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Teaching for sustainable development through ethical global issues pedagogy: Participatory research with teachers

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In the UK and Nordic contexts, global learning initiatives such as global citizenship education (GCE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) have been criticised for reinforcing rather than challenging colonial power relations as they often predominantly involve charity work and awareness raising (e.g., Andreotti, 2006; Sund, 2016). As such, teaching about global issues risks focusing on individualism, unintentionally reproducing colonial systems of power where 'we' in the 'Global North' learn about and solve the problems of 'them' in the 'Global South' (Andreotti, 2011; Pashby, 2012; Sund & Öhman, 2014).

Including ethical global issues in education, and taking a critical approach is a key imperative in education scholarship. Young people have also called for a more complex approach (e.g. *International Youth White Paper on Global Citizenship* 2017). However, research is lacking into a) how to translate this critical scholarship into practice and b) the extent to which teachers are currently resourced and open to engaging such pedagogy – raising concerns about new education initiatives inheriting problematic constructs already in evidence (Pashby, Sund & Corcoran, 2019).

This project, funded through the British Academy's Tackling the UK's International Challenges Programme, was led by Pashby and Sund: researchers with experience in secondary school classrooms and teacher education working in the fields of critical GCE and Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) respectively. We conducted research with secondary and upper secondary school teachers in England, Sweden, and Finland to identify enabling factors and barriers to taking critical approaches in teaching about global issues and co-create a teaching resource to support the achievement of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.7.

An international collaborative approach
Building on an aim of GCE defined by UNESCO (2014):

Support learners to revisit assumptions, world views and power relations in mainstream discourses and consider people/groups that are systematically underrepresented/ marginalized

we aimed to develop a project that would:
1. bridge research in the areas of critical GCE and ESE,
2. bring together academics and teachers to conduct research into the opportunities and barriers to teachers delivering global issues education,
3. share and assess the usefulness of a pedagogical tool designed to make visible interlocking systems of oppression inherent to global issues learning,
4. develop a resource to support critical engagement with global issues in upper/secondary classrooms.

We selected Andreotti's (2014) HEADSUP tool to engage with ethical complexities in the study of global issues. HEADSUP identifies seven historical patterns of oppression that are often ignored and/or reinforced rather than engaged with in teaching about global issues: **h**egemony, **e**thnocentrism, **a**historicism, **d**epoliticization, **s**alvationism, **u**n-complicated solutions, and **p**aternalism. We had previously used HEADSUP as a pedagogical (Pashby & Andreotti, 2013) and analytical (Sund, 2016) tool for research, but not directly with secondary school teachers.

Focusing on teachers' experience
We conducted the project in three stages:
1. A teachers' workshop based on theoretical approaches to critical GCE and ESE and the HEADSUP tool;
2. Classroom visits and reflective interviews with teachers about applying the HEADSUP tool;
3. Using teachers' input to draft, pilot, and publish an online resource to support teacher practice.

We aimed to ground theoretical scholarship in teachers' everyday lives and classroom experiences by focusing on valuable discussions with and between teachers (e.g. Biesta et al. 2017). We generated data using pre- and post-workshop surveys, recordings of discussions and written work from workshops, field notes from classroom observations, and reflective interviews conducted with teachers afterwards.

Using network emails and social media, we recruited teachers who identified as teaching about global learning for workshops in Stockholm (10 participants), Birmingham (2), Manchester (8), London (2), and Helsinki (8). Participants had a range of experience of teaching global issues to students aged 14-18, came from a mix of urban, suburban, and rural schools; and all identified the SDGs as a priority.

Reflecting curriculum links, the teachers in Sweden taught a variety of subjects within social studies as well as natural sciences. In England, most taught Geography; two taught Religious Education and/or Civics. In Finland, they also taught across social studies, science, and languages. Seven teachers (3 in England, 3 in Sweden and 1 in Finland) agreed to be observed applying workshop ideas and/or piloting activities for the resource in class and to reflect on their practice in interviews afterwards.

Taking a critical approach to teaching global issues

The teachers who participated are generally eager to take a more critical approach to teaching global issues. Their students appreciated being challenged by complex ideas and deeply engaging in ethical considerations around global issues. However, the teachers described being both enabled and constrained by the curriculum and found strategic ways to take a critical approach. For example, some explicitly include colonialism as a key factor in global issues while others were concerned about colonialism being too political. Evidently, support to teach critically needed further development. Teachers identified that there are many materials for teaching global issues and desired a resource that could be adapted to current teaching materials to deepen engagement.

Teachers and students are able to apply theoretical constructs related to historical and present-day power imbalances. However, they face challenges that include balancing a critical and constructive approach, inspiring students to enact positive change without stepping over complexities, and negotiating mainstream political tensions within and outside the classroom. Drawing on research findings from theoretical critiques in GCE and ESE, and data generated as part of this project, we identified key principles to direct practice:

- Global issues are complex. We need pedagogical approaches that take up rather than gloss over these complexities.
- Environmental issues are deeply tied to social, political, cultural and economic inequalities. It is essential to link these to historical and present-day colonial systems of power.
- Connecting to all species in our world requires an ethical stance towards both the deep issues threatening us all and the differently experienced impacts of environmental issues.
- Classrooms are important spaces for raising questions. There are solutions to promote and actions to be taken. Re-thinking and unpacking are themselves important actions. When schools and wider community activities promote charity appeals, classrooms can support students to deeply engage with and identify tensions and possibilities.
- Reflexivity must be encouraged and developed. Understanding nuances and considering tensions and paradoxes is as important to global citizenship as taking specific action (or deciding not to take action). These must go hand in hand.

These principles directly informed the co-creation of an ethical global issues pedagogy **teacher resource** for supporting complexity and ethical discussions in the teaching of global issues. It is available in English, Swedish and Finnish: https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/esri/teacher-resource/.

Learning from the project
A key issue from the project involved the extent to which the relationship between school-wide projects and specific subject-based classroom lessons enabled teachers to play an important role in raising critical conversations to contribute towards more complex understandings. When alternative or marginalised perspectives are raised, there is a desire on the part of some teachers to complexify them. This questions whether a culture of pluralism—where all perspectives are treated equally—may work against an approach that engages with tensions between perspectives.

An unexpected but very welcome finding for the teachers interviewed in England, was their classes' deeper engagement because of adapting HEADSUP, especially for so-called "lower performing students". Students across the age groups appeared very engaged, even when challenged by the concepts, suggesting that critical approaches can be promoted across all levels. Further research with students could provide more insight into this.

In 2020, we undertook research to investigate the impact of using the teacher resource. To recap, the resource aims to support teachers to bring complexity and multiple perspectives to the teaching of global ethical issues, providing guiding principles for bridging GCE and ESD. The resource includes a series of activities and question sets that educators can adapt to their existing practice or use to promote new practice. We were interested in how the resource is being used, benefits for teachers and students, and challenges that they may have encountered when using it.

We distributed a survey link to contacts who had applied or planned to apply the resource. Sixteen respondents completed the survey between September and November 2020. They identified themselves as primary, secondary and graduate level educators, as well as trainee teachers and applied education researchers across a range of subjects in the UK and internationally. They described the resource as a unique addition to what is currently available to support the teaching of global ethical issues.

In classroom practice, they felt that the resource supported critical discussion on social issues and their root causes, to reflect upon particular local problems, and to teach transversal competencies. As teachers, they valued its flexibility for providing the pedagogical tools to explore a variety of topics that can be adapted to practitioners' specific contexts. A further advantage is its practicality as a framework for lesson planning, and the clear and concise presentation of complex ideas.

Alongside its use in the classroom, the resource is supporting educators' professional development and reflective practice, particularly in terms of them adopting more critical, relevant and collaborative approaches. A respondent also described using it to support curriculum review and development and the choosing and adaption of teaching materials. Those who had applied the resource were likely or very likely to continue to do so. Many had shared it with colleagues as a way of supporting each other to reflect on and inform the development of curriculum and teaching materials.

Respondents found the resource helpful in supporting new, or deepening existing, practice. There was broad agreement that it facilitates expansive and critical discussions and encourages imaginative and interconnected thinking. In particular, it: centres discussions on issues of power, oppression and privilege; supports deep conversations about global issues; and helps to identify and challenge mainstream perspectives. Respondents found it to be an inclusive resource, attractive to a diversity of students and useful for scaffolding learning on complex issues. More broadly, they felt that it motivates and empowers students by focusing learning on issues that are meaningful to them. There were challenges identified in terms of supporting teachers who are less familiar with critical perspectives and using the resource in primary settings, and these comments will inform the future development of the resource.

Several follow-up projects are underway including adapting for more explicit anti-racist pedagogy and for use with primary students. Please do contact Dr Pashby for further information (k.pashby@mmu.ac.uk).

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