

Global Citizenship Education in Iranian Elementary Physical Education: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the integration of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) within Physical Education (PE) curricula in Iranian elementary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten PE teachers in Esfahan, Iran, and analyzed using thematic analysis informed by phenomenological principles (van Manen, 2016). Findings revealed limited explicit inclusion of GCE in curricula but showed implicit integration through teachers' practices such as team sports fostering collaboration and discussions promoting ethical decision-making. Key challenges included resource limitations, cultural barriers, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate administrative support (Keshāvarz et al., 2019; Rezaee et al., 2022). The study highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive curriculum frameworks and targeted professional development to enhance GCE integration in PE. This research contributes nuanced insights into GCE implementation within diverse cultural contexts, focusing on the Iranian education system (Tarozzi, 2014).

Keywords

Global Citizenship Education, Physical Education, Iran, Elementary Schools, Qualitative Research, Teacher Perspectives

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Global Citizenship Education (GCE) aims to prepare students to engage in an interconnected world, promoting social responsibility, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking (UNESCO, 2014). Integrating GCE into core subjects like Physical Education (PE) offers a unique opportunity to foster holistic development including cognitive, emotional, and physical growth (Chambers & Sandford, 2019). In Iran, the formal incorporation of GCE within PE remains limited, constrained by cultural, curricular, and resource challenges (Mehrabi, 2014). This study investigates the integration of GCE within Iranian elementary school PE curricula, focusing on teachers' experiences, perceptions, and the contextual barriers and facilitators shaping implementation (Keshāvarz et al., 2019).

Literature Review

GCE has evolved as a vital educational framework emphasizing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for responsible global citizenship (UNESCO, 2014). Theoretical perspectives including transformative learning and critical pedagogy underpin GCE practices (Estellés & Fischman, 2021). Globally, PE has been recognized as a platform to develop teamwork, respect for diversity, and ethical decision-making—core GCE objectives (Butler & Reinke, 2020). In countries like Finland and New Zealand, explicit GCE integration into PE curricula is established through dedicated frameworks and professional development (Adaspayeva & Parkes, 2021). However, in Iran, integration remains implicit, influenced by traditional values and a curriculum prioritizing physical skills over civic competencies (Mehrabi, 2014). Challenges such as gender norms, resource constraints, and lack of teacher training further complicate GCE adoption in Iranian PE (Keshāvarz et al., 2019).

Methods

This study utilized a phenomenological case study design (van Manen, 2016; Yin, 2018) to capture the lived experiences of ten PE teachers from public elementary schools in

Esfahan, Iran. Participants were purposefully sampled based on relevant teaching experience. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted in Persian through WhatsApp video calls, transcribed, and thematically analyzed following Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) approach. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, ensuring informed consent and confidentiality (American Psychological Association, 2017). The study acknowledges limitations related to sample size, geographical scope, and data collection constraints due to internet filtering (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Main Findings

Thirteen core concepts were distilled into six overarching themes describing teachers' experiences with GCE integration in PE:

1. **Challenges and Constraints:** Resource scarcity, cultural and societal barriers including gender norms, insufficient administrative support, and limited student understanding hindered effective GCE integration (Keshāvarz et al., 2019; Rezaee et al., 2022).
2. **Teacher Perceptions and Practices:** Varied levels of engagement were observed; some teachers innovatively used films, team activities, and discussions, while others had limited understanding of GCE concepts (Butler & Reinke, 2020).
3. **Curriculum and Policy:** The existing curriculum was widely perceived as inadequate in addressing GCE, with many teachers calling for policy reforms to prioritize PE and GCE (Poursalim et al., 2020).
4. **Student Responses:** Mixed engagement was reported, with some students showing interest while others were indifferent or confused about GCE's relevance.
5. **Interrelation of GCE and PE:** Teachers identified intrinsic connections around teamwork, fair play, cultural respect, and community responsibility inherent in PE.
6. **Embodiment:** Physical activity was seen as a means to embody GCE values, linking personal health with global citizenship and promoting social and emotional learning.

Expanded Exploration of Key Themes

Curriculum, Policy, and Challenges

Teachers consistently reported a complex interplay between curriculum insufficiencies, policy gaps, and a range of challenges impeding effective GCE integration. The official curriculum was perceived as insufficient, with PE marginalized relative to academic subjects, limiting its capacity to promote global citizenship competencies (Poursalim et al., 2020; Mehrabi, 2014). Scarce resources—whether financial, temporal, or material—exacerbated these issues, compounded by cultural constraints including gender norms restricting participation in certain physical activities (Rezaee et al., 2022). Moreover, lack of clear administrative support, policy guidelines, and professional training contributed to inconsistent practices and limited standardized assessment of GCE learning (Tarozzi, 2014).

Teacher Perceptions and Practices

Teacher engagement with GCE varied substantially. Some teachers demonstrated creativity by integrating globally relevant content through films of international athletes, team-building exercises, and fostering ethical dialogues (Butler & Reinke, 2020). Others reported limited familiarity with GCE frameworks, resulting in sporadic inclusion and absence of explicit evaluation methods. This inconsistency signals the critical need for comprehensive professional development tailored to the Iranian context.

Discussion

Iranian elementary PE's limited explicit GCE integration contrasts with global trends emphasizing formal curricular embedding of global citizenship (UNESCO, 2015). The socio-cultural-religious fabric of Iran, while rich, presents unique challenges for harmonizing global education goals with local values (Mehrabi, 2014), especially within PE that traditionally holds marginal status. Resource scarcity and limited teacher preparation further obstruct systemic adoption of GCE.

Nonetheless, teacher-led initiatives illustrate the potential for PE to serve as a dynamic venue for citizenship education when creatively aligned with GCE principles. This aligns with international research highlighting teacher training as pivotal to effective GCE integration (Butler & Reinke, 2020).

Comparisons to countries with explicit GCE-PE curricula, such as Finland and New Zealand, expose the divergent contexts shaping implementation paths (Adaspayeva & Parkes, 2021). Iran's experience highlights the necessity for culturally sensitive curriculum reform and investment in localized professional training, emphasizing embodied learning approaches that connect physical well-being with civic responsibility (Bosio, 2021).

Conclusion

This study elucidates the multifaceted dynamics shaping GCE integration in Iranian elementary PE, spotlighting systemic challenges and emergent pedagogical opportunities. Sustainable integration demands:

- Development of culturally grounded curricula explicitly framing GCE's role within PE;
- Expansion of targeted teacher training addressing contextual realities and pedagogical strategies;
- Strengthened administrative policies and resource allocation;
- Enhanced collaboration among educational stakeholders.

These interventions can ensure GCE in PE supports both global citizenship goals and Iranian socio-cultural integrity (Keshāvarz et al., 2019; Tarozzi, 2014).

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