.

Higher education and the militarisation of race: confronting white nationalism

The assault on education, then, cannot be separated from the broader pedagogical struggle unfolding across the globe. The current fight against a growing fascist politics is not simply a struggle over state power, it is a fight over the production of historical memory, over who gets to speak, who gets erased, and who is allowed to imagine a future. The horrors of the past, from Nazi Germany to apartheid South Africa, make clear that the rewriting of history is always tied to the whitening of the nation, to the violent sorting of populations into those who

belong and those who do not. Universities are central to this battle because they are the institutional guardians of historical memory and critical knowledge. When they are attacked, censored, or hollowed out, the very capacity of a society to learn from its past is imperilled.

These intertwined assaults on education and democracy become even more visible in the racialised militarisation of public life. The deployment of troops into cities with large Black and brown populations is not merely a spectacle of state power; it is another expression of white nationalism and racial cleansing, a violent pedagogy that teaches citizens who counts and who is disposable. This narrowing of citizenship is not unique to the United States. Across the globe, from India to Hungary, the question of who belongs is being reshaped by religious zealotry and fantasies of racial purity. Viktor Orbán makes this logic unmistakable in his declaration that the aim of his illiberal democracy is to eliminate what he calls ‘mixed races’ (Walker and Garamvolgyi, 2022). As Nicola Bertoldi (2018) observes, any struggle for a radical democratic society requires that ‘the lessons from our dark past [be] learned and transformed into constructive resolutions’ for building a post-capitalist future. That task is impossible without institutions, especially schools and universities, that nurture critical memory, cultivate democratic agency, and resist the machinery of erasure.

Confronting the challenges of authoritarianism in education

One of the challenges facing the current generation of educators, students, and others is the need to address the question of what education should accomplish in a society at a historical moment when it is slipping into the dark night of an emerging fascism. What work do educators have to do to create the economic, political, and ethical conditions necessary to endow young people and the general public with the capacities to think, question, doubt, imagine the unimaginable, and defend education as essential for inspiring and energising the citizens necessary for the existence of a robust democracy? What language must higher education reclaim to redefine its mission, to help faculty and students imagine futures beyond the present, see themselves as agents rather than victims or clients, and take responsibility for shaping democratic public life? In an age marked by the abandonment of egalitarian and democratic impulses, what will it take to

educate young people, and the broader public, to challenge repressive forms of authority and hold power accountable? (Saltman, 2016).

In part, this suggests developing educational policies and practices that not only inspire and motivate people but are also capable of challenging the growing number of anti-democratic tendencies under a global tyranny of gangster capitalism. Such a vision suggests resurrecting a democratic project that provides the basis for imagining a life beyond a social order immersed in massive inequality, endless assaults on the environment, and elevates war and militarisation to the highest and most sanctified national ideals. In this view, education becomes something other than an obsession with accountability schemes, market values, imagination-crushing methodologies, or the crude empiricism of a data-driven society. Rather than function as an instrument of pedagogical terrorism and deadening conformity, it should open a space for thinking, translating, acting, and imagining otherwise.

In light of the current assaults on education, what might it mean for educators to take seriously the notion that democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting equity to excellence and learning to modes of agency that embrace the demands of social and economic justice and the virtues of the common good. Any meaningful vision of critical pedagogy should have the power to provoke a radical shift in consciousness, a shift that helps us see the world through a lens that confronts the savage realities of geopolitical issues including genocidal violence, mass poverty, the destruction of the planet, and the threat of nuclear war, among other issues. Global capitalism thrives on staggering inequalities, settler colonialism, and the twisted anti-democratic ideologies that uphold it. A true shift in consciousness is not possible without pedagogical interventions that speak directly to people in ways that resonate with their lives, their struggles, and their experiences.

Education has to help individuals recognise themselves in the issues at hand, understand how their personal suffering is not an isolated event, but part of a broad, systemic crisis. In addition, activism, debate, and critical engagement should be central to a student's education (Grossberg, 2025). Activism is a form of education, a way of guiding students to become both knowledgeable and

engaged citizens. In this sense, critical pedagogy must cultivate conditions that empower students not only to think critically, but to act with purpose and conviction. There can be no authentic politics without a pedagogy of identification, an education that connects people to the broader forces shaping their lives, an education that not only helps them understand the roots of their oppression but also empowers them to imagine and fight for a world where they are no longer victims but active agents of change. Without this, we risk perpetuating a politics that is disconnected from the lived realities of those it seeks to empower. The poet Jorie Graham (2024) emphasises the importance of engaging people through experiences that resonate deeply with their everyday lives. She states that ‘it takes a visceral connection to experience itself to permit us to even undergo an experience’ (Ibid.). For language and appeals to truly matter, they must be anchored in the tangible realities and struggles that shape people’s existence. Only then can communication penetrate consciousness, forging connections between body, mind, and others beyond the poisoned solidarities that sustain hatred, war, and consumerist obsessions.

When teaching loses this visceral, grounded quality, pedagogy risks numbing the mind and body, a condition easily reinforced by a broader culture dominated by screens, virtual spectacles, disconnections, and reductive oversimplifications. To resist this drift into a culture of immediacy and regressive distraction which is never removed from the experiences students bring to the classroom, educators must reclaim their role as public intellectuals, embracing their responsibilities as both critical teachers and active citizens in ways that spark dialogue and mobilise action. This means speaking to wider publics about urgent social issues, developing a language that links everyday troubles to the systemic forces that produce them, and advancing a politics committed to economic and social justice. It also requires creating conditions in which educators have real agency over their labour and a meaningful voice in university governance. Yet this aspiration is continually undermined by the growing neoliberally produced precarity of academic life: without tenure or secure positions, many are cast into spaces marked by fear, repression, crushing workloads, powerlessness, isolation, and, for some, conditions approaching poverty.

Education should rise to meet these challenges, offering a vision capable of resisting what Mark Fisher (2014) called neoliberalism's 'slow cancellation of the future' and helping us imagine a life beyond massive inequality, environmental destruction, and the glorification of war and militarisation as national ideals. In this context, education cannot surrender to academics who insist there is no room for politics in higher education or the classroom, nor to administrators who claim that universities have a responsibility to remain neutral. This position is not only deeply flawed but also complicit in its silence over the current far-right politicisation of education or the utterly damaging transformation of higher education into an adjunct of corporations; it is also a script for depoliticising schooling as an institution as well as both faculty and students.

Neutrality and the erosion of academic freedom

The call for neutrality in many North American universities is a retreat from social and moral responsibility, masking the reality that these institutions are deeply embedded in power relations. As Heidi Matthews, Fatima Ahdash and Priya Gupta (2024) aptly argue, neutrality 'serves to flatten politics and silence scholarly debate', obscuring the inherently political nature of university life. From decisions about enrolment and research funding to event policies and poster placements, every administrative choice reflects a political stance. Neutrality, far from apolitical, is a tool that silences dissent and shields power from accountability. It is essential for educators to recognise that learning unfolds across a multitude of sites, circulating not only through formal institutions but through the wider currents of everyday life. As Shea Howell (n.d.) warns, this truth carries immense weight in a moment when 'controlling public culture is essential to the consolidation of fascist power'. And following Raymond Williams (2015), we are reminded that education must do more than transmit knowledge, it must be woven into the very fabric of social transformation, for 'learning must be a crucial part of the process of social change'.

The most powerful forms of education now operate far beyond schools and universities. In an age of recent technologies, concentrated power, and ubiquitous social media, culture has become a dominant pedagogical force, shaping how people see, feel, and imagine the political world. Democracy is no longer toppled only by coups; it is hollowed out from within, eroded by the ghosts

of past tyrannies revived through symbols, digital spectacles, and the relentless machinery of propaganda. What appears as entertainment, distraction, or common sense is increasingly the terrain where political identities are forged and the boundaries of the imaginable enforced.

Beyond thresholds of disappearance and the colonisation of the mind

The current historical moment is defined by what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls ‘thresholds of disappearance, the proliferation of depoliticized multiplicities’, those institutions and cultural spaces that domesticate power differences, transforming systemic projects of resistance into commodified, private acts of rebellion (Mohanty 2013). In this landscape, neoliberal culture and pedagogy form one of the most consequential thresholds of disappearance, draining politics of substance while stripping education of its radical possibilities. At stake is the recognition that education, whether mediated through schools, digital platforms, or the wider culture, has become an urgent site of struggle, a decisive political terrain where agency is fashioned, desires are mobilised, oppression is normalised and hope itself becomes either militarised or rekindled.

This machinery of disappearance is amplified by cultural forces that speak through images laced with bigotry, saturated with violence, and driven by the logics of cruelty, exclusion, and ethnic cleansing. Culture no longer reflects the past; it erases it, functioning as a pedagogical regime that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2025) argues ‘colonizes the mind’. We inhabit a world saturated with disimagination machines, engines of civic stupidity and right-wing narcotisation, designed to sever people not only from the material conditions that rob them of rights, agency, and hope, but also from the histories, knowledges, and modes of critical thought that make genuine freedom possible. These apparatuses do more than distort reality; they shrink political imagination, corrode critical thought, and render individuals increasingly susceptible to the authoritarian scripts that shape everyday life.

Fascism thrives in precisely these manufactured silences and curated amnesias. Once the public is habituated to disappearance, to the erasure of histories, the trivialisation of suffering, the commodification of dissent, the ground is laid for more overt forms of authoritarian control. Fascist politics feed on this

hollowing out of civic memory, replacing the complexities of historical truth with mythologised narratives of purity, grievance, and fear. Consider how right-wing movements sanitise the 6 January 2021 riot at the US Capitol by recasting it as a patriotic uprising: the goal is not merely to distort an event but to reengineer the collective memory that anchors democratic life. What emerges is a political culture in which cruelty becomes a language of belonging, exclusion a measure of citizenship, and forgetting a civic duty. In this sense, the assault on history is never merely symbolic; it is a pedagogical strategy that shapes desires, identities, and the very possibility of democratic agency.

In the era of digital media, platforms like Fox News, Elon Musk's X and corporate giants such as Facebook, Netflix, and Google have become powerful teaching/propaganda machines, amplifying far-right values and the predatory ethos of gangster capitalism. What we confront is not simply a political failure, it is an educational crisis. Fascism no longer announces itself merely through decrees or armed repression. It is a pedagogical project that shapes memory, desire, and the boundaries of the imaginable. Fascism also colonises memory, determining what needs to be remembered, forgotten, mourned, and celebrated. It wraps itself in spectacles of cruelty, in a language steeped in hate and terminal exclusion. It operates through laws, yes, but also through habits, images, and the daily language games that dull moral sensibility. Trump's most fervent acolytes, Elon Musk, Steve Bannon, and others, perform Nazi salutes as if rehearsing the dark future they are resolved to summon. Stephen Miller, Trump's White House Deputy Chief of Staff, channels Hitlerian rhetoric under the banner of patriotism, insisting that 'America is for Americans and Americans only' (Guerrero, 2024). Trump resurrects Confederate symbols and the mythology of white supremacy, elevating monuments to genocide as emblems of national pride. Under his rule, the culture of fascism is neither subtle nor hidden; it is staged, broadcast, and normalised as the new common sense.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Trump administration's decision to downgrade the swastika, a symbol of fascism, white supremacy, and mass murder, from a hate emblem to something merely 'potentially divisive' (Copp and Boorstein, 2025). In a move that defies history and moral clarity, the US Coast Guard will soon place the swastika, the noose, and the Confederate

flag in the same sanitised category. This moral inversion is not an accident. It aligns seamlessly with Trump's claim that Europe faces a 'civilizational erasure' (Mackenzie et al., 2025) a thinly veiled invocation of white replacement theory that casts non-Europeans as existential threats to Western civilisation. Such rhetoric, and the policies that follow, reveal an administration committed to the normalisation of hatred, the erasure of historical memory, and the legitimisation of white supremacist fantasies.

The horror of fascist violence has returned, now draped in AI-guided bombs, ethnic cleansing, and white supremacists who revel in racial purification while dismantling every vestige of decency, human rights, and democratic life. What we are witnessing is not only the death of democracy but the erosion of moral and civic conscience itself. Education, at its best, is never mere job training, nor should it serve as an indoctrinating machine for white Christian nationalism and its narrow vision of who belongs as a citizen. True education cultivates empowered spaces of grace, rigour and, engagement where students think rigorously and speak freely, where their experiences, aspirations, and dreams can be voiced without fear. It is a courageous and protective site in which students learn to act with agency and critical judgment, and where their voices are heard, valued, and challenged. In such spaces, education becomes a bridge linking school to society, self to other, and theory to practice, urging students to confront the urgent social and political realities of their time while embracing the practice and promise of a radical democratic society.

Furthermore, education should help students cultivate a deeper commitment to justice, equality, community, and freedom (Singh, 2025). Critical pedagogy, as a rupturing practice, must refuse to equate capitalism with democracy, making it clear that one cannot discuss fascism without addressing capitalism. To be truly transformative, any viable critical pedagogy should be inherently anti-capitalist, reviving the discourse of radical democracy, and creating new political formations beyond the conventional liberal and conservative paradigms. Neoliberal capitalism strips education of its utopian possibilities and insists that capitalism and democracy are indistinguishable, that to imagine anything beyond its rule is to invite disaster. In an age of resurgent fascism, education must do more than defend reason and critical judgment; it also needs

to mobilise organised collective resistance to neoliberal fascism. Critical pedagogy in this context is not a naïve ideal but a radical necessity, a defiant force that urges us to envision possibilities beyond the suffocating confines of the present. It requires confronting the forces that seek to extinguish the radical imagination before it can inspire broader change. This struggle, though daunting, demands relentless urgency and unyielding conviction from educators and the public alike.

Conclusion: reclaiming education for collective resistance

Effective resistance to the rise of fascist politics in the United States and beyond cannot occur without making education central to political struggle. This begins with recognising that the transformation of consciousness and the transformation of institutions are deeply interrelated. We must heed Pierre Bourdieu's (Miller, 2010) warning that the most insidious forms of domination are not only economic; they are also intellectual and pedagogical, rooted in belief and persuasion. This insight calls on academics to recognise that the current battle against emerging fascist politics and white nationalism is not only a contest over economic structures or corporate power. It is equally a battle for ideas, for the very consciousness of society, and for the power to reshape culture itself. Education is the crucible where agency is forged, where the foundations of subjectivity are laid, and where the very essence of politics takes shape. It is here, in the spaces of learning and dialogue, that the seeds of democracy can either take root or wither away. The struggle to fulfil the promises of democracy cannot thrive in the shadows of deceit, where lies eclipse reason, ignorance erodes critical understanding, and truth is drowned by the seductive chorus of unchecked power. In this battleground of ideas, education should stand as both shield and sword, a force that defends reason and nurtures the capacities of individuals to question, to resist, and to act with the integrity democracy demands.

Amid the current assault on public and higher education, educators must reclaim their role as architects of imagined futures, fostering a language of possibility that aligns education with the broader struggle for democracy. They should consider taking control of the labour process in order to engage in academic freedom and set the conditions for teaching, learning, and policy. Such a vision of education must reject the neoliberal paradigm of education as a private investment in 'human capital' and instead cultivate a critical pedagogy that

disturbs complacency, inspires critical thinking, and energises students to confront the societal forces shaping their lives. Education's critical function lies in its power to create informed, engaged citizens who possess the civic courage to challenge injustice. This necessitates teaching students to think intersectionally, historically, and relationally. In a world dominated by fragmented knowledge, staggering levels of inequality, and the tyranny of metrics, students must be educated to become border crossers, fluent in multiple literacies, print, visual, and digital, capable not only of consuming culture but producing it as cultural critics and creators. Critical pedagogy should be defended as the search for truth. It is a pedagogy that empowers students to act from a position of agency, equipping them to unsettle power, challenge common sense, and take risks in pursuit of justice and mutual respect. Educators must inspire students to think dangerously, imagining futures where democracy, equality, and freedom are not only values but achievable goals. This involves confronting injustice as an ongoing struggle and recognising that the fight for justice is never fully complete.

In a society where democracy is under siege and fascism casts a growing shadow, educators should recognise that alternative futures are not only possible but that acting on this belief is essential to achieving social change. This urgent political and pedagogical mission demands both a language of critique and a language of possibility. Critique exposes abuses of power, unmasking deceit, and holds authority accountable, while a vision of educated hope dares us to imagine new horizons, empowering us to think and act beyond the confines of the present. It calls on us to reject the inevitability of injustice, to defy the predatory forces shaping our future, and to summon the courage to envision a world grounded in justice, equity, and freedom, a world we must actively strive to build. At stake is the courage to confront the world we want to build, the world we owe to future generations. As Ernst Bloch reminds us, hope taps into our deepest experiences, and without it, reason and justice cannot flourish (Bloch 1986: 3). The great novelist and critic James Baldwin understood with unmatched clarity that a society's fate is sealed the moment it abandons its responsibility to those who have not yet arrived. In *Nothing Personal* (Baldwin, 2021), he warned that when we break faith with one another, we forfeit the very possibility of a shared world. Today, that warning is no longer metaphor, it is the condition of our times.

As authoritarianism weaponises ignorance, as cruelty becomes a governing principle, and as whole populations are written out of the category of the human, the struggle for the future falls squarely on the shoulders of educators and cultural workers. Our task is nothing less than to disrupt the pedagogy of fascism: to nurture forms of critical memory that cannot be erased, solidarities that cannot be bought off, imaginations that refuse to be colonised. If we fail, the future will be engineered by those who thrive on amnesia and revel in disposability. But if we rise to the challenge, insisting on truth, defending the vulnerable, and widening the moral vocabulary of democracy, we create the conditions under which new generations can breathe, speak, and begin again. Resistance, then, is not an option; it is the only means by which the future survives. In these dark times, hope may be wounded, but it is not lost. Resistance and the promise of collective struggle endure, for power is never absolute, and domination cannot extinguish the will to fight back. The global rise of fascism casts a long shadow, marked by state violence, silenced dissent, and the assault on critical thought. Yet history is not a closed book; it is a call to action, a space for possibility. Now, more than ever, we must dare to think boldly, act courageously, and forge the democratic futures that justice demands and humanity deserves.

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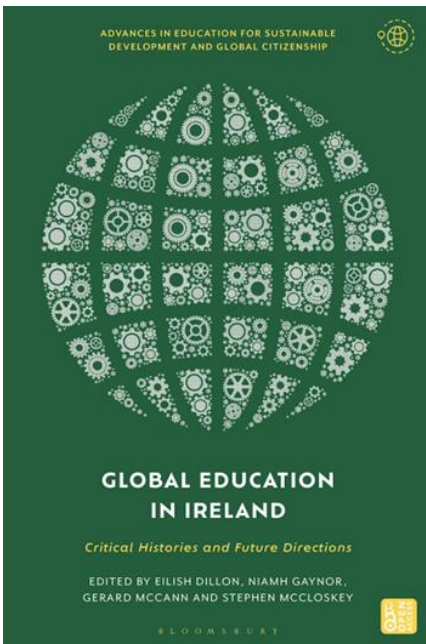
Resource reviews

GLOBAL EDUCATION IN IRELAND: CRITICAL HISTORIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Eilish Dillon, Niamh Gaynor, Gerard McCann, and Stephen McCloskey (eds.) (2024) *Global Education in Ireland: Critical Histories and Future Directions*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.



The publication of *Global Education in Ireland: Critical Histories and Future Directions* marks a significant, much needed and timely contribution to the field of global education in Ireland. This is not simply a book *about* global education. It is written by those who have walked in this quite complex field as educators and activists, developing practice, contesting dominant narratives, and helping to define global education as a bottom-up, critically oriented endeavour. There is a distinctive authenticity to the volume, one that feels particularly necessary in a period marked by intersecting political, economic, social, and environmental crises.

The voices of those who helped to create and sustain the sector are present throughout the volume, voices marked by long-term commitment, ethical seriousness, radical care and a refusal to separate education from struggle. The book offers both clarity and provocation. It does not set out to celebrate the expansion or institutional visibility of the field, though these developments are acknowledged. Instead, it pauses to ask more difficult questions about how global education in Ireland has been shaped, constrained, and reimagined over time. In doing so, it brings together a compelling, accessible, and radically hopeful range of perspectives from practitioners, educators, activists, organisations, and schools who have collectively shaped the field.

The volume also functions as a form of collective memory work. Through critical reflection, historical documentation, and practitioner perspectives, it traces the evolution of global education in Ireland across decades of ideological contestation, pedagogical experimentation, and shifting funding and policy environments. Crucially, it interrogates the foundations on which the field has been built, including its entanglements with colonial histories, international development narratives, and state funding regimes. The result is a textured, multi-voiced collection that will be of value both to long-standing practitioners and to those newly entering the field. The stated purpose of the book is twofold: first, to trace the historical development of global education on the island of Ireland; and second, to consider its future trajectories through a critical and reflexive lens. This dual purpose is realised through five thematic parts: changing contexts and terms; philosophical and pedagogical influences; situating Irish practice internationally; curriculum developments; and future directions. Each section is introduced through an editorial overview that situates the chapters that follow, combining analytical contributions with practice-based case studies.

One of the book's most valuable contributions is its sustained effort to situate global education within wider historical and political contexts. Several chapters explore the emergence of development education in Ireland through solidarity activism, missionary networks, liberation theology, and adult education movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These early initiatives were often shaped by Ireland's own experiences of colonialism, emigration, and poverty, and informed by international events such as decolonisation and the Vietnam War.

Importantly, the authors avoid romanticising these origins. The limitations of early approaches, particularly their tendency to reproduce charity-based framings and unequal power relations, are addressed with honesty and critical care. The volume also offers a thoughtful analysis of how the language and framing of the field have shifted over time. Chapters by Michael Doorly, Aoife Titley and Elaine Nevin examine the movement from development education to global citizenship education and education for sustainable development, highlighting how each framing carries distinct assumptions, priorities, and political risks. These debates are not treated as merely semantic. Rather, the authors demonstrate how terminological shifts reflect deeper tensions around depoliticisation, instrumentalisation, and the dilution of critical praxis. This analysis is particularly relevant at a time when global education is increasingly framed in terms of skills acquisition and behavioural change, often at the expense of structural critique or collective action.

A recurring concern throughout the volume is the growing institutionalisation of global education and the role of the state, particularly Irish Aid, in shaping the field's direction. The question of whether state funding enables or constrains critical pedagogy is explored with nuance. Several contributors caution against the risk of alignment with government policy agendas that may prioritise soft power, branding, or public relations over social justice and systemic change. At the same time, the enabling role of state support in expanding the reach, legitimacy, and sustainability of global education initiatives is acknowledged. Rather than offering a binary judgement, the book invites readers to grapple with these tensions and to consider how a critical edge might be maintained within increasingly institutionalised settings.

Pedagogy is a central thread throughout the collection, particularly in chapters focusing on community education, youth work, higher education, and teacher education. Drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy and participatory learning, contributors emphasise approaches that are dialogical, reflexive, and grounded in lived experience. Several chapters challenge superficial engagements with global issues - such as awareness-raising without action, or empathy without analysis - and instead argue for pedagogies that embrace complexity, discomfort, and relationality. From a pedagogical perspective, the strongest chapters are those

that position global education as an unsettling practice, demanding reflexivity not only from learners, but from educators and institutions. I found the inclusion of a range of case studies across community, youth, and higher education contexts to be very helpful and enriching. Collectively, the case studies included in the volume show how creative, arts-based, activist, dialogical, and participatory methodologies, alongside critical policy analysis and community-engaged learning, are being used to move beyond surface-level engagement and foster deeper, more critical forms of learning.

The volume also pays close attention to questions of voice, representation, and knowledge production. Issues of who speaks, whose knowledge is valued, and whose experiences are marginalised are addressed directly, with several chapters highlighting the exclusion of migrant perspectives, global South epistemologies, and grassroots activists from dominant narratives of global education. The final section on decolonising global education is particularly compelling, moving beyond rhetorical commitments to ask what it would mean in practice to centre critical race theory, lived experience, and alternative worldviews within Irish educational discourse. At its strongest, the book models a form of scholarship that is collaborative, situated, and ethically grounded.

As with many edited collections, the volume is uneven in places, a point that the editors themselves explicitly acknowledge in framing the book as neither comprehensive nor definitive. The authors acknowledge it represents a snapshot of debates, tensions, and practices, not a settled or closed field. Some chapters revisit familiar critiques without substantially extending them, reflecting a wider challenge within the field where critical language is well established, but strategic pathways for action remain underdeveloped. While the volume points to emerging challenges such as digitalisation, climate anxiety, and ideological backlash, these issues are not always explored in depth. The editors are also transparent about the partial nature of the perspectives represented, noting the continued under-representation of community-led, migrant-led, and global South epistemologies within Irish global education discourse. Read in this light, these limitations do not detract from the book's overall contribution, but rather reinforce its invitation to ongoing critical reflection and future work.

In conclusion, *Global Education in Ireland: Critical Histories and Future Directions* is a landmark publication for the field. It succeeds in holding critique and care in productive tension, offering a volume that is reflexive without being self-indulgent and rigorous without becoming detached from practice. By documenting debates, tensions, and shifts over time, it resists the growing risk of historical amnesia in a field that has become increasingly professionalised and policy-facing. For readers of *Policy and Practice*, the book offers both affirmation and challenge. It affirms the intellectual seriousness, ethical commitments, and pedagogical creativity that have long characterised global education on the island of Ireland. At the same time, it challenges educators, researchers, and funders to reflect critically on their own assumptions, complicities, and institutional locations. This is particularly important in contexts where global education is increasingly mainstreamed, but where its critical edge risks being diluted or depoliticised.

Ultimately, this volume reminds us that global education is not simply about responding to issues ‘out there’, nor about keeping pace with changing terminology or policy frameworks. It is about how we choose to teach, learn, organise, and act in the face of injustice. In an era of overlapping crises and educational uncertainty, this book functions both as a mirror and a provocation, inviting the field to remember where it has come from, while asking difficult questions about where it is going, and who it is for.

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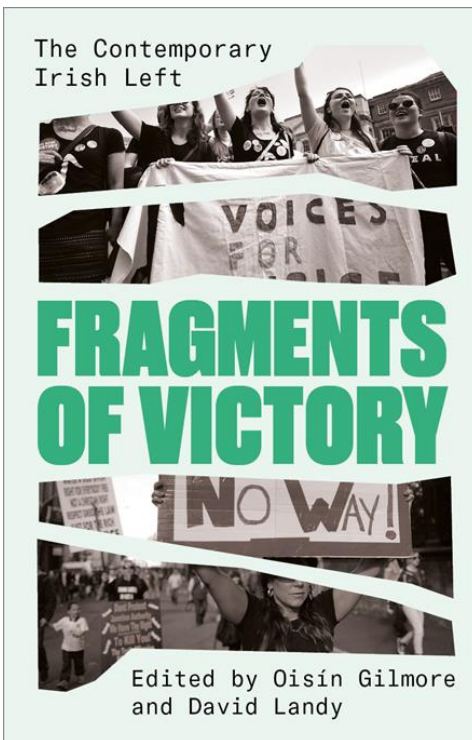
methodologies in teaching and research. She works across community, policy, and higher education contexts, with a strong commitment to ethically grounded and socially engaged scholarship.

FRAGMENTS OF VICTORY: THE CONTEMPORARY IRISH LEFT

STEPHEN MCCLOSKEY

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Oisín Gilmore and David Landy (eds.) (2025) *Fragments of Victory: The Contemporary Irish Left*, London: Pluto Press.



This is an engaging and clear-eyed reflection on the political and activist left in the period of austerity in Ireland following the 2008 financial crisis. It is the story of a fractious political left often engaged in bitter internal disputes and a uniform political right 'with near universal support for neoliberal politics' (Gilmore and Landy, 2025: 9). The book assesses how the political left and civil society responded to the imposition of austerity as part of a bailout to the Irish state by the Troika of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission and European Central Bank. The launch of a successful campaign to oppose water charges was one of the

'fragments of victory' in this period that effectively combined community organisations with trade unions and left political representatives in a united movement called Right2Water. The book reflects on the lessons to be learned

from this period and is described by the editors as a ‘work of recollection, deliberation, debate, provocation and analysis’ (Ibid.: 23). As Gilmore and Landy suggest:

“It is by studying the struggles, conflicts and possibilities of our present and our recent past that we can work out where we stand and, from there, where we might advance in the future” (Ibid: 19).

The intensity of campaigning and the sheer exhaustion that attends activism over an extended period often precludes the possibility of reflection and analysis of lessons that can be learned going forward. Gilmore and Landy, for example, argue that the ‘left has failed to build lasting political institutions’ that could help sustain the mobilisation of communities and social movements in future endeavours (Ibid.: 3). So, this book, despite its acknowledged limitations, has a lot to offer readers interested in advancing the leftist values of social justice, diversity and equality. These are the values of global education and practitioners from the sector will find the book useful in learning from the leftist campaigns that have resonated with communities in Ireland. The book also attains added interest as its publication coincides with the election of an Irish president, Catherine Connolly, who campaigned on an unapologetic socialist agenda for a ‘new Republic’ and won with a resounding majority receiving 63.4 percent of the vote (RTE, 2025). Is this a harbinger of more electoral success for the political left in Ireland? What are its implications for global educators and how the sector communicates with the public? They are issues worthy of further debate.

Austerity and water charges

Between 1990 and 2003, the Irish economy underwent a remarkable transformation from poor, peripheral status to becoming the poster economy for neoliberalism in Europe. Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy was predicated on attracting foreign direct investment in high-end sectors particularly pharmaceuticals, information technology and financial services. Ireland’s open economy positioned itself mostly toward the export sector with its largest market in the United States. It enjoyed an ‘annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 9.4% between 1995 and 2000’, one of the highest in the world (Peters, 2025). But as an open and highly deregulated economy, Ireland was particularly

vulnerable to the 2008 global financial crisis when it lost its economic sovereignty as a result of a banking collapse fuelled by a speculative property boom that left the sector sitting on a pile of unsustainable debt. The Fianna Fáil-led government responded to the crisis with a complete bailout of the banks financed by a loan of €67.5 billion borrowed from the Troika. The EU-IMF bailout came with demands for austerity including water charges that was opposed by a national campaign for the Right2Water which mobilised hundreds of thousands of people to participate in mass demonstrations. The Right2Water campaign was hugely effective in combining mass protests with the blocking of the installation of water meters and a call for the non-payment of bills which reached a peak of 73 percent (Gibney, 2025: 57).

The campaign succeeded because it had support from some of the political parties and independent representatives in the Dáil (the Irish parliament), the organisational skills of five of Ireland's 48 trade unions and the grassroots mobilisation of community groups. Together these three 'pillars' created a formidable campaign that forced the government to scrap water charges in 2016. Dave Gibney, who was heavily involved in the campaign and wrote the chapter on water charges in Gilmore and Landy's edited text, emphasised the importance of political economy education by trade unions to the success of Right2Water. He found that the unions had abandoned these more politicised education courses during the economic boom and neglected the 'need for collective solutions to workers' problems and focused almost entirely on individualised solutions' (Ibid: 58). So, when the economy collapsed in 2008, 'many workers had no idea what had happened' as they lacked the critical consciousness and political content that unions used to provide (Ibid). As Gilmore and Landy (2025: 9) put it, the 'labour movement in Ireland had been muzzled by social partnership' agreements between the unions with government and the Irish business and employers' confederation. This ensured trade unions did not engage in potentially disruptive industrial action and maintained a business-friendly environment for corporate investors.

Another highly effective campaign in this period was that for the repeal of the eighth amendment of the Irish constitution to open the way for legislation allowing abortion in certain circumstances. The Abortion Rights Campaign was

a grassroots all-volunteer group that had the support of a coalition of political organisations and NGOs and successfully secured a referendum on the eighth amendment in 2018. The Abortion Rights Campaign joined an umbrella group called 'Together for Yes' that secured 66 percent of the vote in the referendum on 25 May 2018 when Ireland became one of the first countries to provide abortion through local GP services (O'Carroll and Ni Chuagáin, 2025: 79). The success of the repeal the eighth campaign followed another major social reform when a referendum on legalising same-sex marriage was carried by a 62 percent majority in 2015 (Gilmore and Landy, 2025: xiv). The success of the abortion and same-sex marriage referenda were indicators of a changing Ireland from a socially conservative to a more plural and secular society. However, political change has been more glacial as this book suggests.

A divided left and unified right

Since Ireland's partition more than a century ago with the north of Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom, the political system in the south of Ireland has been dominated by two centre-right parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. These parties emerged from the pro- and anti-treaty forces that fought in Ireland's civil war in 1923 over a treaty with Britain that partitioned the island. Ideologically, the parties became increasingly interchangeable and in the Celtic Tiger period both were committed to the economic model driven by securing foreign direct investment for the export market which increasingly integrated the Irish economy into the orbit of the United States both politically and economically. The buoyancy of the Celtic Tiger years ensured the left stayed in the political margins, but this began to change post-austerity when the left republican Sinn Féin and Trotskyist People Before Profit parties started making significant gains in local and general elections in 2011 and 2016. The soft left Labour and Green parties have occasionally entered coalition governments with the political right and have paid the price at the ballot box for supporting austerity measures while in power which means Ireland remains the only 'democracy in western Europe where a socialist or social democratic party has never led a government' (Ibid.: 3).

Fragments of Victory has a two-part structure with part one focused on campaigns (anti-austerity, water charges, abortion and housing) and part two on organisations (mostly political parties and trade unions). From a global education

perspective, part one's focus on political education, organising campaigns, building alliances and public engagement will probably be of greater interest and relevance. This section certainly suggests a role for global educators in working with communities on anti-austerity issues, supporting community education programmes and campaigning on social justice issues. Recent issues of *Policy and Practice* have indicated a deepening sectoral unease at global education silences on social and economic justice issues (Wheatley, 2024; Murphy, 2024; O'Toole, 2024; Khoo, 2024). And, interestingly, Landy (2025: 30) makes the point that non-governmental organisations in the period of austerity played a negligible role of 'quiescence and acquiescence'. In a similar fashion many trade unions failed to mobilise their members during the austerity period either because of their relationship with the Labour party which was in government between 2011 and 2016, or because of social partnership agreements. Gilmore's conclusion depressingly finds that trade union density is lower today than it was in 2007 and 'no lasting form of working-class self organization has emerged' (2025: 177-178). This in turn has weakened worker education and the capacity of trade unions to respond to the multiple challenges assailing us at present including the rise and growing public disorder of the far-right, online racism and hate speech, homelessness and the power of corporations.

The large social movements that emerged in the post-2008 austerity period were often highly effective in sustaining campaigns and large-scale mobilization but:

“have failed to identify an avenue through which society might be changed, and given this, they have failed to develop a mass political consciousness around the capitalist nature of our society or around what needs to be done to change it” (Ibid.: 183).

And yet there are reasons to be optimistic about the future. Catherine Connolly's presidential campaign platformed climate justice, housing, the cost-of-living crisis, Irish neutrality, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism and the genocide in Gaza (Connolly for President, 2025). These issues resonated with the electorate, particularly young people who were energised by her campaign and the idea of a more inclusive society. And in the November 2025 New York mayoral campaign,

the democratic socialist candidate, Zohran Mamdani, won with more than half the vote standing on a platform that included free public buses, reduced childcare costs, increasing the minimum wage and the corporate tax rate and opening city-owned grocery stores to subsidise food costs (Goodwin, 2025). They are two very different political contexts, but the Connolly and Mamdani campaigns showed that progressive policies can win elections if communicated with clarity and targeting social needs. Can these campaigns put down the political roots needed to inspire and sustain other candidates from the political left? It remains to be seen but at the very least they offer hope for the prospects of progressive political change on both sides of the Atlantic.

Conclusion

Fragments of Victory revisits a painful period in Irish history which caused severe suffering for workers most vulnerable to the economic collapse such as those employed in the construction sector which virtually ground to a halt post-2008. The National Suicide Research Foundation (NSRF) in Ireland found that ‘the rate of male suicide by the end of 2012 was 57 per cent higher than it would have been if the recession had not happened’ (O’Connell, 2025). Many families in Ireland continue to carry the loss of those years, particularly those that lost a loved one and the main economic provider. It is important, therefore, that we reflect on the causes of the financial crisis, the impact of austerity, and how the political and activist left responded. To that end, *Fragments of Victory* is a useful foundation for more fulsome treatments to come on the political and activist left with a broader sweep of sectors in civil society and a wider timeframe. This short book acknowledges the issues that it omitted including anti-racism, LGBT+ rights, environmentalism and international solidarity. It also confined itself to the south of Ireland when an all-island approach would be essential to a follow-up publication given the growing discourse on all-island politics (Harvey, 2025; Department of the Taoiseach, 2025).

A future treatment of the left would also have to assess the enormous and sustained public activism in Ireland aroused by Israel’s genocide in Gaza which has undoubtedly shifted the dial in terms of public consciousness on Palestine and influenced a mostly unified approach to the issue from the political left. It should also reflect on the 14-year presidency (2011-2025) of Michael D.

Higgins, which has re-defined a largely ceremonial position to make it more overtly critical of government policies, particularly those on housing and neoliberalism (Leahy, 2023; Fletcher, 2023). The Higgins presidency is a surprising omission in *Fragments of Victory*, as it has been the one constant beacon of leftist support and success in an otherwise challenging period for the political left in Ireland.

But it is in its coverage of the activist left in Ireland that *Fragments of Victory* really scores. There is valuable learning here in how communities on the frontlines of austerity came together with NGOs, trade unions, and civil society movements to fashion effective campaigns for social justice. Global educators reading this book should reflect on how they can engage with the campaigns to come that will inevitably attend the poly-crisis breaking across our world.

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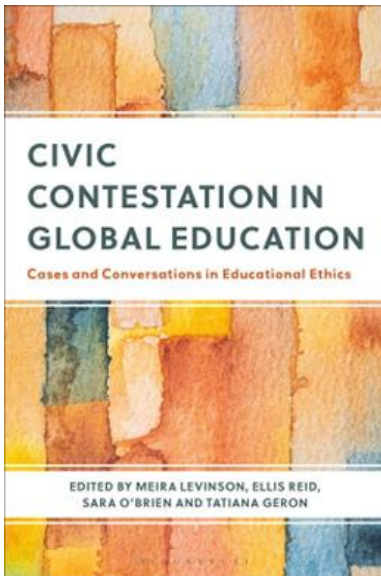
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CIVIC CONTESTATION IN GLOBAL EDUCATION: CASES AND CONVERSATIONS IN EDUCATIONAL ETHICS

F. DILARA DEMIR BLOOM

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Meira Levinson, Ellis Reid, Sara O'Brien and Tatiana Geron (eds.) (2024) *Civic Contestation in Global Education: Cases and Conversations in Educational Ethics*, London: Bloomsbury Academic. It is available in open access format at: <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph?docid=b-9781350399532>.



Civic Contestation in Global Education: Cases and Conversations in Educational Ethics offers a timely and innovative contribution to global citizenship education and educational ethics. The book comprises eight global normative case studies, each paired with an introductory context, and a convivial conversation among educators from schools, leaders from community organisations, and academics. Each chapter concludes with a character guide that outlines the school setting, key characters, and study questions designed as teaching tools for both formal and informal educational contexts. Each case study is grounded in real-life educational challenges and primarily aimed at teachers

and school principals. These challenges range from dealing with conspiracy theories, online teaching and digital ethics, environmental challenges, promoting or silencing student activism, racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, polarisation

of society, religious sensitivities, and civic responsibility in conservative contexts. Each case study takes place in different contexts: the United States, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Australia, Canada, and England (Levinson et al., 2024: 2).

The book begins by positioning schools and education at the heart of democratic spaces - particularly in fragile democracies - and challenges polarisation by promoting dialogue and communication (Ibid: 1-12). Each case study takes place in different levels of formal education; primary, secondary, middle and high schools, vocational institutes, or higher education institutions. It revives the notion of education as liberation, applying critical pedagogies to contemporary controversial topics faced by educators and learners across the Western world (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2014). The book refers to education's role in society for 'reading the world' rather than 'reading the word' (Freire 1970). The book also fosters ethical praxis, echoing Paulo Freire's call for educators to move from reflection to action (Ibid.) by digging deep into reflexive case studies and then suggesting action plans and tools for the teachers or the school principals to use in similar cases. Its writing style in conversations also showcases the work of educators as collaborative, dialogical, and based on active learning as the practice of engaged pedagogies (hooks, 2014; Goodrich and Vu, 2025).

There are common themes arising in different case studies to re-imagine education and the role of educators and learners, while offering strategic and practical solutions for the daily lives of educators in different spaces at different levels. For example, the first normative case study in the book takes place in a comprehensive secondary school in Dortmund, Germany and is about a student promoting conspiracy theories in class (Drerup, 2024: 13). The student, influenced by far-right ideologies, introduces COVID-19 conspiracy theories that dominate classroom discussions (Ibid: 13-30). There is another student in the same class who lost family members to the pandemic and is on the verge of tears. This case study brings a lot of challenges for the educator with respect to responding to the student in a meaningful way, while protecting other students from being influenced by a loud and assertive student dominating the discussion in the classroom. The teacher questions how to have a meaningful dialogue on political and moral issues with the students in a safe learning environment.

The case study continues with other teachers in the same school discussing how to engage with that student, his background and his family, as well as facilitate a dialogic, critical atmosphere in the classroom without excluding him (Ibid: 13-19). Other educators then analyse the case and reflect on the teachers' attitudes in this secondary school. A particularly striking moment in this chapter arises when a primary school teacher from Münster, Germany, remarked that schools partly exist 'to protect children from being stuck at home under the tyranny of their parents' ideas' (Ibid: 25) or 'to challenge their social bubbles' (Ibid: 19). The conversation enriches the debate about the role of schools and the value of deliberation beyond schools.

In another chapter, the role of schools in supporting dialogue is discussed but this time the case study takes place in a repressive environment. This case study is about teaching a critical consciousness course in an anti-critical race theory environment, in a middle school in the United States (Michael, Tanchuk, and O'Brien, 2024: 115-133). In this case, the only Black school principal in a conservative county, called Heath, is considering how to keep the critical consciousness course open while being threatened by parents about spreading 'unholy' or 'un-American' ideals, such as promoting gay marriage as a matter of equity (Ibid: 119-120). This conversation among educators highlights 'the purpose of education as liberation, developing critical thinking skills and critical consciousness so that people can become the best versions of themselves' (Ibid: 122). This case study reflects on the role of schools as critical spaces challenging the social bubbles of the students and educators.

The role of public schools for a progressive society with critical consciousness and critical thinking are core issues at stake in this book. In all the chapters, educators offer hands-on, practical advice for teachers by drawing from their own experiences. For example, in the first case study about a student spreading conspiracy theories in the classroom, the educators suggest organising classes on media literacy, the notion of skepticism, and critical thinking for the students to create their own informed opinions (Ibid: 20-22); they also suggest using different methods of facilitation and moderation to make the classroom a safe space for the educator (Ibid: 23-25). It takes the classroom as a micro-society in which educators and learners share notions of respect while considering each

other's backgrounds and family influence. It also offers ideas such as talking to the student one-to-one after class and proposing a reflective writing assignment that enables him to challenge his views by self-learning (Ibid: 25). The book highlights the role of educators in turning difficult conversations into learning moments that are vital for critical consciousness. Educators need to keep practicing self-reflection and restorative practice for these conflict-driven moments to support critical transformation (Cheng et al., 2017).

Another common theme in the book is the critical role of school support and organisational dynamics within formal school settings to overcome isolation among citizenship teachers (Groot, Weening and O'Brien, 2024: 31-47). Although overcoming isolation is important for teachers and educators at all levels, it is vital for citizenship teachers, who discuss sensitive subjects every day in the classroom. In the current polarising period, some subjects such as free healthcare can be difficult to talk about within the classroom, especially in online settings.

A case study set in 'a vocational school for students aged 16-25 in the Netherlands' (Ibid: 46) discusses a challenge set by a teacher of an online class about healthcare by asking a controversial question to the class: 'Should people who drink or smoke a lot pay more for their health insurance?' (Ibid: 32). This is heard by one of the parents in an online classroom, and the parent interrupted the class in an abrupt manner and threatened the teacher for being biased. The parent made a formal complaint about the teacher for teaching their child that their parents are not worthy of receiving healthcare because they drink or smoke (Ibid: 32-33). This incident made the teacher think about the safety and privacy of online classrooms for students and educators, and shared this with her colleagues in her vocational school (Ibid: 35).

In the conversation section, the educators question the learning goals of the course for citizenship education and how it can be adapted to an online learning environment. They also highlight one of the most important tools for educators; feeling the room with non-verbal communication in their classroom, when they are physically present (Ibid: 38). The online classroom does not offer that tool to the educator. Moreover, organisational support for teachers, and

creating a community of practice to discuss these issues without feeling isolated and alienated as an educator, are crucial concerns for a better learning environment for both educators and learners (Ibid: 40-42). All educators in the conversation agreed that the school senior leadership and management should be proactive about supporting their teachers with training on technical and pedagogical issues related to online classrooms, especially while discussing controversial issues and creating a safe space for students and educators, in-person or online (Ibid.: 42-45).

This raises important questions about power dynamics both among senior leaders and between educators and learners. Who has agency and power? The conversation among educators in the United States, discusses *Weapons of the Weak* by James Scott (1985), and Jarvis Givens' work *Fugitive Pedagogy* (2021) to emphasise that even small acts of defiance can offer resistance and be liberatory in difficult, repressive systems (Michael, Tanchuk and O'Brien, 2024: 125-126). This raises the same question on the role of schools in challenging the status quo and racist laws, for learners, educators and communities around the schools. One of the teachers points out that 'When people talk about anti-American ideals, the American ideals they are referring to are White, middle class, heteronormative ideas' (Ibid: 127). This makes the point that all school curricula are value-laden in one way or another and not recognising that they are value-laden is 'problematic' (Ibid.).

The use of normative case studies inspired from real contexts and real issues experienced by educators is a brilliant way to make this book 'a teaching tool for the classroom and discussion tools for democracy' (Ibid: 176). The authors claim that the book is written both for teachers in the classroom and citizens who have conversations on social issues that can potentially transform points of view (Ibid: 175). It offers perspectives and actions for educators and practicing teachers that support difficult conversations in global citizenship education on controversial issues, while contributing to reflective teaching and learning (Ibid: 176). The authors offer a practical guidance on how to 'use these case studies for democratic dialogue' in a detailed manner (Ibid: 176-182). They also offer models of facilitation for the case studies as 'Tools for Learning' (Ibid: 182-187). Each case study models facilitation techniques as they all involve meta-

level discussions among educators, trying to identify ‘the ethical dilemmas in play, and different values, interests, and practical constraints that constitute these dilemmas’ (Ibid: 10). So ethical values and practical wisdom come together and reflect on ‘gritty materialities’ of an educator in an everyday life school context (Apple, 2012).

My main critique of the book is that its content is drawn from the global North; incorporating case studies from the global South would have made the conversation richer and more insightful. The underrepresentation of the global South in knowledge production when it comes to case studies in education is well-recorded (Breidlid, 2013). A focus on the connections and interdependence between the global North and South would have brought a more global discussion on educational challenges, while addressing the power asymmetries between different contexts. The book does not promote ‘soft’ as opposed to ‘critical global citizenship education’ (Andreotti, 2006). The authors offer a critical understanding of global citizenship education and approach power imbalances and inequalities seriously in local contexts and dig deep into complex global relationships (Ibid: 46-48). However, the authors could have identified the societal problems more explicitly to discuss the limitations of the scope of the book. For example, focusing only on formal school settings and on the global North is a limitation. It is a limitation to discuss Islamophobia or migration in school settings in Europe, without addressing historical connections and colonisation processes that lead to these societal issues being present in schools.

Overall, *Civic Contestation in Global Education* is an insightful, engaging, and practically valuable resource that aligns closely with the aims and values of global citizenship education. Through its rich, grounded case studies and dialogic methodology, it provides a unique approach to civic dilemmas in education. I highly recommend this book for student-teachers, teachers, school principals, and education policy makers to take a stance on ethical issues, to make pedagogical decisions in formal education contexts, as well as learn more about facilitation and communication techniques in citizenship education. I also recommend this book to community and trade union organisers, as well as citizens, who seek to foster ethical, inclusive and courageous civic learning in contested times.

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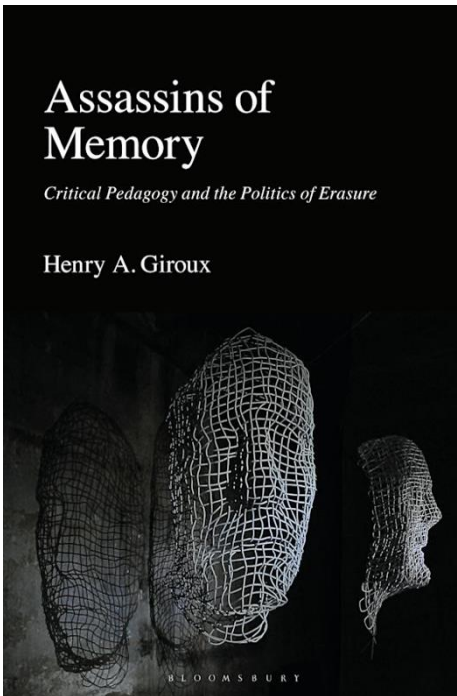
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ASSASSINS OF MEMORY: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE POLITICS OF ERASURE

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Regular readers of *Policy and Practice* will be closely familiar with Henry Giroux's incisive, urgent and lyrical writings on critical pedagogy, cultural studies, critical race theory, historical consciousness and social democracy. For Giroux, education must be political with a dual focus on reflection and action toward social transformation and a reimagining of the economy to prioritise social need over profit and privatisation. As a regular contributor to progressive online publications including *Truthout*, *Counterpunch* and *Salon*, Giroux monitors the centres of power, particularly in North America, and applies a transformational pedagogy to his diagnostic

analysis of social and economic ills.

In 2021, Giroux published *Race, Politics and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis* which reflected on the intersecting plagues of the COVID-19 pandemic and the first presidential term of Donald Trump. The book did not end with any sense of triumphalism at Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election. It instead ended with the prophetic line that: 'The ghosts of fascism may have been pushed back in the shadows, but they have not disappeared' (Giroux, 2021: 20). Trump's re-election has vindicated this judgement and his latest book, *Assassins of Memory: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Erasure*, coincides with the first year of Trump's second term and the United States' alarming 'descent into authoritarianism' (Giroux, 2026: 89). It is both a warning of the erasure of historical memory and critical thought and an invocation to collective resistance through citizen action. Oxfam's 2026 global economy report reflects on the political capture by extreme wealth analysed in detail in Giroux's book. It reveals that the number of billionaires worldwide has surpassed 3,000 and collective billionaire wealth is higher than at any time in history (Oxfam, 2026: 3). While Elon Musk sits on wealth estimated at half a trillion dollars, one in four people across the world regularly don't have enough to eat (Ibid.). Oxfam argues that the world faces the choice of 'oligarchy or democracy' (Ibid.).

In the United States under Trump, oligarchy is crushing democracy through an 'unholy alliance between Trump's political machine and a powerful cohort of corporate and tech oligarchs' (Giroux, 2026: 88). This alliance is advancing 'racist, nationalist culture that champions white supremacy, directly eroding the core American values of equality and justice' (Ibid.: 91). Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2025, was a preview of his administration's political alignment with the cultural power of Information Technology platforms as the tech leaders of Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta and X were more prominently seated than Trump's cabinet nominees (Helmore, 2025). The political conventions of democracy were to be eradicated or subjugated to the higher influence of billionaire and corporate wealth. With Trump's transactional approach to politics, there was no better appointee as US Special Envoy to the Middle East than Steve Witkoff, a real estate developer. With Trump's presidency blurring the lines between business and government amid accusations of 'crony capitalism' (Aspan, 2025), there was no better pick as Senior Advisor than his

son-in-law Jared Kushner. At this moment of real peril for democracy as economic and political power becomes concentrated within an increasingly unaccountable billionaire class, *Assassins of Memory* delivers moral clarity and an urgent invocation to act in a post-truth world. It is a stirring reminder that we can't face into the future without historical memory which means resisting the politics of erasure that would ban books, champion ignorance and silence dissent.

The precarity and possibilities of youth

There are three parts to *Assassins of Memory* with the first devoted to the precarity of youth in the age of neoliberalism. In the United States, the welfare state has come under renewed attack from Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA) with its planned cuts of over \$1 trillion from health programmes described by the Center for Medicare Advocacy (2025) as 'the largest rollback of federal support for health care in American history'. The Yale School of Public Health (2025) estimates that the OBBA's removal of health coverage for millions of Americans could result in 51,000 preventable deaths per annum. This is a clear case of criminal negligence in which the President, enabled by Congress, is consciously removing food and welfare provisions that will severely impact children, 'particularly those in working class and poor families' (Gotbaum and Calame, 2025). Chapter one of *Assassins of Memory* is part memoir in which Giroux recalls his tough working-class upbringing that later required him to unlearn racist ideologies and the stereotypes and prejudices that underpinned them (Giroux, 2026: 13). As a child carer who was separated from his sister at an early age, Giroux experienced homelessness in his own home (Ibid.). His difficult transition to tertiary education and struggle for tenure reflect the social and economic barriers erected for working-class students and intellectuals 'especially when they were on the left of the political spectrum' (Ibid.: 16). This reminds us why Paulo Freire radically rejected a class-based society and believed that 'a thorough understanding of oppression must always take a detour through some form of class analysis' (Macedo, 2000:13).

In his rendering of youth, Giroux both connects the personal to wider societal forces and bears witness as a border crosser between cultures, ideologies and occupations. The atomisation of neoliberalism has greatly impeded social mobility, stigmatised poverty, commodified education and supplanted community

cohesion with ‘cutthroat survival’ (Giroux, 2026: 21). This chapter recalls an immersive study of homelessness in New York by Andrea Elliott (2022) that meticulously framed the marginalisation of an African American family living in a homeless shelter to the racial, historical, political and institutional injustices that pushed them into poverty. Resistance to these injustices, urges Giroux, demand that we name them, unmask them and fight against them ‘with the full force of collective defiance’ (Giroux, 2026: 27). Chapters two and three focus on the scholasticide (UN, 2024) carried out by Israel as part of its genocide in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2024) which Giroux argues is part of ‘a disturbing global alignment in the attack on intellectual freedom and historical truth’ (Giroux, 2026: 42-43). Chapter three rightly applauds the growing international calls for civic disobedience to resist the rising tide of fascism in the US and the ongoing genocide in Gaza but importantly adds that action must be accompanied by ‘political education and consciousness-raising’ (Ibid.: 57). As Freire (2000: 88) reminded us: ‘if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism’ or ‘action for action’s sake’ which ‘negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible’.

Historical amnesia

Part two of *Assassins of Memory* on ‘The Scourge of Historical Amnesia’ reports on the relentless assault on public education in the US through book banning, the withdrawal of courses on critical race theory, the defunding of public institutions and curtailing of academic freedoms under the auspices of Christian white nationalism (Giroux, 2026: 64). Trump’s Deputy Chief of Staff, Stephen Miller, has been a relentless purveyor of far-right rhetoric with a speech in May 2025 decrying what he described as ‘cancerous, communist, woke culture that is destroying this country’ and called for the dismantling of policies on diversity, equity and inclusion, and transgender medical treatments (Viser and Wootson Jr., 2025). In chilling rhetoric recalling fascist Europe of the 1930s, Miller said: ‘Children will be taught to love America. Children will be taught to be patriots’ (Ibid.). Miller has been accused of turning the US State Department into an ‘anti-immigration machine’ revoking thousands of visas and establishing full or partial bans on immigrants from 19 countries (Roth, 2025). This theatre of cruelty is not only designed to terrorise migrant communities in the US but ‘deflect attention from headlines about economic contraction and job losses’ (Viser and

Wootson Jr., 2025). Trump's reimagining of history and nativist rhetoric are intertwining dynamics, argues Giroux, 'demonstrating how the suppression of critical thought and the manipulation of historical narratives coalesce to undermine democratic ideals and promote exclusionary ideologies that fuel a politics of disposability' (Giroux, 2026: 68).

Chapter five on 'the violence of historical amnesia' argues that when a society 'refuses to remember or address past injustices – whether its slavery, imperialism or economic exploitation – those in power can continue to exploit the present without fear of historical accountability' (Ibid.: 81). Chapter six considers the impact of right-wing social media platforms – what Giroux calls 'disimagination machines' – in fostering 'oppressive ideologies' and mainstreaming toxic hate speech and launching culture wars. The concentration of corporate media and cultural and political institutions has narrowed political debate and reduced much of our journalism to stenography. Giroux finds that just six corporations' control 'over 90 percent of the information to which Americans are exposed' (Ibid.: 90). This narrow media base in the hands of right-wing ideologues is creating 'manufactured ignorance' and normalising censorship, propaganda and cruel invective as political theatre (Ibid.: 93). The defanging of media has been compounded and enabled by a bi-partisan approach to the crucial issues of today including the Republican and Democratic parties' consensus on neoliberal economics, supporting Israel's genocide in Gaza and colonisation of the occupied West Bank, silencing dissent on university campuses, 'othering' migrants and people of colour, and de-politicising education thus denying millions of Americans a progressive political voice. It necessitates 'making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical at all levels of society' (Ibid.: 97).

Pedagogy of resistance

The final section of *Assassins of Memory* is titled 'The Crisis of Education and the Possibilities of Resistance' and takes stock of the plague of neoliberalism on welfare and its enabling of Israel's genocide through the manufacture and supply of weapons. The complicity of some American universities in Israel's genocide through partnerships with military contractors is contrasted with the courageous resistance of students who were subjected to 'brutal state repression'. 'These

students' defiance', writes Giroux – 'rooted in principles of justice and human rights – stands as a beacon of hope in a world increasingly defined by dispossession, cruelty, violence and domination' (Ibid.: 108). He adds that 'Democracy cannot endure, let alone thrive, without citizens who are civically literate, critically engaged, and capable of resisting forces that seek to reduce us to mere spectators in our own lives' (Ibid.: 111). Giroux is careful, however, not to reduce the current crisis to economics alone, situating it within an inflamed racial panic framed by the loss of dignity, community and hope within a sinister identity politics and white replacement theory. This lethal cocktail demands a 'pedagogy of identification' that 'connects people to the broader forces shaping their lives' (Ibid.: 116).

'As neoliberalism collapses into overt authoritarianism', argues Giroux, 'its machinery of repression intensifies' (Ibid.: 107). This has been most evident in Trump's deployment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in American cities ostensibly to arrest and deport undocumented migrants but as Jeffrey St. Clair (2026a) reports: 'Dozens, perhaps hundreds of American citizens, have been illegally stopped, interrogated, tasered, tear-gassed, arrested and detained by masked ICE and Border Patrol agents'. St. Clair presciently summarises the aim of the Trump / Miller program: 'to inflict maximum cruelty on a vulnerable population that it has used as a scapegoat for the decline of the American economy, resulting from four decades of ruthless neoliberal policies' (Ibid.).

Since the publication of Giroux's book, Renée Nicole Good, a 37-year-old mother of three, and Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive care nurse were shot dead by ICE agents in Minneapolis within a few weeks of each other on 7 and 24 January 2026 (St Clair, 2026b; Allison, 2026). While Trump and his acolytes sought to gaslight the public by urging them not to believe their eyes, it was clear from cellphone footage of their final moments that Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti were murdered (Andersen, 2026). In the case of Renée Good, Vice-President JD Vance offensively and outrageously suggested that she had been 'brainwashed' and was 'a victim of left-wing ideology' thus compounding the pain of her grieving family (Price, 2026). We now live in a post-truth world where irrefutable evidence of grievous crimes is clouded in doubt and those guilty of

such crimes operate with impunity. The Trump administration and those European powers that have been complicit in Israel's genocide and imperial drain of resources from the global South (Hickel et al., 2022) depend on our ignorance, historical amnesia and inertia. As Giroux argues: 'mass ignorance' fuels 'the death of moral conscience' and 'the collapse of social responsibility' (Giroux, 2026: 153). We require a pedagogy of hope and resistance to sustain a 'ferocious battle requiring courage, vision and mass action' (Ibid.: 152).

Conclusion: embracing discomfort and learning to resist

Challenging historical amnesia not only involves learning from the past but, as Giroux argues, knowing what 'has to be *unlearned*' (Ibid.: 71). This means embracing discomfort and confronting imperial histories that sustain a Eurocentric view of the global South and a complicity with the normalisation of genocide in Gaza. It means recognising the interconnections between the criminalisation of dissent, the enabling of genocide and what Colombia's President, Gustavo Petro, describes as 'the barbarism of consumption based on the death of others leading us to an unprecedented rise of fascism' (Klein, 2024). In positioning the role of educators during this polycrisis, Giroux suggests that 'education is not meant to soothe; it is meant to awaken'. And our role in the global education sector is to embrace a pedagogy of discomfort to address our own silences and support learners on a journey to social and economic transformation (Stein, 2024).

At the beginning of 2026, Trump illegally invaded Venezuela and abducted its head of state, President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, killing 83 Cuban and Venezuelan soldiers in the process (Aljazeera, 2026). His reckless, cruel and increasingly authoritarian domestic and foreign policies go largely unchecked by a compliant media and supine Congress, and are applauded and normalised by tech platforms controlled by billionaire allies. Vital to Trump's disastrous foreign policy has been the vassal-like role played by European states that have been complicit in the genocide in Gaza and silent on grievous breaches of international law such as the invasion of Venezuela (McKelvie, 2026). This is a component of contemporary international relations that could have been explored in greater depth in *Assassins of Memory* as many European states are shifting to the far-right (Henley, 2025) and experiencing similar pedagogical

pressures from the forces of neoliberalism to those deployed in the US (Díez-Gutiérrez, Alonso-Martínez and Palomo-Cermeño, 2025). Many European states have criminalised protest against the genocide in Gaza and tried to silence dissent on university campuses (Amnesty International, 2025). The Euro-Atlantic relationship in the context of Trump's 'authoritarian capitalism' (Macfarlane, 2025), increasingly aggressive foreign policy and attack on historical memory could perhaps have broadened the book's analysis and geographical reach.

However, Trump's administration is the epicentre of the unravelling of international law, hollowing out of democracy, the march toward racism and attack on public education. *Assassins of Memory* rightly concentrates its analysis on how educators can arrest Trump's slide to authoritarianism by reviving radical democracy and solidarity as a 'political and moral force' (Giroux, 2026: 156). This book is a warning against 'oligarchic gangster capitalism' but also a source of hope for a 'multiracial working class rising like a phoenix from the ashes of despair' (Ibid.: 152). Our activism and organising have never been more necessary. 'The stakes could not be higher: the future of democracy, the survival of justice and humanity itself hang in the balance. The time to act is now' (Ibid.: 156).

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