

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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