

# The role of emotions when learning about global issues

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**Abstract:** This study explores what perceptions students and teachers have of emotions when learning about global issues. Empathy, compassion, social justice and hope are well established values in the Global Learning (GL) literature. GL should emphasise establishing a more robust and clearer pedagogical framework that offers strategies to include and manage emotions when practicing GL. This can only be achieved by embracing the inclusion of other fields. By making this interpersonal journey of emotions an explicit and natural part of the collective process of learning with and through others, and incorporating an SEL approach, GL values can transcend theory and be put into practice.

**Keywords:** Global Learning. Social and Emotional Learning. Global Issues.

**Resumo:** Este estudo explora quais percepções alunos e professores têm das emoções quando aprendem sobre questões globais. Empatia, compaixão, justiça social e esperança são valores bem estabelecidos na literatura de Aprendizagem Global (ECG). A ECG deve enfatizar o estabelecimento de um quadro pedagógico mais robusto e claro que ofereça estratégias para incluir e gerir emoções na prática da ECG. Isto só pode ser alcançado abraçando a inclusão de outros campos. Ao tornar esta jornada interpessoal de emoções uma parte explícita e natural do processo coletivo de aprendizagem com e através dos outros, e ao incorporar uma abordagem SEL, os valores da ECG podem transcender a teoria e ser postos em prática.

**Palavras-chave:** Aprendizagem Global. Aprendizagem Social e Emocional. Questões Globais.

**Resumen:** Este estudio explora qué percepciones tienen estudiantes y profesores sobre las emociones cuando aprenden sobre temas globales. La empatía, la compasión, la justicia social y la esperanza son valores bien establecidos en la literatura sobre Aprendizaje Global (GL). GL debería enfatizar el establecimiento de un marco pedagógico más sólido y claro que ofrezca estrategias para incluir y gestionar las emociones al practicar GL. Esto sólo puede lograrse adoptando la inclusión de otros campos. Al hacer de este viaje interpersonal de emociones una parte explícita y natural del proceso colectivo de aprendizaje con y a través de otros, e incorporando un enfoque SEL, los valores GL pueden trascender la teoría y ponerse en práctica.

**Palabras clave:** Aprendizaje Global. Aprendizaje Social y Emocional. Problemas Globales.

## Introduction

The role of emotions in learning, especially in Western education, is often overlooked. Emotions are behavioural and physiological reaction patterns to events, which are conceptualized through social and cultural influences (Immordino-Yang et al., 2016). This perspective supports Vygotsky's theory of the importance of culture in child development and the union of emotion and reason, contrary to Western Cartesian philosophy that separates the two (Colliver and Veraksa, 2021). Affective and social neuroscience emphasizes the connections between emotions, social functioning, and decision-making, highlighting the role of 'emotional thought' in processing meaning and enabling moral judgements. This suggests that education should help students build cognitive and behavioural strategies to navigate complex situations creatively and flexibly (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007).

Creativity is not solely a product of cognitive development; emotions can bridge the gap leading to creative transformation. Culture shapes the invisible social rules that drive behaviour, but emotions must be acknowledged and regulated for personal transformation. Otherwise, there is a risk of moral disengagement and anti-social behaviour (Visconti, Ladd, Kochenderfer, 2015). Research has shown strong links between emotional regulation and civic engagement, such as social responsibility, political behaviours, and values (Metzer et al., 2018). The importance of societal and cultural exposure in defining behaviour is further supported (Bourn, 2015). The COVID-19 lockdowns, which isolated children from society, may have contributed to moral disengagement and anti-social behaviour upon their return to school.

Teachers have observed significant behavioural changes in student's post-pandemic, with increased anxiety, lack of focus, depression, and deteriorated mental health (Hsieh et al., 2021; Cost et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Ribeiro, Celeste, and Reis, 2023). A report by the NASUWT Teaching Union (2023) found that 37% of teachers experienced physical abuse, and 90% experienced verbal abuse or violence from students, attributing poor behaviour to the impact of COVID-19 on social interactions and inadequate behaviour management programs. Understanding and addressing the role of emotions in learning and behaviour is crucial for developing effective educational strategies post-pandemic.

During my teacher training in 2021, the pandemic's impact on schools focused efforts on managing student behaviour and social interactions. Students struggled with life events and emotions, hindering their learning focus. Using Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) techniques, I helped students manage emotions and integrated global issues into lessons, enhancing focus and engagement. A significant shift occurred when discussing global topics, creating a safe space for expression and processing emotions (Freire, 2005; Bourn, 2015; Arao and Clemens, 2023; Zembylas, 2023).

Research supported these observations, showing ongoing psychological distress in children due to the pandemic, with increased anxiety, depression, and cognitive deficits (Hsieh et al., 2021; Breaux et al., 2023; Cost et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Ribeiro, Celeste, and Reis, 2023). These issues likely contributed to behavioural problems, as reported by the NASUWT Teaching Union (2023), with a significant percentage of teachers experiencing physical and verbal abuse from students, attributed to the pandemic's impact on social interactions and ineffective behaviour management.

## **Literature review**

The literature review section builds a theoretical framework, guiding the reader through GL as a pedagogical approach and the roles of teachers and students as equals in the classroom. As previously mentioned, although GL emphasises empathy, compassion, social justice, equity and hope, it seems to overlook the importance of processing emotions that can transform these values into action. However, ESD, CCE and GCE acknowledge emotions as key components of learning about global issues and attempt to build affective pedagogies. Perhaps GL can follow this path and expand it further by formalising SEL as a component of the teaching and learning. To explore this acknowledgement, I adopt an emotions lens that identifies values of empathy, compassion, social justice and the importance of emotions in affective pedagogies found in ESD, CCE and GCE. This allows the reader to understand that the prevalence of emotions and values across the literature is explicit, but how these are managed is implicit. I argue that this is a gap in the field and embracing SEL and TSEL could transform both fields.

Defining Global Learning (GL) and its challenges for practitioners is complex. GL focuses on social justice, equity, critical thinking, empathy, and empowering youth

(Andreotti, 2006, 2021; Scheunpflug, 2010; Kumar, 2008; Bourn, 2014; Norden and Avery, 2021; Bowman and Germaine, 2022).

However, maintaining controversy and challenging established concepts can be overwhelming (Scheunpflug, 2010; Wegimont, 2020). The ambiguity in defining GL, often used interchangeably with Development Education (DE), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and Global Citizenship Education (GCE), leads to confusion and difficulty navigating its scope. While interconnected by shared goals, the transition from DE to GL has narrowed its definition, making it more isolated and primarily recognized in the West, unlike the globally accepted ESD and GCE, which integrate Global South perspectives (Bourn, 2014; Bryan, 2020, 2022).

ESD particularly highlights the need to incorporate emotions in learning to manage the negative feelings prompted by global issues like climate change (Bryan, 2020). Integrating these transformative approaches into curricula requires significant change. Schools need to integrate transformation into their core rather than merely adding it as an additional requirement, which often results in superficial compliance without meaningful impact (Bryan, 2022). A stable definition of GL could benefit practitioners by providing a clear pedagogical framework based on learner engagement with issues such as poverty, colonialism, and social justice, developed through self-reflection, critical thinking, and dialogue (Bourn, 2014).

GL continues to evolve within its Western borders, while ESD and GCE are more established and adaptable across different cultures. To create global citizens committed to a fair and sustainable world, a clear pedagogical framework is necessary. This framework should help learners engage with complex global issues through a stable and grounded approach, incorporating emotions and addressing power imbalances and social justice (Bourn, 2014).

GL emphasizes students, learning processes, capacity building and social learning (Norden and Avery, 2021). This requires a learning environment that nurtures communication and discussion based on principles of empathy, love and trust (Kumar, 2008). Through empathy and access to different voices, students and teachers can unlearn harmful assumptions. It is important to include a critical reflection on how empathy is developed and taught to allow such positive outcomes (Kurian, 2019; Ludvik, et al. 2023).

Critically reflecting on complex global issues through different lenses might not elicit values of social justice and empathy. These values must be developed to build an identity with such a values base, perhaps requiring a more explicit approach.

GL is often seen as a transformative pedagogical approach, moving from passive empathy to deeply unsettling discussions involving significant negativity (Andreotti, 2006). Processing these negative feelings can deepen engagement, leading to long-lasting social action and preventing the perpetuation of neoliberalism and colonialism. Discussing topics like colonialism challenges students' self-image and ingrained assumptions, making such discomfort crucial for equity and social justice (Andreotti, 2021). This discomfort, though often avoided, is essential for empowering students to challenge unequal power structures and adopt a social justice mentality (Zembylas, 2023; Porto and Zembylas, 2024; Kumar, 2008).

A moral agency focused on simple actions to absolve guilt, without continuous reflection on injustice, perpetuates individualism and inequality. Empathy needs to be the foundation for developing collective social action, transforming pity and guilt into empathy and social justice. A critical approach is necessary to foster a social justice mindset, allowing students to step into others' perspectives and change their thinking (Andreotti, 2006). By decentring their perspective and understanding the world through different cultural lenses, students can process the emotional loss of old assumptions, biases, and stereotypes, which is crucial for preventing feelings of guilt, hopelessness, and disempowerment and enabling transformation (Bourn, 2021).

There is a gap in the field regarding an explicit approach to help students and teachers manage emotions in the classroom. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Climate Change Education (CCE), and Global Citizenship Education (GCE) emphasize the role of emotions in learning, suggesting that formalizing emotional processing could address this gap effectively.

Climate change prompts significant negative emotions, necessitating an affective framework to help students manage these feelings. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural learning, particularly in SDG Target 4.7, which integrates Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) competencies (UN, 2017). Combining these competencies with empathy and compassion can foster communities, rather than reinforcing individualism (Hatley, 2019). Removing barriers to non-western

perspectives is essential for shifting attitudes towards social justice and equity (Bryan, 2022; Ludvik et al., 2023).

Managing emotions in ESD and Climate Change Education (CCE) is crucial, as young people often experience feelings of powerlessness, marginalization, and climate anxiety (Norden and Avery, 2021; Bowman and Germaine, 2022; Bryan, 2020). These emotions are integral to decision-making and motivation. If left unaddressed, students may become apathetic, recognizing the right decisions but choosing indifference (Ludvik et al., 2023). Teachers, educators, and students need to directly address the embedded assumption that emotions are not part of reasoning to process these negative feelings and avoid replacing transformation with inertia and denial (Bryan, 2020).

The pandemic's negative impact on environmental issues and trauma underscores the need for a formalized pedagogical approach that teaches students to process emotions and develop transformative values. This is essential to prevent students from staying in negative emotional spaces and to drive positive change.

Values, defined as consistent goals guiding actions and infused with feelings when threatened or supported, are activated by emotions, especially when values are challenged (Conte et al., 2023). Emotions, often more reliable than beliefs for actions, are essential based on the moral relevance of held beliefs (Tapolet, 2016). Ethical GCE fosters global awareness, integrating Indigenous perspectives emphasizing humility and empathy (Pashby, 2018; Sharma, 2020; Bosio and Schattle, 2021; Swanson, 2007).

Values-creation in GCE develops respect, diversity, and responsibility, empowering students to identify power relations and act with empathy and compassion (Sharma, 2020; Bosio and Schattle, 2021). The role of emotions in value creation is underexplored, presenting a gap in managing negative emotions and transforming them into hope. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can provide the strategies to achieve GL goals. The next section will define SEL, its background, and its connection to GL.

CASEL, as an SEL framework, is a systemic approach that is globally recognised and strongly evidence-based, providing all the resources necessary to ensure a successful implementation. As a well-established framework, its evolution towards a more equitable world has shown a stability and progression that is important to explore. According to CASEL definition of SEL (2020):

SEL is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the

knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible caring decisions. (...) SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.

This definition is significant because it was updated in 2020 to include equity, social justice, unequal power structures, civic engagement and empowerment showing an evolution of SEL (Williams and Jagers, 2022). In the next section I will briefly explore SEL's background and its evidence-based positive impact, analysing the benefits and challenges of implementing it, while identifying the links with GL.

Efforts to support children's development and well-being, particularly in the US, have a long history. The term SEL and the formation of CASEL originated from a conference that gathered researchers and educators to create evidence-based SEL approaches for education (Brackett et al., 2019). Over time, SEL's definitions and approaches have evolved, with extensive research showing that social, emotional, and cognitive development are interconnected, positively impacting health, life outcomes, moral judgment, and motivation (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones, Fleming and Williford, 2020). Interest in SEL has grown, with organizations like UNESCO, OECD, and WHO emphasizing its importance in education and health (Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

The evidence-based positive impact of SEL on students includes higher engagement, higher-order thinking, increased performance, greater well-being, positive behaviour, optimistic relationships, and more responsible decisions. Research shows SEL improves academic success, reduces bullying and violent behaviour, engages at-risk students, increases student autonomy and leadership, amplifies student voice, and develops empathy for multiple perspectives (Brackett et al., 2019; Cipriano et al., 2019; Baumsteiger et al., 2022). From a GL perspective, these SEL outcomes are necessary for developing critical thinking and engaging with complex global issues.

However, SEL outcomes should expand to adapt to different cultures and critically engage with emotions in topics of social justice, equity, and unequal power structures. SEL should be considered a human right, as its unavailability perpetuates social injustice (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Evidence on SEL's role in reducing inequality in schools is limited (Jones, Fleming, and Williford, 2020).

To address complex global issues, there needs to be a focus on context and culture. Transformative SEL (TSEL) integrates these themes into SEL pedagogy, clarifying its links with GL. Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (TSEL) is defined as

a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal well-being (Jagers, Rivas-Drake and Borowski, 2018, p. 3).

Viewed through a GL lens, TSEL integrates multiple perspectives to foster critical thinking, reflection, and creativity in addressing global issues like injustice and inequity. A formal TSEL approach within GL could deconstruct ingrained assumptions and biases, fostering meaningful engagement and agency. TSEL, still evolving, focuses on social identity, collective agency, and a sense of belonging, without ignoring the journey from individual self-awareness to collective citizenship (Williams and Jagers, 2021). Emphasizing social competencies and incorporating multiple perspectives from various communities can shift students' social perspectives, enabling civic empowerment and engagement against inequality and injustice (Andreotti, 2021).

The interconnected and synergetic SEL competencies foster cultural and civic capabilities leading to social change, and integrating these within GL can build a comprehensive pedagogical framework. SEL can lend credibility to GL and promote deep, transforming teachers and students into agents of social change (Bourn, 2015).

TSEL is a collaborative endeavour built on SEL practices to promote collective well-being and social justice. The challenge lies in stretching SEL towards TSEL. Research shows that in schools with successful SEL frameworks, students are already engaged and willing to discuss issues of injustice in their communities and school. Furthermore, SEL teachers use SEL as a context to connect language, students' social identities and encourage action (McGovern et al., 2023).

Multiple perspectives play a key role in changing students' own realities and transforming them into engaged citizens. It offers an opportunity to include indigenous approaches from the Global South that are already built on values of empathy and compassion. These non-western perspectives could be weaved through TSEL, using GL as a pedagogical framework, introducing a multidisciplinary approach that reflects the goals of both TSEL and GL.



## Methodology

This small-scale qualitative study utilized observations and individual semi-structured interviews, methods widely used in social sciences (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Participants were viewed as meaning-makers, offering their perspectives on emotions in learning about global issues (Cohen et al., 2017). The study encouraged creative reflections on integrating emotions into learning, giving students a voice and allowing teachers to consider the absence of emotions in teaching.

Observations focused on teacher-student relationships to understand how they influence the expression of feelings. Individual semi-structured interviews allowed students to voice their perspectives without peer or teacher influence, offering flexibility and adaptability for reflective responses (Cohen et al., 2017). Examples of club work observed were used to probe deeper into emotions triggered by global issues, facilitating creative opportunities for participants. Combining these qualitative methods was crucial for exploring participants' perspectives on emotions.

This study has one main research question (RQ) and two sub research-questions (SRQ):

- Main RQ1: What are teachers' and students' perceptions of emotions when learning about global issues?
- SRQ2: What emotions are identified by students and teachers when discussing global issues?
- SRQ3: In what ways do emotions affect students' engagement when learning about global issues?

Utilising a reflexive thematic analysis, I analysed the interviews based on the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The analysis was conducted separately for students and teachers to highlight both the similarities and differences in their perspectives.

Participants were selected from a club called *People & Planet* within the school described above. Fourteen students and two teachers are part of the club working on climate change awareness and projects that promote just and sustainable behaviours.

During the study, group projects were underway. One group was preparing an Earth Day Assembly for all Y8 students (12 years old) following their viewing of the

documentary *Plastic Warriors*. The club decided it was important to remind students of the documentary and inform them about reducing plastic consumption. Three consent forms and three participant information sheets were prepared for students, teachers and parents and these were included in the communications. Ten club members were recruited as participants (Table 1).

Table 1 – Study Participants

Year	Age	Number of Students	Gender
Y7	11	2	Female
Y8	12	4	Female
Y12	17	2	Female
Profession and Subject	Age	Number of Teachers	Gender
Assistant Headteacher (Geography)	20 - 30	1	Female
Early Career Teacher (ECT) (Geography)	40 - 50	1	Female

Observations were one of the two data collection methods used. Initially, the plan was to observe 2-4 lunchtime club sessions, each lasting one hour, focusing on emotionally charged interactions, with data captured using a 360 microphone for further analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). After discussions with a teacher revealed that emotions were not usually directly addressed, the approach was changed to two one-hour observations with notetaking to capture teacher-student and student-student relationships. A structured observation framework was used, focusing on how students enter the classroom, their level of independence, interactions, expression of emotions, and difficulties in labelling feelings (Bell and Waters, 2014).

Due to intensive group work for project deadlines, there were no group discussions on specific topics, and recordings of group interactions were hard to analyse. However, notes, club documentation, and conversations with teachers provided valuable insights into the setting, context, and culture of the group (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The second collection technique was the use of individual semi-structured interviews. Ten interviews were conducted (eight with students and two with teachers) using open-ended questions and several prompts informed by the observations to achieve

the necessary level of detail. Two interview schedules were created - one for students and one for teachers - to capture the different perspectives. A summary of the topics for each group was created. The individual interviews were conducted face to face in a social space with sufficient privacy, even though other students and teachers were present. Lapel microphones and a phone device were used to record the interviews, which lasted between 24 and 59 minutes without break

Observation notes were categorised into three groups: students, teachers, and relationships. Recordings were not used for thematic analysis due to difficulties in capturing verbal interactions, but notes provided valuable insights (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) incorporated preconceived themes related to emotions from the literature review (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021). Interview transcripts were created using Microsoft Word's transcription feature and reviewed in depth for data immersion. NVivo was used to systematically create initial codes, exploring patterns of shared meaning at semantic and underlying levels (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Initial codes were refined into sub-themes, reviewed multiple times using Microsoft Excel, and described in detail. The RULER approach was applied to capture participants' feelings: Recognizing, Understanding, Labelling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions (Baumsteiger et al., 2022). The mood meter tool, including definitions of each feeling, facilitated analysis. Results are presented separately to highlight differences and similarities in students' and teachers' perceptions.

The study began after the research proposal received approval from the supervisor and ethical clearance from the MA programme committee. It followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) code of ethics, ensuring no harm to participants, voluntary participation, and adherence to scientific and professional integrity standards. Interviews were conducted in a student social space, focusing on club topics and projects to avoid personal intrusion. School safeguarding procedures were followed, and both student and parent consent forms were obtained to empower young participants. All means of participant identification were removed, using pseudonyms, and the school was not named to maintain confidentiality. Data shared with the supervisor was pseudonymized.

## **Discussion of findings**

Observations used a structured approach, focusing on classroom relationships and ongoing projects, with notes identifying emotions, values, and feelings, while interviews captured students' and teachers' perceptions of emotions in learning about global issues. The club, an extra-curricular activity, saw students arriving comfortably, engaging independently and passionately with topics, with minimal teacher intervention. Personal stories shared with teachers highlighted close relationships, while older students nurtured younger ones, fostering pride and admiration. Despite being described as quiet by teachers, students displayed remarkable bravery in acting, speaking confidently before peers, attending Council meetings, and addressing MPs at Westminster.

The classroom's positive energy, driven by teachers, created a welcoming atmosphere. Teachers acted as guides, offering encouragement, with empathy and compassion evident in interactions. Strong relationships developed among students and between students and teachers, with some students joining because of the teachers. The classroom atmosphere was open and motivating, driven by teachers' positive energy, making students feel ready to change the world.

During interviews, students expressed a sense of urgency that emotions should be explicitly addressed when learning about global issues, especially emotionally charged ones, to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation. They saw the negativity often surrounding these issues as a key driver of positive change, motivated by injustice, and valued hope and education as cornerstones of transformation.

Teachers linked emotions and mental health, possibly due to the pandemic's impact, considering mental health initiatives to introduce SEL. However, fear, caution, daily challenges, and lack of training hindered their vision for incorporating this approach in the classroom. Despite strong emotional connections with students, teachers believed in impartiality and neutrality.

This restraint lifted when discussing negative feelings at the club, confidently speaking about empowering students and giving them a voice, choice, and agency. The stark difference was students' bravery and urgency in including emotions in learning, while teachers exhibited fear and caution.

## Conclusion

This study found that students felt an urgency for emotions to be explicitly addressed in discussions to facilitate learning, especially when negative emotions were involved, as they are crucial for acting on complex issues. An unexpected finding was the loneliness students felt from not discussing emotions in these contexts. Teachers acknowledged the relevance of emotions in learning and the impact of negative feelings on action-taking, but expressed fear and caution about explicitly incorporating emotions, concerned about protecting both students and them.

Both students and teachers saw emotions as key to learning but had different attitudes. Students expressed bravery in discussing negative feelings towards global issues, believing open exploration could alleviate loneliness. In contrast, teachers seemed reluctant and afraid to address these feelings, focusing instead on empowering students to act without explicitly managing emotions. The students did not feel the need to be shielded from negative events or feelings. Engaging with negative topics that provoked shock was essential for motivating action and driving positive change, as in their projects.

The students' frustration, anger, and occasional sadness stemmed from deep empathy and compassion, rather than pity or apathy. Their strong sense of injustice motivated them to drive change. Students avoided despair or hopelessness by transforming these feelings into motivation.

Expanding the study to the entire school population might yield different results, but the current study provided rich data aligned with GL values. Including teachers of varied experiences offered diverse perspectives. Extending research to schools in Zambia, South Korea, and Brazil could incorporate non-Western perspectives.

Introducing SEL interventions before the study could mitigate participants' difficulty in expressing emotions, capturing the impact of integrating SEL with GL. SEL and TSEL can transform students' loneliness and teachers' fear into meaningful journeys for a just and sustainable world. This transformation should facilitate emotional discussions, crucial in fragile school environments. SEL's evidence-based positive impact can integrate emotions into learning complex global issues, promoting collective engagement. GL needs a robust pedagogical framework for managing emotions, achievable by integrating fields like Psychology and SEL, to put GL values into practice.

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