

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

KATIE CHAPPLE AND JOANNE O'FLAHERTY

**Citation:** Chapple, K and O'Flaherty, J (2026) 'Global Citizenship Education from the Margins: Insights from Youthreach and Alternative Education in Ireland', *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, Volume 42, Spring, pp. 42-68.

**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.

## References

Andreotti, V (2014) 'Critical literacy: Theories and practices in development education', *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, Vol. 19, Autumn, pp. 12-32.

Andreotti, V (2011) *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Andreotti, V (2006) 'Soft versus critical global citizenship education', *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, Vol. 3, Autumn, pp. 40-51.

Axelson, R D and Flick, A (2010) 'Defining Student Engagement', *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 38-43.

Bamber, P, Bullivant, A, Clark, A, Lundie, D and Peterson, A (2018) *Educating Global Citizens in Colleges and Universities: Challenges and Opportunities*. New York: Routledge.

Barry, M, Waldron, F and Bryan, A (2024) 'Understanding global citizenship education in the classroom: A case study of teaching practices', *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 397-416.

Boler, M and Zembylas, M (2003) 'Discomforting Truths: The Pedagogy of Discomfort', *Educational Theory*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 107-119.

Bourn, D (2020) *The Theory and Practice of Development Education: A Pedagogy for Global Social Justice*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Bosio, E (2023) 'Global South University educators' perceptions of global citizenship education: Reflective dialogue, social change, and critical awareness', *Prospects*, Vol. 55, pp. 67-81.

Braun, V and Clarke, V (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 589-597.

Braun, V, Clarke, V, Hayfield, N, Davey, L and Jenkinson, E (2023) 'Doing reflexive thematic analysis' in S Bager-Charleson and A McBeath (eds.) *Supporting Research in*

*Counselling and Psychotherapy: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Research*, New York: Springer, pp. 19-38.

Bryan, A and Bracken, M (2011) *Learning to Read the World? Teaching and Learning About Global Citizenship and International Development in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland*, Dublin: Irish Aid.

Bryman, A (2016) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Council of Europe (1997) *Global Education Charter*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Day, C, Gu, Q and Brown, C (2020) *Successful School Leadership*, Reading, Berkshire: Education Development Trust, available: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614324.pdf> (accessed 27 November 2025).

DES (Department of Education and Skills) (2014) *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development 2014-2020*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

DES, Department of Education and Science (2004) 'Circular F49/04: Designation of Centres for Education under Education Act, 1998', Dublin: The Stationery Office.

DoE (Department of Education and Youth) (2022a) *Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development – ESD to 2030*, Dublin: Government of Ireland, available: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/2nd-national-strategy-on-education-for-sustainable-development-esd-to-2030/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

DoE (Department of Education and Youth) (2022b) *Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision*, Dublin: Social Inclusion Unit.

De Wet, J, Bacher, J, Wetzelhuetter, D and Nnebedum, C (2024) 'Global citizenship values among Students: Testing the Thesis with World Values Survey Data', *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 13-28.

Dumas, M J and Anderson, G (2014) 'Qualitative research as policy knowledge: Framing policy problems and transforming education from the ground up', *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 22, pp. 1-21.

Franch, S (2019) 'Global citizenship education and the problem of depoliticization', *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 1-15.

Giroux, H A and Bosio, E (2021) 'Critical Pedagogy and Global Citizenship', *Policy Futures in Education*, Vol. 19, No. 8, pp. 951-964.

GENE (Global Education Network Europe) (2022) *European Declaration on Global Education to 2050: The Dublin Declaration*, Dublin: GENE.

González-Valencia, G, Massip Sabater, M and Santisteban Fernández, A (2022) 'Critical Global Citizenship Education: A Study on Secondary School Students', *Frontiers in Education*, Vol. 7, pp. 1-13.

Gordon, M (2011) *Youthreach soft-skills framework*, available: [http://www.cefa.ie/uploads/1/5/8/8/15883224/youthreach\\_soft\\_skills\\_document\\_23\\_nov\\_11.pdf](http://www.cefa.ie/uploads/1/5/8/8/15883224/youthreach_soft_skills_document_23_nov_11.pdf) (accessed 27 January 2026).

GoI (Government of Ireland) (2022) *SDG National Implementation Plan 2022-2024*, Dublin: GoI.

GoI (Government of Ireland) (2021) *Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy 2021-2025*, Dublin: GoI.

GoI (Government of Ireland) (2019a) *A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development*, Dublin: GoI.

GoI (Government of Ireland) (2019b) *Climate Action Plan 2019*, Dublin: GoI.

Hennessy, E and Donnelly, M (2005) *After-school care in disadvantaged areas: The Perspectives of Children, Parents and Experts*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Hurley, S and Keenaghan, N (2023) *Baseline report for Global Citizenship Education in the adult and community education sector*, Saolta, available: <https://developmentperspectives.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Baseline-Report-for-GCE-March-2023.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2026).

INTO (Irish National Teachers Organisation) (2004) *Tackle disadvantage Now! An INTO Policy Document*, Dublin: INTO.

Jeffers, G (2008) 'Some challenges for development education in the formal sector: A case study from Ireland', *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, Vol. 7, Autumn, pp. 48-62.

Kenny, M, Burke, J and Grummell, B (2022) 'The Youthreach Employee Wellbeing Report 2022', Maynooth: Maynooth University, available: <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/16819/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

Khoo, S-M (2017) *Sustainability and Global Citizenship Education: Challenging Neoliberalism through Transformative Learning*, New York: Routledge.

Kováč, T and Forkan, C (2024) 'Building upon the conceptualisation of alternative education in Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 1429-1453.

LYCS, Lourdes Youth & Community Services. (n.d.) *Global Citizenship Education at LYCS*, available: <https://www.lycs.ie/programs-services/global-citizenship-education/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

Mathie, R G (2024) 'A Whole School Approach: A Synthesis of Interconnected Policy, Practice, and Research Conceptualisations' in A E Wals, B Bjonness, A Sinnes and I Eikeland (eds.) *Whole School Approaches to Sustainability. Sustainable Development Goals Series*, Springer: Cham, pp. 9-34.

McHugh, K (2014) "A Road Less Spoken": The experiences of Youthreach participants', Doctorate Thesis, Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. available: <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/id/eprint/5437/1/Complete%20Thesis%20Ed%20KMcHugh.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2026).

McLaren, P and Bosio, E (2022) *Critical Global Citizenship Education: Theory and Praxis*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Mogren, A and Gericke, N (2019) 'School Leaders' Experiences of Implementing Education for Sustainable development: Anchoring the Transformative Perspective', *Sustainability*, Vol. 11, No. 12, pp. 1-21.

NEWB (National Education Welfare Board) (2008) *School Attendance and Participation: What Works and Why?* Dublin: National Educational Welfare Board, Available at: [http://www.newb.ie/downloads/pdf/attendance\\_report.pdf](http://www.newb.ie/downloads/pdf/attendance_report.pdf)

Nussbaum, M (1997) *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

NYCI (National Youth Council of Ireland) (n.d.) 'Youth2030: Promoting global youth work and development education - Programme overview', NYCI, Dublin, available: <https://www.youth.ie/programmes/global-youth-work-and-development-education/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2018) 'Preparing our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World: The OECD PISA Global Competence Framework', Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2010) 'Overcoming school failure: Policies that work', Paris: OECD Publishing, available at: <https://web.archive-storage.oecd.org/aemint-web-archive-prod/web-archive/0a/0adce9f5bfl72490b8083040e2a16598980e606e9644b8353cc5d1f340cc5fl8.pdf>

Orfield, G (2004) *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.

Oxley, L and Morris, P (2013) 'Global citizenship: A typology for distinguishing its multiple conceptions', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 301-325.

Pashby, K (2018) 'Identity, Belonging and Diversity in Education for Global Citizenship: Multiplying, Intersecting, Transforming, and Engaging Lived Realities' in I Davies, L Ho, C Peck, A Peterson, E Sant and Y Waghid (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Citizenship and Education*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 277-293.

Rosenthal, R and Vandell, D L (1996) 'Quality of care at school-aged child-care programs: regulatable features, observed experiences, child perspectives, and parent perspectives', *Child Development*, Vol. 67, No. 5, pp. 2434-2445.

Scheunpflug, A and Mehren, R (2016) 'What Do We Know about Global Learning and What Do We Need to Find Out?' in H Hartmeyer, and L Wegimont (eds.) *Global Education in Europe Revisited*, Waxmann: Münster, pp. 205 - 225.

Sheridan, C (2018) 'Youthreach graduates' perspective on the 3rd level experience', Master of Arts in Education Studies thesis, School of Policy and Practice, Dublin: Dublin City University, available: <https://doras.dcu.ie/22676/1/Carl%20Sheridan%20Masters%20for%20printing%2009.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2026).

Simpson, A and Dervin, F (2019) 'Global competence or global competitiveness?', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 28-40.

Smyth, E, Banks, J, O'Sullivan, J, McCoy, S, Redmond, P and McGuinness, S (2019) 'Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme', Dublin: ESRI.

Smyth, J, McInerney, P and Fish, T (2013a) 'Blurring the boundaries: from relational learning towards a critical pedagogy of engagement for disengaged disadvantaged young people', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 299-320.

Smyth, J, McInerney, P and Fish, T (2013b) 'Re-engagement to where? Low SES students in alternative-education programmes on the path to low-status destinations?', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Vol. 18, No. 1-2, pp. 194-207.

Tarozzi, M and Torres, C A (2018) *Global Citizenship Education and the Crises of Multiculturalism*, London: Bloomsbury.

Teaching Council (2020) *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*, Dublin: Teaching Council of Ireland.

UNESCO (2024/5) *Global Education Monitoring Report: Leadership in Education*, Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2021a) *Global Citizenship Education: Key Concepts and Approaches*, Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2021b) *Training Tools for GCED: Whole-school approach (Module 6)*, Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2016) *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*, Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2015) *Global Citizenship Education: Topics and Learning Objectives*, Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations (2015) *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, New York: United Nations.

WorldWise Global Schools (2025) 'A case study on a WorldWise Global Schools' Special Passport Holder', available: <https://www.worldwiseschools.ie/2025/07/11/lessons-in-global-citizenship-education-leadership-from-west-wicklow-youthreach-part-1> (accessed 26 January 2026).

WorldWise Global Schools (2023) 'WorldWise Global Schools Strategy Phase III (2023-2028)', Dublin: WorldWise Global Schools, available: <https://www.worldwiseschools.ie/strategy/> (accessed 26 January 2026).

Zembylas, M (2018) 'The Ethics and Politics of Global Citizenship Education', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 590–603.

**Katie Chapple** is the Director of WorldWise Global Schools, Irish Aid's programme for Global Citizenship Education in Ireland. Katie has a primary degree in English and Geography and worked for twenty years as a post-primary teacher. Katie holds a PhD in Education from Mary Immaculate College which focuses on the right of the young person to be heard in their education setting. Her research interests include youth voices, inclusion, and Global Citizenship Education. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/katie-chapple-08789022b/>

**Joanne O'Flaherty** is an Associate Professor at the School of Education, University of Limerick and Research Lead for the Ubuntu Network ([www.ubuntu.ie](http://www.ubuntu.ie)). She has a primary degree in Physical Education and English. Joanne has worked in a variety of educational settings, including the formal post-primary sector and the NGO sector, before joining the University of Limerick faculty.

Her research interests include teacher preparation, social justice education and social and emotional learning, and she has published in these areas. <https://pure.ul.ie/en/persons/joanne-oflaherty>