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The #TeachSDGs movement and global citizenship education: Soft openings, pluriversal possibilities

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Abstract

This article examines how global citizenship education (GCE) is interpreted and understood by the #TeachSDGs movement, an online transnational, cross-level group of educators dedicated to disseminating the UN Global Goals (SDGs) through pedagogical resources. Drawing on Andreotti's (2014) soft-to-critical GCE framework, the study deploys thematic and critical discourse analysis to assess the #TeachSDGs movement's blogs, social media posts and lesson materials. The advocacy group's online posts and classroom initiatives are found to be well-intentioned but risk reinforcing the colonially infused power dynamics and neoliberal logic responsible for the planet's ecological crises and socioeconomic injustices. As such, seemingly benevolent narratives around technology, collaboration and empathy are interrogated for their uncritical and therefore, a soft approach to GCE. However, the study also reflects on the work of a minority of the movement's members who confront colonial legacies, political hegemonies and power disparities, thereby engendering a more critical understanding of GCE. Lastly, the paper discusses the #TeachSDGs movement's potential to imagine pluriversal possibilities, a postcolonial, post-development world consisting of many radically interconnected worlds (Escobar, 2020).

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Introduction

A growing cohort of educators is seeking ways to prepare their students to confront the ecological crises and socioeconomic injustices awaiting them in an increasingly interconnected world. At the same time, policymakers and international organisations understand that many of the world's most pressing issues transgress national boundaries and aim to embed global citizenship education (GCE) into coursework and curricula. To support these endeavours, a transnational group of educators founded the #TeachSDGs advocacy movement, which aims to galvanise teachers around the world to promote and disseminate the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (TeachSDGs, 2024). This study undertakes a critical examination of the #TeachSDGs movement and interrogates the way GCE is promoted through the blogs, social media posts and lesson content submitted and referred to by its members. Specifically, the study explores the extent to which the movement confronts, or unintentionally reinforces and reproduces the power dynamics that have led to the current planetary predicaments. The research draws on critical scholars who suggest that GCE and global development frameworks such as the SDGs, despite being well-intentioned, are often embedded in a universalist, Eurocentric paradigm and fail to account for a colonial history of social, economic and political injustice. The study also examines the potential of #TeachSDGs to promote a pluriversal and reflexive GCE, one which seeks to account for historical wrongs, recognises a profound interdependence among humanity, reclaims symbiosis with the natural world and affirms multiple ways of being, knowing and thinking.

This investigation ultimately seeks to embolden educators across levels to reflect more critically on how they conceptualise global citizenship and promote instruments like the SDGs, thereby mitigating the risk of unintentionally reaffirming hegemonic structures and undermining genuine progress toward ecological and social justice.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the #TeachSDGs movement and the GCE theoretical framework that informs this study. This is followed by an outline of the methodology, an assessment of the key findings and a discussion on how these intersect with a critical and pluriversal GCE.

#TeachSDGs, global citizenship education (GCE) and the pluriverse

The #TeachSDGs movement

Following the unveiling of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 (United Nations, 2015), the #TeachSDGs movement was launched by activist educators to promote the teaching and dissemination of the seventeen Global Goals (SDGs). #TeachSDGs conducts its advocacy online through a network of nearly nine hundred volunteer ambassadors, located in over seventy countries (TeachSDGs, 2024). To become a #TeachSDGs ambassador, an educator agrees to spread the movement by leading SDG-themed classroom projects, engaging with school

leaders, interacting on social media, writing blog posts, and influencing policy. In addition, the #TeachSDGs website provides teachers with links to pedagogical resources based on the Global Goals, aimed at a wide range of educational contexts, targeting learners from primary level to adults.

Global citizenship education (GCE)

The importance of cultivating students' global citizenship is a recurring theme in the #TeachSDGs blog posts and features prominently in many government, NGO and UN documents devoted to education. Target 4.7 in SDG 4 aligns GCE with education for sustainable development, gender equality, cultural diversity, human rights, peace, and non-violence (United Nations, 2015). In academia, these topics are frequently consolidated under the term GCE, a loosely defined but burgeoning academic discipline which aims to embed a social role within international education (Marshall, 2011). However, such a social role obscures a growing neoliberal trajectory in education systems around the world. Scholars like Nussbaum (2010) lament that profit-driven market forces, which prioritise the teaching of technical skills, have undermined education for human development, thus neglecting the cultivation of critical thinking, democratic citizenship, and empathy for the Other. Diverging from Nussbaum's liberal humanist perspective, other scholars have interrogated GCE and its allegiance to an international development paradigm which they argue is neo-colonial (Andreotti, 2014; Sund & Pashby, 2018). Drawing on postcolonial theory, this line of inquiry asserts that global social justice narratives are grounded in Eurocentric worldviews and colonial ideologies, thereby enabling Northern and Southern elites to maintain political, economic, and cultural hegemony over vast populations of rural poor in the South and others excluded from the dominant group (Spivak, 2004). These global asymmetries hold sway over how global citizenship is defined and whether the status of 'global citizen' is available to all of humanity or only to a privileged cosmopolitan elite (Dobson, 2005).

Exploring how these positions play out in the classroom, Andreotti (2014) developed a framework which contrasts 'soft' and 'critical' approaches to GCE. The fact that the framework was cited in a blog post by a #TeachSDGs ambassador suggests it has potential to bridge the gap between academia and practical application, and to provide a relevant theoretical foundation for this study.

Soft and critical GCE

Andreotti (2014) suggests that a soft version of GCE is informed by the belief that poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation are symptoms of underdevelopment, caused by poor education, a lack of resources, and inadequate technology. Based on universalist assumptions of what defines an ideal world, soft GCE teaches students that humanity has a moral obligation to share and spread the "good life" to those who lack it (Andreotti, 2014, p. 29). Teachers therefore aim to raise student awareness about global issues, while empowering them to act and support charitable campaigns. This view positions the privileged

students as agents who can impose change from the outside on to those who are seen as lacking. Soft GCE aligns with both humanistic and neoliberal worldviews, the former focused on promoting tolerance and harmony, the latter on supporting free market solutions (Andreotti, 2011; Andreotti & Pashby, 2013).

While recognising that some of the aspects of soft GCE are useful starting points for more complex discussions, critical scholars like Andreotti (2014) fear that such probing classroom dialogue may be exceedingly rare. They decry soft GCE for avoiding difficult historical and political questions, and thereby failing to address the root causes of the injustices that have resulted in poverty, inequality, and ecological breakdown (Andreotti & Souza, 2011). They further note that soft GCE runs the danger of advancing a Eurocentric, individualistic, and salvationist development agenda, which offers simplistic and consensual solutions to complex ethical issues and contestable problems (Sund & Pashby, 2018). Worst of all, critics worry that soft GCE risks entrenching exploitative, colonial power dynamics and reasserting assumptions of cultural supremacy through notions of development based on self-interest, paternalism, and essentialised views of the Other.

In contrast, critical GCE draws on postcolonialism and Freirean pedagogy in which “‘washing one’s hands’ of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (Freire, 1985, p. 122). Critical GCE is thus based on probing colonially embedded power relations, confronting asymmetrical Northern-dominated globalisation, questioning simplified solutions and challenging universal assumptions (Andreotti, 2014). Going beyond nurturing a culture of helping and empowering students to support campaigns, critical GCE promotes an ethos of critical thinking, leading to more accountable and ethical action (Andreotti & Souza, 2011). This means establishing a more level playing field for global dialogue and thus more autonomy for people to establish their own pathways to development. Critical GCE invites students to analyse their own positions and belief systems within complex local, national and global power structures and to participate in a process of change that starts from the inside (Andreotti, 2014).

The pluriversal paradigm

Expanding the soft-critical GCE continuum described above, Andreotti and Souza (2011) invite educators to address the “neocolonial and imperialistic frameworks that are still prevalent in global citizenship education” by seeking “yet-to-come postcolonial educational possibilities of situated and dynamic pluriversalities.” (p. 2-3)

The concept of pluriversality gained currency with a group of Latin American post-development scholars amid the Zapatista movement. It is an epistemic and political decolonising project (Mignolo, 2011) which aims to unravel prevailing Eurocentric universalist development ideologies in favour of “a world where many worlds fit” (Escobar, 2020, p. ix). Pluriversality is philosophically guided by Mignolo’s (2011) inquiry into the causal interplay between

Enlightenment principles like modernity, rights, freedoms, citizenship, representative democracy, and property ownership and their ‘dark’ counterparts, the violence and destitution wrought by colonialism, exploitation, dispossession, racism, and patriarchy. Pluriversal scholars link this binary to the modern day development paradigm, in which global organisations and development initiatives seek to de-traditionalise, re-educate, secularise, industrialise, and urbanise indigenous and subaltern populations (Höne, 2015). Pluriversalities instead represent an imagined future of re-communalisation, powered by local knowledges and horizontal political strategies which “move decidedly toward nonpatriarchal, nonracist, and postcapitalist social practices and organizations” (Escobar, 2020, p. 30). Importantly, the pluriverse is a radically interdependent space in which identities are both cosmopolitan and local, and global projects are grassroots, “without the G7, G8 or G20” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 23).

Adding nuance to this emphatically post-development position, Escobar (2020) suggests that a small number of progressive NGOs, those which pursue a social and environmental justice agenda through grassroots alliances, can be a starting point to the pluriversal vision. For Escobar (2020), this yet unrealised aspiration represents “expansions from below, effectively relativizing modernity’s universal ontology and the imagery of one world that it actively produces.” (p. xvi)

The UN’s Global Goals agenda would likely receive scant support from those who champion the pluriverse, especially the SDGs which double down on development through economic growth, industrialisation, and technology. Nevertheless, there is nascent evidence that pluriversal approaches are gaining some attention in mainstream debates on global development. During initial consultations about formulating indicators for SDG 4 on education, indigenous and grassroots organisations were invited to contribute suggestions on behalf of their communities (Höne, 2015). However, the insistence to quantify the SDG indicators marginalised many of these groups’ contributions and thereby undermined alternative epistemic approaches. This, and the fact that these stakeholders were excluded from the final decisive round of intergovernmental negotiation on the SDG 4 indicators (Höne, 2015) demonstrates that pluriversal voices have thus far only been elevated to a peripheral sideshow.

Interjecting the pluriverse into the classroom, Andreotti and Souza (2011) build on critical GCE and call for teachers to more deeply scrutinise historical injustices and unequal power dynamics. In a pluriverse, global student partnerships are built on ethical solidarity, reciprocity, and mutuality. Humility and self-insufficiency are understood as governing principles of all transnational relationships. A pluriversal pedagogy eschews essentialisms and cultural relativism, but also avoids assimilated identities and homogenised political projects (Sund & Pashby, 2018). Most importantly, “knowledge is seen as situated, equivocal and provisional, and educational pathways... equip learners to respond to context and relate to difference” (Andreotti & Souza, 2011, p. 3).

While the pluriverse embodies a yet-to-come possibility in GCE, it is a potentially aspirational model for the #TeachSDGs movement's well-intentioned activists. This study therefore seeks to position the advocacy work of #TeachSDGs on the soft – critical – pluriversal continuum and thereby urge reflexivity among educational activists and support a trajectory towards a postcolonial GCE of pluriversal possibilities. To this end, a critical-pluriversal lens is deployed to interrogate how far the promotional work of the #TeachSDGs movement is living up to its good intentions. As such, the following research questions are posed:

To what extent does the #TeachSDG movement promote critical global citizenship education? What is the movement's potential for a pluriversal GCE?

Methodology

To address these research questions a documentary analysis of the #TeachSDGs movement's online communication was undertaken. This methodology section provides a brief overview of documentary and online research, the #TeachSDGs blogging community and the thematic and critical discourse data analysis approaches which were deployed.

Documentary and online research

As documentary research was the principal source of data collection, this study was guided by Bowen's appeal to access "a wide array of documents providing a preponderance of evidence." (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). Thus, a robust review of the #TeachSDG blogs, social media posts, and the links provided by the authors was conducted. The links included videos, audio recordings, songs, project presentations, posters, educational wikis, lesson plans, field reports, and various other online documents containing learning material and student output.

The extensive archive of comprehensive and varied pedagogical blog posts on the #TeachSDGs website align with Hookway's (2017, p. 169) assessment of blogs as effective tools for qualitative research, as they capture "situated understandings and experiences of everyday life, converging traditional self-reflective forms of data like diaries, letters, biography, self-observation, personal notes, images, photographs and video, into a multi-media and interactive archive of everyday life." As the blogs used in this study were unsolicited and therefore not generated for the purpose of research, they provided "naturalistic narratives unadulterated by the scrutiny of a researcher" (Hookway, 2017, p. 169).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider other limitations of online spaces as sources of data collection. The study prioritised the #TeachSDGs blogs and linked pedagogical websites over social media posts, which are especially vulnerable to user-induced bias and social desirability (Kosinski et al., 2015). Conversely, relying heavily on blog posts risks the potential homogeneity of the blogging

population (Hookway, 2017) and raises the question of how representative forty-five bloggers are of almost nine hundred #TeachSDGs ambassadors and thousands of educators who engage with the website and the resources it offers. On the other hand, it is well established that bloggers are opinion leaders who potentially have significant influence on the behaviour of their readers (Balabanis & Chatzopoulou, 2019). Given that the research question asks about the type of GCE that is *promoted*, it is fair to assume that the #TeachSDGs blog posts offer a plausible account of the various ways in which the #TeachSDGs movement can influence its members and readers.

The blogs, the bloggers and the #TeachSDGs community

The blog archive on the #TeachSDGs website contains sixty blog entries written by forty-five of the movement's ambassadors, with no individual contributing more than five entries. The posts are typically over one thousand words in length and usually contain links to educational activities and resources. Unlike most blogs, comments are not enabled directly on the website, though links to social media are provided. The biodata at the end of each blog post uncovers a range of nationalities and educational contexts. However, as the blogs are exclusively in English, many bloggers are situated in 'Anglophone' countries, including the US, the UK, Canada, Nigeria, India, and the Philippines; others are teachers of English or teach in multilingual international schools in countries such as Denmark, Russia, Vietnam, Guatemala, and Egypt. The bloggers work with students in many contexts, ranging from kindergarten to university, though a large portion teach at the secondary school level. The fact that the #TeachSDGs communication is almost exclusively online and in English has implications on the socioeconomic context of the study. Possessing these requisite technical tools and linguistic skills leaves little doubt that the bloggers and the wider #TeachSDGs community of ambassadors and followers occupy a position of privilege over the vast majority of those that SDG initiatives are intended to serve. This disparity of course uncovers the binary paradox of subject and object within GCE discourse (Andreotti, 2014), yet it provides a crucial lens into how members of the privileged group negotiate this contested space.

The study adheres to the ethical principle that informed consent is normally unnecessary when posted online data is intended for public use (BERA, 2024). However, as the bloggers' postings and resources may be subject to unanticipated professional scrutiny, the principle of withholding the authors' identities has been followed (Hookway, 2017).

Data analysis

The starting point for analysing the #TeachSDGs online data set was to "establish the meaning of the document and its contribution to the issues being explored", while always bearing in mind "the original purpose of the document... and the target audience." (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). To gain an understanding of how the #TeachSDGs movement's

intersect with the soft-to-critical GCE continuum and to assess the more abstract potential for pluriversal possibilities, a thematic analysis was undertaken, aiming both “to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The iterative process of note taking, coding, developing, and refining themes was conducted manually following Braun and Clarke’s (2019, p. 594) reflexive thematic analysis model with an understanding that these are “produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves.”

As one of the aims of this study is to challenge the postcolonial discourse of ‘good intentions’ within development and GCE, it was appropriate to apply a latent thematic analysis and to thus “examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations - and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This brought an element of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the study. Drawing on the work of Mullet (2018), I examined the use of high-frequency words like ‘empowerment’, ‘empathy,’ and ‘collaboration’, for how they relate to embedded power structures and the social context they are applied to. I also followed CDA principles by examining what has been omitted from texts (Mullet, 2018), especially the reluctance to confront power structures and the legacies of colonial history. Furthermore, in alignment with the soft-critical-pluriversal GCE framework, I undertook CDA with some of the questions posed by Sund and Pashby (2018), including: “How are people in need portrayed? How are relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’ addressed? How are sentiments like generosity, solidarity and sympathy addressed?” (Sund & Pashby, 2018, p. 6).

Findings

A comprehensive analysis of the #TeachSDGs blog posts and supporting resources uncovers a movement dedicated to GCE as a tool to confront global challenges, underscored by the recurring themes of spreading technology, enabling collaboration, and nurturing empathy. At the same time the data exposes a reluctance to delve into complexities, to critique power structures, and to explore the role of historical injustices which have created the need for instruments like the SDGs. The goals themselves are treated by many bloggers as sacrosanct; one contributor recounts sharing “the gospel of the Sustainable Development Goals.” Such sentiments are bolstered by pedagogical resources featuring images of the colourful SDG logos, often held up by celebrities and children in school uniforms. These narratives position the overall ethos of the #TeachSDGs movement firmly within the soft GCE paradigm, despite some notable instances of critical pedagogies, driven by deeper reflections on social justice and the Global Goals agenda.

In the following sections I assess how the #TeachSDGs movement’s advocacy for technology, collaboration, and empathy intersects with Andreotti’s soft-critical GCE framework. I also examine pedagogical cases within these themes which are potentially compatible or entirely at odds with a pluriversal vision of GCE.

Technology

A large portion of the #TeachSDGs movement’s advocacy work centres around the importance of technology in solving global problems and achieving the SDGs. The disproportionate focus on technology, even in pre-COVID 19 days, is partly the result of Microsoft’s partnership with the World’s Largest Lesson website, where #TeachSDGs educators are directed to access Goal-themed lesson ideas. Microsoft offers a free training course about the SDGs following enrolment in the ‘Microsoft Educators’ scheme, thereby securing the services of many #TeachSDGs ambassadors as proponents of its products. Some of the bloggers thus use their posts to highlight how helpful various Microsoft tools have been in promoting SDG classroom themes.

The overwhelming majority of blog posts which highlight technology do so uncritically and assume its universal necessity and inevitable global spread. Bloggers write, for example, that technology “...paves the ground for... [students] to solve problems,” and that it “...has become the need of the hour.” More explicit posts suggest that ICT skills are central to a ‘proper’ education, “vital for being an active participant in the 21st century,” and necessary to “penetrate the labour market and join the workforce.” Bloggers further declare their faith in “ICT tools to change our mindset” and call for “a paradigm shift from traditional practices to practices which are knowledge driven and ICT empowered in this present era of globalization.”

While the global digital divide is acknowledged, the power dynamics which support it go unmentioned, as do any alternative visions to a technological future. Smith and Watson (2020, p. 24) argue that when technology is “increasingly portrayed as our aspiration and role model, the ability to envisage and create a rich, flourishing and abundant future becomes shoehorned into technological visions and we further become disconnected and alienated.” Also absent from the blogs is any notion that “the person with the best tools to articulate and manipulate perspectives through technology will have a much stronger chance to steer the debate” (Andreotti & Pashby, 2013, p. 432).

The blog posts and lesson resources also frequently link technology to empowering individual action, the development of leadership skills, and the generation of new ideas to solve the world’s problems. A lesson plan on the Worlds’ Largest Lesson website invites students to sing a song about an electric car, while an animated SDG educational video on the site tells learners: “We have great ideas and we are great at making things. With that power we have already changed the world over and over and we’ve solved thousands of problems. So now we can do it again.” In a similar vein, a #TeachSDGs blog post provides a link to a reading text on the website of ‘Global Citizen’, an anti-poverty, climate activist organisation, which is astonishingly partnered with sponsors such as Delta Airlines and Formula 1. The assigned text assures students that “together Formula 1 and Global Citizen are driving change to positively impact the world we race in” (Global Citizen, 2024). Critics would disparage such messaging as an acceleration of neoliberal capitalism in which “technology restructures political

liberalism so that it conflates instrumentalism with action, exhibitionism with communication, image with reality" (Pinar, 2013, p. 5).

However, there are some in the #TeachSDGs movement who challenge the prevailing narrative. One blogger reminds us that technology "can affect the world in a bad way," pointing out high-tech weapons as an example. A second contributor shares a song intended for students to ponder a dilemma and a question often unasked: "Our planet is in jeopardy, we need to get clean energy. By using new technology, can we preserve our history?" Another blog post from India presents three case studies which describe local grassroots initiatives to revive "ancient Indian water management traditional knowledge" in three regions suffering from water scarcity. The author then shares online and in-person SDG-themed workshops and activities about various traditional water management systems.

Despite some of the critical voices and the grassroots initiatives edging toward the pluriversal, the vast majority of the #TeachSDGs movement promotes modern technology as an unequivocal tool for progress. This represents an epistemic hegemony in which technology empowers individual action and generates universal solutions, and therefore skews toward a soft GCE (Andreotti, 2014; Andreotti & Souza, 2011).

Collaboration

The #TeachSDGs blog posts frequently champion collaboration as an important component of GCE and engaging with the Global Goals. This section assesses two collaborative initiatives described in the #TeachSDGs blogs which illustrate different positionalities on the soft-critical-pluriversal continuum.

The first blog post describes a collaboration between science students in two Canadian schools, and students at an elite private school in the Dominican Republic. Their project aimed to address electricity shortages that impacted disadvantaged Dominican students who, according to the blog, "had difficulty to learn and read at night." In the blog post, one of the teachers recalls motivating the Canadian students: "What are we going to DO about this? And: what are we going to MAKE about this? The students became excited to build solar powered 3D printed lanterns to help out." The author provides links to the project's digital documents, videos, and photos which celebrate the Canadian students' achievements in fundraising, creating lantern prototypes, building the circuitry, and gaining important technical skills. However, there is no reference to the project's impact on the targeted community nor to the Dominican beneficiaries. There is only a photo portraying four idle individuals amid an impoverished Dominican urban landscape, which stands in stark contrast to the multiple images of Canadian students proudly posing with their lantern prototypes.

Andreotti (2012) problematises the 'feel good' factor common in the soft approach to GCE, as it risks reinforcing cultural supremacy and privilege. Classroom philanthropy too often focuses on student "self-improvement, the development of

leadership skills or simply having fun, enhanced, of course, by the moral supremacy and vanguardist feeling of being responsible for changing or saving the world 'out there'" (Andreotti, 2014, pp. 21–22). Instead Andreotti urges teachers to raise more difficult questions about how poverty is created and how people justify inequality, exploitation, and dominance, thereby striving to mitigate "the reproduction of harm and expose how self-serving practices can be disguised as altruism. (Andreotti, 2012, p. 23)."

Another blog post describes a different approach to a collaborative project. A UK researcher conducted interviews with residents of low-income communities in Bangladesh "to understand how climate change affects their everyday lives and what solutions they employ." Aiming to disseminate her research beyond academia, she initiated a theatre project with students of drama in Bangladesh and extended the collaboration to students in the UK. The students in Bangladesh turned the research findings into Pot Gan, a traditional interactive theatre performance, while the students in the UK learned about this form of community theatre and about how climate change impacts those on the front lines. Both groups of students delivered Pot Gan performances to diverse communities in their countries, raising awareness and reflection among UK audiences, and a basis for action for those directly impacted in Bangladesh. The project produced videos of the researcher's interviews and the theatre performances, as well as teaching resources on climate change aimed at UK secondary school geography classes.

This collaboration provides a far more critical interpretation of GCE than the first, as change was elicited bottom-up from those on the inside, rather than imposed top-down by outsiders. This enabled a more equal basis for dialogue between stakeholders and empowered those most impacted by climate change to define their own vision of development through locally situated knowledges (Andreotti, 2014). Nevertheless, a tension is exposed as the Pot Gan performances in the UK open themselves to critique for potentially trivialising and exoticizing the cultural Other, a transgression irresolutely atoned for by the gravitas of the climate emergency theme (Andreotti, 2011). Thus, pluriversal possibilities falteringly emerge when collaborations uphold an ethos of mutuality, reciprocity, and ethical solidarity, though they must likewise confront context and engage with difference (Andreotti & Souza, 2011).

For the significant majority of bloggers in the #TeachSDGs community who champion an uncritical soft GCE approach to collaboration, a helpful starting point is to engage with questions which raise the inevitable tensions so often embedded in power disparities: "How can we address salvationism without crushing generosity and altruism? How can we address people's tendency to want simplistic solutions without producing paralysis and hopelessness?" (Andreotti, 2012, p. 26).

Empathy

Many #TeachSDGs blog posts identify a symbiotic link between collaboration and developing empathy for the Other. Various blog entries interweave the notion of empathy with concepts such as care, compassion, tolerance, humility, shared-responsibility, open-mindedness, non-judgement, understanding, and humanitarianism. One blogger suggests that empathy must be “taught explicitly,” as it “shapes the minds and hearts of youth, building up global citizens who are change agents...” and can thus “encourage acts of heroism.” Such was the sentiment among the science students in Canada whose “empathy was lit” when they heard about the lack of electricity among disadvantaged students in the Dominican Republic and so decided to produce and donate solar lanterns.

However, while empathy is a prerequisite for political solidarity and openness to difference, it does not preclude a reinforcement of dominant power relationships (Scholte, 2007, p. 36). Drawing on research from Critical Race Theory, Duncan (2002, p.90) cautions about the risk of “false empathy” and the resulting “abstraction and detachment” which enables the privileged to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths about systemic and structural inequalities. Thus, false empathy is a symptom of soft GCE which promotes a culture of helping the unfortunate and underprivileged, but fails to challenge systems that are structurally unjust (Andreotti, 2011).

A more critical approach to GCE elicits a deeper empathy by confronting injustice and evoking ethical solidarity. Such an approach is detailed in a #TeachSDGs blogger’s lesson plan about the global garment industry. In the lesson students are asked to consider questions such as: “What are the problems that sweatshop workers face? How would you feel if you were a sweatshop worker?” and “How can we make working conditions fairer for those living in developing countries?” The students are then given a provocative debate proposition: “Sweatshops are good for us because we can buy cheap clothes.” They are subsequently shown a video in which three young people from Norway travel to Cambodia to take part in a day-in-the-life experience of local garment factory workers. The video exposes the abhorrent work conditions and pitiful wages faced by the seamstresses, and consequently the grotesque inequalities between those who produce and those who purchase fast fashion. The students are thus forced to reflect on their own positionality in global capitalist structures and to confront the blatant asymmetry of neoliberal globalisation (Andreotti, 2011, 2014). When students like these engage with unequal power relations, realise their self-insufficiency and build ethical solidarities with the Other, their empathy is no longer abstract and detached, and pluriversal visions become possible (Andreotti & Souza, 2011).

Discussion

From a neoliberal soft, toward a critical GCE

The findings of this study have identified a tension between the #TeachSDGs movement’s altruistic intentions and the risk that much of its advocacy is reproducing the colonial and neoliberal paradigms responsible for the planet’s many woes. The ethos of #TeachSDGs largely draws on a soft understanding of GCE and a universal vision of global development. This leads to a pedagogy of raising student awareness about global issues and promoting simplified technical solutions, but seldom examining the complexity of problems and their connection to historical wrongs and unequal power structures (Andreotti, 2011, 2014). Despite its benign intentions, much of the movement inadvertently reflects a development paradigm characterised by Western-centric, top-down globalisation, propelled by neoliberal capitalism (Escobar, 2020).

The incursion of the neoliberal trajectory onto movements like #TeachSDGs is evident to anyone who scours such organisations’ websites. Companies ranging from Microsoft to Formula 1 racing are among the many who have appropriated the #TeachSDGs movement and its affiliated websites, joining UNICEF and NGOs as partners and sponsors, thereby blurring the lines between corporate public relations, advocacy/activist movements, and civil society. Thus, the SDGs themselves become a branded good, their colourful logo placed on t-shirts and hoodies, available for order on the #TeachSDGs website. The corporate sponsors undoubtedly contribute much needed revenue to maintain websites and fund campaigns. However, the fog of altruism results in few educators querying the extent to which Delta Airlines and Google are building their philanthropic credentials to protect their interests, secure future markets, and resist systemic change that might downgrade their market value.

It is therefore little wonder that the #TeachSDGs movement’s soft version of GCE is subjugated by the human capital paradigm, in which education’s primary role is to produce a skilled workforce to enhance economic productivity (Nussbaum, 2010). Charitable classroom projects thus highlight the marketable leadership and technical skills gained by the benefactor students rather than their initiatives’ charitable impacts. The critical path of seeking more equitable and ethical grounds for collaboration between donor and beneficiary on projects is out of sync in a neoliberal infused soft GCE context (Andreotti, 2011, 2014). Instead, soft GCE focusses on high-tech fixes and ‘ethical consumerism,’ touting eco-friendly cars and asking students calculate their individual carbon footprints, but seldom inviting them to confront the historical, political, and economic power disparities which have most contributed to the high-carbon globalised economy.

Nevertheless, the #TeachSDGs movement has steered thousands of educators towards a journey with the potential for a different paradigm. Indeed, some of the #TeachSDGs ambassadors are challenging the prevailing ethos by engaging in a more critical pedagogy. In addition, as Andreotti (2014) argues, many soft GCE principles, such

as raising student awareness about global hardships and eliciting their positive engagement, are necessary starting points toward a critical position. However, educators must understand these as points along the journey rather than as destinations in themselves.

Toward dynamic pluriversalities?

The assessment that #TeachSDGs largely promotes a soft version of GCE invites the question of whether the movement is even compatible with a pluriversal worldview. At first glance it would seem unlikely to find any common ground between a cosmopolitan, tech-heavy, and neoliberal-infused SDG movement, and an anti-capitalist, anti-universalist, philosophical position which considers the prevailing development paradigm “a tool of domination and control” (Escobar, 2020, p. 112). However, Escobar (2020) reminds us that the pluriversal vision welcomes a plurality of pathways as long as they favour the “kind of cooperation practiced with the intention of fostering greater social justice and environmental sustainability.” (p. 107).

While decrying that the work of actors such as the World Bank and most mainstream NGOs “can only reinforce colonialist understandings of development,” Escobar (2020, p. 107) wants to “keep the door open” for progressive organisations. He urges such NGOs to:

“go beyond the binary of “us” (who have) and “them” (who need) and embrace all sides in the same, though diverse, movement for civilizational transitions and interautonomy; that is, coalitions and meshworks of autonomous collectives and communities from both the Global North and the Global South” (Escobar, 2020, p. 107).

A ‘progressive’ NGO specifically cited by Escobar is Oxfam, which has produced several high-quality publications for teachers and schools on GCE and the SDGs (Oxfam, 2015, 2019), all free of corporate sponsorships. The lack of commercial influence has enabled Oxfam to take a more critical approach to GCE, thus encouraging students to question their values and assumptions, to engage with multiple perspectives and to explore the complexity of global issues. The GCE publication stresses that global citizenship “is not only about far-away places and peoples” and cautions students against “telling people what to think and do, providing simple solutions to complex issues and focussing on charitable fundraising” (Oxfam, 2015, p. 5). Additionally, rather than glorifying the Goals, Oxfam’s SDG publication highlights both their benefits and limitations, and includes case studies which invite students to make “the leap from ‘charity’ to ‘social justice’” (Oxfam, 2019, p. 17). It is noteworthy that the #TeachSDGs logo can be found on the back of Oxfam’s SDG guide, alongside the NGO’s other partners, especially given that Oxfam’s resources receive scarcely a mention in the #TeachSDGs blog posts or lesson plans.

If the #TeachSDGs movement is to see through the fog of altruism, explore critical pedagogies and imagine pluriversal futures, its members and followers must challenge three

prevailing notions. The first is to consider the possibility that “we have modern problems for which there are no modern solutions” (Santos, 2012, p. 46). Teachers would thus look beyond the movement’s fealty to technology and examine bottom-up solutions and local knowledges, including those of indigenous communities. Secondly, altruistically motivated classroom collaborations must be conceived on the basis of equal partnership and mutuality, and therefore question the binary code of ‘us’ and ‘them’, the ‘developed’ and the ‘developing’ (Escobar, 2020). Finally, educators in the pluriverse must realign the #TeachSDGs movement’s prevailing ethos of empowering the individual and contemplate a pedagogy consistent with the “recommunalization of social life...that will allow us to coexist without destroying ourselves or the Earth” (Escobar, 2020, p. 16).

Conclusion

The planet’s ongoing ecological and socioeconomic disruptions behove educational institutions to provide their students with a comprehensive GCE. However, far too often well-meaning educators, like many in the #TeachSDGs movement, see GCE from a singular universal perspective. Far too often, the good intentions of privileged classrooms end up reproducing the ontologies and epistemologies which have most contributed to the plight of the human and the natural world.

Nevertheless, the #TeachSDGs movement’s more critical contributions embody a starting point to galvanise educators to take on a reflexive, critical GCE. This requires a pedagogy of foregrounding the complexity of social justice, eschewing simple solutions, interrogating universal technological fixes, and legitimising indigenous knowledge systems (Sund & Pashby, 2018). It also means forming educational collaborations in which power disparities are mitigated, historical wrongs are addressed, structural inequalities are confronted, and empathy is expressed through ethical solidarity (Andreotti, 2011).

This small-scale study of a single online advocacy movement is a snippet of a wider discussion about the urgency to align GCE with “the profound social transformations needed to face the planetary crisis” (Escobar, 2020, p. 9). To move the discussion forward, researchers, advocates, and educators are invited to explore the pluriverse, a postcolonial, post-development world consisting of many radically interconnected worlds, where multiple locals contribute to the global.

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