

Who Feels Entitled to Be a Global Citizen? School Fields, Capital, and Secondary students' perception in China

Research Overview

This study examines how international and public-school students in China perceive global citizenship. Drawing on Bourdieu's key concepts, it focuses on how different school fields, forms of capital and habitus shape students' national identity and perceived entitlement to become global citizens.

Purpose and Research Methods

GCE is a significant component of education systems worldwide, as it aims to cultivate students' global mindedness and essential 21st skills in the face of global challenges. Yet, we do not know what this may mean for the future Chinese nation-state, and students' voices are important. Within a social constructivism view, the goal of this research is to explore Chinese secondary student participants' points of views regarding how they perceive GCE.

The study employed a sequential qualitative design. Data were collected through students' open-ended responses (N = 560), followed by 12 focus-group interviews (N = 36) and 20 classroom observations conducted across two public schools and two international schools. Multiple data sources were used to triangulate the findings and enhance the credibility of the analysis.

The data analysis commenced with the construction of detailed case profiles for each school. Students' open-ended responses were analyzed through word-frequency and content analyses to identify dominant discourses. Building on these findings, thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken to examine how students perceived GC in different school fields.

Results and Discussion

Based on the findings, students from public schools tend to have a stronger standpoint of nationalism and patriotism, while students from international schools tend to show more strategic forms and purposes of cosmopolitanism, which entails moral-ideological cosmopolitanism or a moral sense of global citizenship.

A notable similarity across both international and public-school students is their

strong sense of national belonging, which appears to be shaped by a shared national educational field. Despite differences in school contexts, students commonly emphasized national identity, social responsibility, peaceful development, and cultural identity affirmation, reflecting the influence of official political discourses in China. Therefore, many viewed international exposure as a resource that could contribute to China's development and global influence. Openness to different ideas from international-school students was frequently incorporated into national aspirations, suggesting that cosmopolitanism and patriation were not constructed as exclusive orientation. Rather, students tended to perceive global engagement as compatible with, and even supportive of, national development and cultural confidence as their habitus.

While similarities can be attributed to a shared national educational field, differences appear to arise from the unequal distribution of capital across school fields. Although both groups expressed commitment to social responsibility, international school students were more likely to position themselves as legitimate global actors. Their responses frequently reflected forms of strategic cosmopolitanism with national orientation, characterized by aspirations of performing intercultural agency, cultural brokerage, global leadership, and participation in international communities. Importantly, this cosmopolitan orientation did not replace national belonging; rather, it coexisted with and was often mobilized in support of national aspirations and cultural pride.

In contrast, substantial variations were observed among students across different school types. First, public-school students tended to construct their GC as a future-oriented aspiration rather than a currently attainable identity. Expressions such as "I can contribute when I become more capable later," "I can start with small actions," or "I am only a student" appeared repeatedly in their narratives. Their understanding of GC was therefore more closely associated with moral responsibility, making progressing, and future contribution rather than immediate ability to global participation. Access to cultural, linguistic, economic, and symbolic capital appears to shape whether global citizenship is experienced as a lived identity or a distant aspiration. These findings suggest that the key difference lies not in students' awareness of global issues, but in

their perceived entitlement and legitimacy to imagine themselves as global citizens. Second, Teacher-student rapport shapes how students feel safe, recognized, and empowered to engage with dialogue, critical reflection, and global participation. Third, international school students generally demonstrated a compliant yet softly critical form of global citizenship. Beyond environmental protection and cultural respect, some students reflected on structural global issues, including fair trade, refugee crises, digital interconnectedness, and the paradoxes of modernity. These responses suggest an emerging capacity to critically engage with inequality and globalization. In contrast, public school students tended to draw upon state-endorsed civic discourses, reflecting forms of cultural hegemony shaped by official knowledge systems.

To conclude, this paper fills significant gaps by reflecting on students from both schools for potentially established GCE, also providing better understanding on those influential factors in shaping different students' groups' variations on the conceptualization and implementation of young learners' global citizenship.