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To cite this article: Caroline Ferguson & Jia Ying Neoh (2025) Interrogating the intersections of global citizenship and human rights education, Human Rights Education Review, 8:3, 369-374, DOI: [10.1080/25355406.2025.2570564](https://doi.org/10.1080/25355406.2025.2570564)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25355406.2025.2570564>



Published online: 05 Nov 2025.



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Interrogating the intersections of global citizenship and human rights education

Global citizenship education (GCE) and human rights education (HRE) are processes of learning for, about and through active citizenship and human rights. GCE and HRE share interest in building connections across societies through education to teach values and ways of relating to our common humanity. They examine histories to drive action for the present and the future. They are dynamic sites of struggle that remind us that we cannot take any gains of equity and global solidarity for granted.

In 2025, we are grimly aware of rights repeal, conflict and human suffering in multiple global contexts. Global citizenship reminds us of the need to continually reflect on how identity, rights, responsibility and participation can be conceptualised beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. We have responsibility to others, not just in our local and national communities, but in distant places to people who we do not yet know. Human rights, as the inherent freedoms and dignity that belong to all people, deserve vigilant protection.

The concept of citizenship, and its broadened articulation as global citizenship remains deeply contested and open to multiple interpretations. Human rights are similarly disputed. While this holds the potential to create spaces for diversity and inclusion, it can equally reproduce forms of exclusion and injustice. Both areas of learning are context specific, shaped by diverse national and societal priorities. For members of the global community who are committed to advancing global citizenship and a shared humanity grounded in human rights, both GCE and HRE demand sustained intellectual, ethical and practical engagement. While international instruments and formulations of global citizenship and human rights serve an important role in agenda-setting and as calls to action, it is within the everyday practices of education and scholarship that their complexities and struggles are directly confronted.

Conceptually, the discursive and formative nature of GCE and HRE demands continual reflection and examination. The concepts are frequently in tension with their stated aims, as more transformational approaches tend to generate resistance. In practice, approaches to GCE and HRE are diverse and dynamic. Institutionalised top-down approaches frequently thin out and depoliticise activist or social justice education. At the individual level, interpretations of GCE and HRE are shaped by educators' political subjectivities, intersectional positionalities, and varying degrees of professional autonomy. Therefore, the relationship between GCE and HRE remains fluid and continually negotiated and mediated by a multitude of factors within shifting political, cultural, and economic landscapes of education.

As Guest Editors of this Special Issue on GCE and HRE, which brings together contributions from diverse global and educational contexts, we emphasise the importance of creating spaces for diverse positionalities and lived experiences. This commitment has informed the conceptualisation of the issue and underpinned our call for both empirical and conceptual contributions interrogating the intersections of GCE and HRE. In our own research and teaching as teacher educators, informed by many years of classroom experience, we have observed that the connection between HRE and GCE is not always clearly articulated in academic discourse. This Special Issue of *Human Rights Education Review* aims to sharpen the focus on these intersecting fields, building on scholarship that has already made substantial connections between them (Abdi & Shultz, 2008; Bajaj, 2011; Gaudelli & Fernekes, 2004; Osler & Starkey, 2005; Rapoport, 2021; Starkey, 2012). In doing so, it contributes to existing literature by examining these connections across diverse contexts. The articles in this issue explore the relationship between GCE and HRE as constructive companions, ethical anchors, or critical adversaries through both conceptual discussions and examinations of practice. Collectively, they provoke critical and reflexive engagement with GCE and human rights from multiple perspectives.

Factors shaping educational policies

Globally, education policies have been shaped by efforts to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Unterhalter, 2017). The aspirational vision of Goal 4 on quality education is to ensure inclusive and equitable education while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Rooted in human rights principles and framed through global citizenship, this vision responds to the realities of an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. Within SDG 4, the partnership between HRE and GCE centres on inclusivity and equity as pathways towards ethical, sustainable, and peaceful futures. Importantly, SDG 4 reflects a vision of universal development and progress that extends beyond specific regions (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). While it serves as a valuable invitation for mobilisation, it remains ambiguous as a practical blueprint (Leite, 2022). Consequently, much remains to be learned about the ways in which HRE and GCE converge, or diverge, in practice.

Tensions between UNESCO and OECD visions for education

The role of Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) in connecting, transferring and disconnecting GCE and HRE cannot be understated. UNESCO, founded on post-war cosmopolitanism, has traditionally supported a humanistic vision encompassing both GCE and HRE (Mochizuki & Edward Vickers, 2024), while the OECD and World Bank advanced an economic trajectory aligned with Cold War containment strategies (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). Human rights became central to UNESCO's mandate, with the organisation playing a central role in drafting and negotiating human rights treaties on the right to education (Donders, 2018). By contrast, the OECD has not positioned itself as a moral authority on human rights, instead focusing on corporate compliance with legal human rights obligations. Nevertheless, the OECD identified GCE for its future economic skill potential, reframing it as an ahistorical, depoliticised 'global competence' through PISA (Auld & Morris, 2019). This policy transfer, part of a new OECD development paradigm, has been interpreted as "'assessment as a public good", or "human right" - merging human rights and human capital' (Auld et al., 2019, p. 203). Such framing marks a stark departure of GCE from UNESCO's moral vision of human rights.

Following OECD's 'humanitarian' turn, which quantified GCE while removing human rights, UNESCO, already accused of promoting a neoliberal social imaginary (Rizvi, 2014), responded with a psychological approach, rebranding GCE as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), a set of neuroscience-based competencies for emotional management and resilience. This affective turn, however, risks further decoupling human rights from GCE. Bryan's (2022) critical analysis of the UNESCO 'flag of convenience' (p 770) legitimising promotion of SEL effectively shows how human rights and social justice values are weakened by the pressures of corporate global education policy and governance. The arrival of behavioural governance, what Whitehead et al. (2018) call Neuroliberalism, limits the processes of GCE and HRE. It is alarming to note the fortuitous commercial timing of the policy shifting GCE as digitally acquired SEL just as educational technology businesses experienced a pandemic-inspired boom and the OECD invested in technocratic AI instruments for measuring student emotional skills (OECD, 2024). The global policy and governance of the interaction of GCE and HRE is a deserving focus of ongoing critical scrutiny.

The need for contextual and critical approaches

Recognising the potential of universal definitions to constrain spaces for diversity, context-specific knowledge is essential (Crossley, 2012). This highlights the need for more nuanced and grounded research into the intersections of GCE and HRE within the broader framework of the SDGs. Yet, this task is complicated by the prevailing neoliberal environment in which powerful interests of the Global North have frequently shaped GCE into instrumental competencies for competition (Andreotti, 2006; Rapoport, 2021). In contrast, the human rights principle of 'the full sanctity of all people, regardless of who they are and where they reside, as full human beings' (Abdi, 2008, p. 78) offers a vital basis for ongoing critique of global knowledge, responsibility and justice (Abdi, 2008; Benhabib, 2014; Coysh, 2017; Stewart-Harawira, 2005). A closer integration of GCE and HRE may help confront the decontextualised limitations imposed on both concepts (Rapoport, 2021). In doing so, their connection can support the development of locally relevant global competencies under SDG 4 and generate productive tensions that advance both fields.

There is broad consensus in GCE and HRE literature for more critical approaches. With GCE often theorised as an expansion of national citizenship, it has been observed that the ‘global citizen’ envisioned in much discourse frequently reflects that of a western liberal democratic state (Pashby, 2011). This exposes significant limitations within GCE, particularly when framed by vague and uncritical calls for ‘change’, given the contested nature of globalisation and divergent interpretations of global interconnectivity. While GCE became synonymous with training for economic success in the global economy, it was also charged with perpetuating colonial mentalities and unequal power relations (Andreotti, 2006). Against this backdrop, Pashby (2011, p. 428) posed a critical question: ‘exactly for whom is GCE key to transforming a notion of responsibility and agency, and by whom will the framework of such responsibility and agency be determined?’. This question prompted a theoretical turn to the critical in GCE.

The critical turn opened space for decolonial imaginaries, which challenge dominant assumptions about global interconnectivity. Decolonial theory interrogates the Western locus of knowledge production and exposes how norms presented as universal as in fact, historically contingent and controlled. The decolonial option envisions a pluriversal future that embraces the coexistence of multiple cosmologies, ways of knowing, and importantly for GCE ways of becoming (Andreotti, 2016; Pashby et al., 2020; Shultz, 2018). UNESCO’s Future of Education Report (UNESCO, 2021) reflects this shift by including Indigenous knowledges. Yet, Mochizuki (2023) illustrates in examining decolonial GCE in India, such approaches often remain at odds with the normative framings of the SDGs.

Despite the theoretical shift, empirical research reveals that GCE practice remains uncomfortably bound to simplistic normative expressions. The persistence of ‘thin’ enactment of GCE highlights the gap between critical theory and practice (Ferguson, 2024; Ferguson & Brett, 2023a; Smith & Neoh, 2023). This disconnection is compounded by the demanding intellectual and pedagogical work required to implement critical approaches, within neoliberal pressures of efficiency and performance. Nevertheless, as the articles in this issue illustrate, committed members of the global community continue to demonstrate genuine interest in creating space, however broad or constrained, for engaging with critical GCE. This persistence offers important inspiration.

GCE and HRE as a moral and ethical endeavour

In an educational landscape often characterised by good intentions yet shaped by strong ideological tides, GCE requires moral and ethical guidance (Bosio, 2020; Sund & Pashby, 2018). Human rights hold the potential to offer such a global ethic for GCE. Transformative approaches to HRE illustrates this prospect. For example, Bajaj et al. (2016) proposed a transformative human rights education (THRED) model, which emphasises knowledge and explicit action. Grounded in critical, cosmopolitan orientation, THRED encourages people to promote human rights in their communities, while grappling with the tension between universalism and cultural relativism. By engaging beyond Western concepts of human rights, and incorporating diverse pedagogical strategies, it invites people to imagine different ways of being in the world.

Philosophies of cosmopolitanism continue to underpin these endeavours. Cosmopolitanism, rooted in the notion of a shared humanity, is ‘neither inevitable nor impossible’, but a fragile ideal worth cultivating (Shiller & Irving, 2015, p. 3). Its presence across cultures, time and space demonstrates its enduring resonance (Ferguson & Brett, 2023b) with new readings of relational self, other and world extending to a transcendental cosmos (Papastergiadis, 2023). Cosmopolitanism can be an analytic for deliberating global citizenship and human rights as much as a vernacular lived experience. Educators are central to navigating the complexity of cosmopolitanism debate and vision (Unterhalter, 2017). Importantly, cosmopolitan ideals require careful pedagogical engagement to address universalist challenges, making the role of education pivotal. GCE and HRE, however, do not operate in abstraction, responding to cultural norms, political agendas, social expectations, economic imperatives, geopolitical dynamics, and historical legacies (Jackson, 2025; Kennedy, 2004; Osler, 2015; Veugeliers, 2021). This complexity raises ongoing questions about the extent to which a common set of competencies, and in this case, human rights principles, can be meaningfully applied across contexts. Critics caution that overly universalist framings risk constraining the ability of civil societies to resist fundamentalism, cultural homogenisation, nationalism, populism, and intolerance (Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Tan & Vickers, 2024). Yet, globalisation has also created new opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, opening possibilities for a shared yet flexible framework for GCE that might serve as

a moral foundation for a global community (Bruun & Jacobsen, 2003; Sears, 2013). At stake in these debates is the question of how societies might strive for inclusivity while engaging with increasing diversity.

Building on these debates, the articles in this Special Issue engage critically with the intersections of GCE and HRE in diverse contexts, illustrating a myriad of ways in which scholars and practitioners are engaging with questions of universality and relativism, ethics and practice, and the possibilities of citizenship and human rights education in shaping more just futures.

The contributions that follow offer both conceptual insights and empirical case studies. Some examine the productive tensions between GCE and HRE as ethical frameworks, while others explore how these ideas are enabled, or constrained, in localised educational settings. Collectively, they invite readers to reflect on the moral and political stakes of education for citizenship and human rights, and to consider how theory and practice might be brought into closer dialogue.

Acknowledgments

We owe thanks to those who helped us to publish this Special Issue. We would like to acknowledge the peer reviewers who gave their time and effort to provide critical feedback to authors, which was central to developing this strong contribution to the field. We extend our gratitude to the *Human Rights Education Review* Editorial Board, to Managing Editor Kalpani Dambagolla for supporting us, and express sincere heartfelt thanks to Editor-In-Chief Professor Audrey Osler for her guidance and mentoring throughout our editorial journey.

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