CREATING AGENCY IN STUDENT RESPONSES TO GLOBAL POVERTY

Jeremy Longworth

The Scots College, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This study employed action research as a qualitative way of exploring how the attributes of an active global citizen might be fostered amongst male students in a Year 8 geography class. The primary action integrated individual case studies of exemplary "world leaders." These leaders have implemented effective responses to issues of global concern, and have become successful models for active global citizenship. Data were collected from the 19 participating boys through observation, video-recorded student reflections pre- and post-action, and work samples. The research found that while both empathy and awareness of a global justice issue are important for cultivating a sense of global citizenship in students, in isolation they are not sufficient. Where empathy and awareness were the focus, students tended to remain disconnected and distant from their own realities, as well as overly simplistic and primarily focused on large-scale financial assistance or monetary aid. However, the research also found that the investigation of an exemplary response to global issues of injustice and the provision of a model of active citizenship, served as catalyst for encouraging a sense of personal agency amongst students. This resulted in more complex, holistic and contextually sensitive solutions in which students saw themselves participating. It is concluded that the combination of empathy, understanding and, most importantly, agency were key for encouraging active global citizenship amongst students.

Introduction

This research sought to raise students' awareness of, and support for, responses to global issues of injustice. It encouraged students to use and apply this knowledge by creating connections, firstly, to relevant non-government organisations (NGOs), such as Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières, and World Vision, and secondly, to significant individuals who have themselves been actively engaged in either advocating for, or designing solutions to, such issues. The research was motivated through my teaching of geography to 13-14 year old high school boys who, in my experience, are quick to display empathy, but seem to possess a

limited sense of agency in meaningfully responding to such global issues. In light of this, the question underpinning this research was:

How might an investigation by Year 8 boys into the legacy of famous leaders and associated Millennium Development Goals help to develop the attributes of an active global citizen?

Action research was used to address this question because it allows for a "systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (Stringer, 2014, p.1). The origin of, and response to my research question lie in the classroom with the students, and in relation to my practice as their teacher. Given the reflective and applied nature of action research, I considered it both conceptually and practically appropriate.

Defining Key Terms

There are a number of key terms used throughout this research. *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) are the world's time-bound and quantified targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many dimensions – income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, and exclusion – while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability. *Social inequality* refers to the ways in which socially-defined categories of persons (according to characteristics such as gender, age, class and ethnicity) are differentially positioned with regard to access to a variety of social "goods." An *active global citizen* is someone who identifies with being part of an emerging world community, and whose actions contribute to building this community's values and practices.

Literature Review

The Goal of Global Citizenship

In *Valuing global citizenship,* Douglas (2001) from Oxfam Education presents seven attributes of a global citizen. A global citizen is one who:

1. Is aware of the wider world
2. Respects and values diversity
3. Has an understanding of how the world works economically, politically, socially, culturally, technologically and environmentally

4. Is outraged by social injustice
5. Participates in and contributes to the community at all levels from the local to the global
6. Is willing to act to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place
7. Takes responsibility for his or her actions

In theory, these criteria are sound goals to aim for, yet they appear to contrast with student perceptions and understandings of active global citizenship. According to Kennedy (2007), students' views of active citizenship relate to political considerations rather than social obligations. Douglas (2001) suggests that the goals Oxfam promote in an educational context encourage self-esteem and are student-centred. However, when placed alongside Kennedy's findings, one might suggest that these goals are more aspirational than achievable. In fact, Kennedy (2007) suggests that most young people are civically disengaged. This brings into question whether schools are promoting active global citizenship in ineffective ways.

Enabling and Engaging as Global Citizens

Theoretical perspectives about global citizenship and classroom practices have also been investigated. Exploring the way global citizenship is cultivated in Canadian settings, Eidoo et al. (2011) found that a lack of rigorous engagement with multiculturalism produced weaker results and that oversimplification of the issues under examination reduced the level of lively and critical engagement in the classroom. Unlike Kennedy (2007), who aims to outline the attributes of active citizenship, Eidoo et al. (2011) place a greater emphasis on the method used to engage students. They argue that this is critically important to engender a rich response from students, moving beyond an "us and them" approach. They adopted a critical exploration of famous leaders that promoted complexity and conflict in the classroom. In doing so, their aim was to prompt deeper thinking and the building of relationships across difference, based on genuine reciprocity. This research has significantly informed the design of my own action research project, which focuses on the analysis of famous leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Al Gore and Desmond Tutu, who initiated social change.

The role of active global citizenship is further explored by Armstrong (2006), who investigated the emergence of a putative global civil society, and asked whether the formal political side of global citizenship (expressed in organisations such as the United Nations) was becoming its more predominant element. The United Nations, World Bank, International

Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation, in addition to other non-government organisations, are discussed as a network of organisations whose role is to address common problems and promote aspirational goals. One limitation of Armstrong's research is that it looks at global challenges from a state level rather than an individual (and specifically student) level.

Davies, Evans and Reid (2005) argue that the government plays a primary role in formulating educational pedagogy that teaches students about citizenship and global education that contributes to the development of global citizenship. They investigated the changing nature of nationhood in light of globalisation, pointing to the way global citizenship is playing a stronger role in students' understanding and engagement with the world. Issues related to identity, law, political citizenship, social and environmental matters increasingly incorporate discussions of human rights.

A more "bottom-up" approach to teaching active global citizenship brings together student voices in Australia and Indonesia to build mutual understanding and agency. *Global Connections: A Tool for Active Citizenship* (Schultz, Guevara, Ratnam, Wierenga, Wyn and Sowerby, 2009) evaluates the findings of this Global Connections Program. This research goes beyond labelling active global citizenship, by engaging in a student-centred activity based upon shared understanding of each other. It is interesting to hear the students' voices in the research with comments such as, "the programme 'made me feel like I take a lot of things for granted in my day to day life' and that 'together we can make a difference.'" The findings of this research directly addressed the challenges I had been experiencing in helping boys develop as active global citizens. It challenged me to consider how I might scaffold learning in a way that moved students from the simple, abstract response strategies to complex, applied strategies that encouraged student agency and responsibility.

In summary, there are differing conceptions of what constitutes active global citizenship and how such citizenship is enacted and achieved. These include both top-down (i.e. government to individual) and bottom-up approaches. There are strengths and benefits to both of these approaches. My research draws upon these findings to help students move beyond a theoretical discussion to help students both identify as global citizens, and encourage student agency and perceptions of agency.

Research Context

The Scots College is a Presbyterian, T-12 boys' school, established in 1893 and located in Bellevue Hill, a high socio-economic suburb of Sydney, Australia. The school seeks to bring together the values of the Christian faith and inspire boys to learn, lead and serve as they strive for excellence together. The school is non-selective academically. Students not only attend with a diverse level of academic abilities, but also represent a diverse range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including overseas students and students of indigenous descent. The school is large, with over 1800 day and boarding students aged 3-18 years-old. Supporting these students is an academic staff of over 200, who are spread across the multi-campus school.

The participants chosen for this study were a Year 8 Geography class. These students were selected using convenience and purposive sampling. The class consisted of 19 students, who were streamed based upon their achievement in English. Students in this class were 13-14 years of age. Of the 19 students, one student was from a rural area, another was from a family of high socio-economic status in a developing country and the remainder of the students were from Sydney. This particular class performed in the top 20% of the year group. My relationship with the participants was as their classroom teacher. I had not previously taught these students and only one student was in a school athletics team that I coached.

A consent and information form was created for parents, guardians and participants to read and sign. The rights of the participants and parents were clearly communicated including the opportunity to discuss the research and its findings with me in person. Participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, without it jeopardising their education or relationship with the school. Finally, the anonymity of the participants was preserved throughout the research, real names having been replaced with pseudonyms.

Action

In order to explore the overarching research question, this project implemented a three-staged action.

Stage 1: Empathy task

During the first phase students undertook an empathy task in order to ascertain the extent of their empathy towards social injustice. Students were asked to respond to an image (below), which was selected as representative of broader social injustices.

Metaphor for Africa's despair, The New York Times*, 26 March 1993*

Stage 2: Issues study

The second phase involved the implementation of a series of activities aimed at raising student awareness of a global issue. These issue studies were individually conducted. Issues explored included genocide, threatened animal species, fair trade, climate change, child labour, overpopulation and poverty as they related to the following:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
- Millennium Development Goals

Activities during this phase were primarily focussed on developing student knowledge and understanding of their chosen issue.

Stage 3: Study of world leaders

In groups of 3-4, students selected a personality known for their active involvement in addressing issues of global injustice. This was the third and final phase of the action. Selected personalities included Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and David Attenborough. As part of this task, students were to investigate the core issue or injustice confronted, and the method adopted by these personalities for responding to the issues. They were then required to

comment on and critique the effectiveness of this response. These findings were subsequently presented to the class.

Data Collection

The methodological approach of this research was qualitative, as is characteristic of most action research projects. Angrosino (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) asserts that action research should be primarily qualitative as, "observational researchers traditionally have attempted to see events through the eyes of the people being studied" (p. 732). Likewise, Stringer (2014) states that the qualitative method of gathering data ensures that the participants' experiences and perspectives are gathered in order to make sense in their own terms.

I collected three different types of data which enabled research analysis to be triangulated. According to Perakyla (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), interviews and naturally occurring empirical materials form established methods of data collection. As such, the first type of data collected was in the form of student self-recorded video reflections, much like a pre-test and post-test. The second data type was student work samples and video recordings of student learning. The third method was a teacher reflective journal. The purpose of each of these data sources is documented below.

Data Collection Method	Purpose
Recorded Student Reflection – pre-test and post-test videos	To establish participants' prior understanding upon which further gains can be measured and to understand participants' changes in views.
Work samples	To gather written exemplars of participants' expressions in a written format to assist in tracking the learning pathway.
Teacher reflective journal and observation	To observe participants' actions and record the thinking about the different stages of the research.

Data Analysis

The data collected were broadly separated into natural and human categories, and then analysed thematically as a whole. Due to the nature of the data recorded by video, a transcript of each participant's response was prepared prior to being analysed for themes. The student work samples, research notes and short answer responses in exams, were included and pseudonyms were created to ensure participant confidentiality.

Once the videos were transcribed, themes emerged in both the pre-test and post-test video reflections. The themes became evident in the words of the participants, as well as in their actions in the videos. These themes were then compared with the teacher reflective journal and student work samples, which presented a different perspective on the participants' views. These themes formed the scaffold of the following discussion of findings.

Discussion of Results

The following discussion is organised around the key findings that emerged during each of the three phases of the action research cycle: empathy and distance; empathy and understanding; and, activating agency through model global citizens. These phases corresponded to the students' developing understanding of the attributes of an active global citizen.

Phase 1: Empathy and Distance

The primary focus of this stage was to ascertain students' affective response to injustice. In responding to the stimulus, it appeared that students empathised with the people, and had an emotive response to injustice. This was evident through observation of the students' body language, paralanguage and the nature and quality of each student's verbal responses. The image elicited a visceral response. Students physically recoiled from the image. There was an initial shocked silence, as students processed the image, their faces expressing both horror and incomprehension. This was followed by a succession of questions regarding the safety of the child, outrage at the injustice, and whether the photographer assisted the child after taking the photograph. It was evident that the stimulus had an affective impact on the students.

As noted in my reflective journal, the comments by the cohort, however, also revealed a degree of personal distance from the issue. There was an expectation and assumption that

help should be provided by an aid agency. At no point did students see themselves as having any responsibility in this scenario, nor did they see themselves as able to make any contribution to the solution: they were almost entirely abstracted from both the problem and the solution. Responses were instead underlined by a strong belief in the efficacy of increased financial aid as the main remedy for famine. The only exception was Harry, who questioned whether money donated to charitable organisations and NGOs was the most effective way of implementing economic and social change. Harry recounted the importance of active participation in local communities and the significant potential these methods had to affect change.

These findings suggest that despite signs of an affective response by students, a shocking image such as that shown did not, on its own, provide an imperative to act for change. Whilst empathy might be considered an attribute of the global citizen, amongst these students, empathy in and of itself did not "make" a global citizen.

Phase 2: Empathy and Understanding of the Global Issue
At the conclusion of the second phase it was evident that students possessed a more complex understanding and greater awareness of the underlying issues of social inequality. However, while increased knowledge allowed for a more informed empathy amongst students, it did not translate to personal agency in their response to the issue.

As applied at both a global and local village level, the student-directed research allowed students to achieve a nuanced and multi-dimensional perception of their chosen issue. Their empathic understanding became more thoughtful and considered, holistic in approach, globally aware and contextually rich. Despite this, the process did not trigger a corresponding change in the principal solution to these issues. Instead, solutions remained rooted in the financial aid paradigm. This can be seen in the responses of the students in the conclusions they reached in their individual projects. For instance, Otto researched poverty and was able to discuss the elements that constitute poverty at a global level, and with specific examples drawn from a local setting, in this case a South American community. However, the strategies he offered to fight poverty centred on financial assistance. "One thing we can do to help is to donate money to help give people education, health care and water," he said. Kane provided a more specific solution, the improvement of government and infrastructure, "such as roads so that goods can be trucked to markets and cities." However, this was similarly a

detached response that centered on the donation of funds to existing non-government organisations, and did not require action on his own part. Such a response was common across the cohort. At this stage, the participants evinced a high level of knowledge and a high level of empathy, however they continued to evince limited agency.

Student self-reflection responses reinforced this finding. Responses demonstrated that the boys felt little capacity, opportunity or responsibility to directly engage with the issue and the search for solutions. When asked why the countries of Africa were not on target to meet the Millennium Development Goal of reducing the number of people without access to fresh water and sanitation, the majority of participants responded that there were limited donations to assist the countries of Africa in overcoming these problems. The remaining participants were unable to provide an answer at all. The continuing reliance on external aid and macro-scale solutions revealed the extent to which students felt personally disconnected from the issues. In short, while grasping that global issues are complex, students were unable to imagine correspondingly complex solutions to these issues which required their own involvement. Phase 2 saw an increased understanding and awareness of global issues contribute to a greater conception of global citizenship, informing empathy. However, it did not see students envisioning or conceiving of *themselves* as active global citizens.

Phase 3: Activating Agency through Modelled Global Citizens

In order to address the disconnect between empathy and agency, a task was designed drawing on the findings of Schultz et al. (2009) and Eidoo et al. (2011), that promoted active student engagement and included exemplary models of global citizenship.

In my reflective teacher's journal, I noted that the majority of participants were highly engaged in researching their chosen personality. One group of students even took it upon themselves to find their own personality to add to the suggested list, researching a leading anti-poverty crusader from India. I observed students demonstrating curiosity in the quality and direction of their questions, which centered on the methods the personality had utilized to solve their issue. For example, two of the groups were questioning each other about the nature and efficacy of the method their chosen personality had employed to address a given social issue. The extent and depth to which the boys queried the strategies and methods of the personality demonstrated a significant shift in their empathic understanding and the role of personal agency in tackling global development issues. In the context of self-directed, small

group discussion, students were observed probing, critiquing and challenging documented responses, moving beyond superficial to deep engagement. Several lessons of such discussion revealed a deep understanding of the role of individuals in affecting significant social and economic change. In doing so, the students were able to critically reflect upon their own agency as global citizens and their ability to contribute to transformative programs that address complex issues, such as poverty, child labour and poor education. The exemplar personality shifted students' emphasis from a generalised reliance on institutional and large-scale assistance where the only salient solution was increased financial aid, to a contextually aware understanding of the interplay between global and local issues, as well as the crucial role that individuals can play in transforming communities. In short, students were able to place themselves in the shoes of these exemplary models of agency, and see themselves as global ambassadors and actors for change.

In the post-test video, created by students, a series of reflections emerged which captured the shift in students' understanding and engagement. What was most notable was the use of a significantly altered language and vocabulary. Previously, reflections had been passive, centred on descriptions of financial aid as provided by those other than themselves, for a situation that was inevitable and unchangeable. In the video, language was more inclusive; the emphasis was on action and global campaigns depicting individuals acting for change and advocating for awareness. Most significantly, the majority of students saw themselves as part of this response, alternating between the use of personal and collective pronouns, "I" and "we." Of the 19 participants, 12 adopted the perspective that a solution could be based upon individual action, and 7 were either unsure of a solution or advocated a hybrid solution that drew upon both large-scale financial aid models and more individual and local solutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst activities that deepened empathy and understanding were important foundations upon which agency could be developed, I found that the most significant factor contributing to the development of active global citizenship amongst students was engagement in a study of exemplary role models. These models acted as a catalyst for changing the nature of a student's response to issues of global injustice, moving from observation to agency. They provided a pathway for the boys to reflect on more complex solutions, helping them to see themselves not simply as bystanders but as participants with an

opportunity to be part of the solutions. Students translated these participatory pathways to real-world opportunities, such as existing school-based "service learning" programs in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Grounded in my practice as a Year 8 Geography teacher, this research sought to investigate how a series of activities exploring the legacy of famous leaders and associated Millennium Development Goals might help to develop the attributes of active global citizenship. In summary, the research found that, firstly, while empathy towards and awareness of a global injustice issue and the people experiencing it are important bedrocks for the cultivation of global citizenship, in isolation they are not enough. In this class, student responses to such issues tended to remain disconnected and distant, as well as overly simplistic and primarily focused on large-scale financial assistance and organisational responses. However, the research also found that by having students investigate a person whose response to global issues of injustice had been exemplary, the provision of a model of active citizenship served as catalyst for encouraging a sense of personal agency amongst students. This resulted in more complex, holistic and contextually sensitive solutions in which the students themselves participated. It might be suggested that the combination of empathy, understanding and, most importantly, agency are keys for encouraging active global citizenship amongst students.

Implications for future research and practice

These findings have several implications for future research and practice. For research, they suggests that more work needs to be done around how we encourage students to not only see themselves as global citizens, but to see ways that they might "act" as global citizens. This research was limited in both its size and scope, but it would be of interest to see whether students from a similar status of socio-economic advantage struggled to conceptualise agency in the context of global issues of injustice beyond monetary aid. This poses a continuing challenge for schools, as they consider how to prepare students for the challenges and responsibilities of their increasingly global identities.

For my own practice, the research has been significant in helping me to reconceptualise how I, and other members of my department, teach the broader Geography unit that the associated "actions" sat within. Originally this design concluded with a "Global Issues Fair. I was not able to include this during the first action research cycle, however as we have prepared for the next cycle, we have made adaptations to integrate this final stage, seeing it as a unique

opportunity to capitalise on students' growing sense of agency and using it to generate awareness across the wider school community.

Reflection Statement

The action research has provided an opportunity to stop and reflect upon the aims of a particular course in order to make it more meaningful for the students, and at the same time for myself as a teacher. In the busy life of a teacher there is very little time to consider or query different methods of investigating students' thoughts regarding a specific topic. The action research allowed me to create an environment of open discussion and investigation in which the students were happy to share how their thoughts about a topic changed over the course of the unit of work. Whilst I had queried the students' perspectives in the past, the research allowed me an opportunity to gather students' views and then make positive changes in the course for future students.

The experience of attending the IBSC Annual Conferences has opened up my perspective of the strength of global educators sharing their research amongst similar high schools. The IBSC Action Research Program has been a vital part of my own academic journey. I have been supported through the valuable guidance of Laura Sabo. The Scots College Research Centre has supported me through the challenging aspects of turning action research into a documented study, and I am indebted to the guidance and support of Dr. Caitlin Munday. I am grateful for their camaraderie as well as helpful questions, edits and suggestions.

At the heart of this research are the boys who inspire me every day with their curiosity and willingness to openly discuss their thoughts and views. It is truly inspiring to see the lengths to which the boys I teach support an investigation into new paths for them to find solutions to global problems.

References

Armstrong, C, 2006. Global Civil Society and the Question of Global Citizenship. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 349-357.

Davies, Evans and Reid, 2005. Globalising Citizenship Education? A Critique of 'Global Education' and 'Citizenship Education'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 66-89.

Denzin, N & Lincoln, Y. (Eds). (2008). *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Douglas, L, 2001. Valuing global citizenship. *Teaching Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 89-90.

Eidoo, Ingram, MacDonald, Nabavi, Pashby, Stille, 2011. "Through the Kaleidoscope": Intersections Between Theoretical Perspectives and Classroom Implications in Critical Global Citizenship Education.*Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 59-85.

Johnson, B, & Christensen, L (2000). *Educational Research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Kennedy, K, 2007. Student Constructions of 'Active Citizenship': What Does Participation Mean to Students?. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 304-324.

Reichert, M, & Hawley, R (2010). Reaching Boys: An International Study of Effective Teaching Practices. *The Phi Delta Kappan.* Vol. 91, No. 4, pp. 35-40.

Schultz, Guevara, Ratnam, Wierenga, Wyn and Sowerby, 2009. Global Connections: A Tool for Active Citizenship. *Development in Practice*, Vol. 19, No. 8, pp. 1023-1034.

Stringer, E (2014). *Action Research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.