

## Reading Humanitarian Heroes for Global Citizenship Education?: Curriculum Critique of a Novel Study on Craig Kielburger's *Free the Children*

**Carrie Karsgaard**  
*University of Alberta (Canada)*

### Abstract

Literature classrooms hold great potential to educate students for critical global citizenship through serious engagement with marginalized stories that test or subvert mainstream knowledges and structures, including the familiar humanitarian framework that dominates Western thinking about the Global South. Unfortunately, much existing literary curriculum in the Global North often does just the opposite. Instead, Western-oriented texts and safe, traditional reading practices contribute to a form of global citizenship that perpetuates Western hegemony and limits expressions of citizenship to benevolent actions. This is especially the case where global citizenship curriculum is developed by NGOs and humanitarian organizations, such as Me to We, a popular social enterprise with increasing influence over education in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K.

Using the frameworks of critical global citizenship education, Slaughter's (2006) theory of humanitarian reading, and Stone-Mediatore's (2003) notion of reading for enlarged thought, this paper will undertake a close reading of the unit materials for *Free the Children*, a unit developed by Me to We, which aspires to educate for global citizenship. Unit activities problematically appropriate the voices and viewpoints of child laborers in South Asia by establishing dichotomies between readers and the populations that Me to We aspires to help. This unit provides a means by which to examine the effectiveness of reading a memoir by an exemplary humanitarian, particularly when unit activities are framed by an organization with a particular humanitarian agenda.

### Keywords

Global citizenship; Global citizenship education; Humanitarianism; Literary theory; Standpoint theory

One of the most prominent organizations influencing global citizenship education (GCE) within the Canadian context is Me to We, a social enterprise that aspires to “empower people to transform local and global communities by shifting from ‘me’ thinking to ‘we’ acting” (Me to We, 2017). Me to We is designed to support We Charity, formerly Free the Children,<sup>1</sup> which works through We Day and We Schools to educate and empower youth. Since 2007, over one million youth have participated via their schools in We Day, an event hosted by Me to We in cities across Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. We Schools is the educational side of Me to We, providing schools

with a year's worth of educational resources, including unit and lesson plans, awareness campaigns, action kits to engage students actively in global issues, and more. In order to participate in We Day, schools must complete a portion of the We Schools curriculum. Between We Day and We Schools, this organization has clear prominence in the implementation of GCE within schools across Canada.

Within their suite of materials, Me to We historically offered “novel studies,” including one that takes students through *Free the Children* (1999), a memoir by Craig Kielburger, one of the organization's founders. Though Me to We has recently been developing curriculum

that focuses on individual lessons rather than entire units, this unit plan provides insight into how *Me to We* develops citizenship education that lacks critical engagement with Western hegemony and imbalances in global power relations, oftentimes perpetuating the very social injustices that it wishes to address. Designed for academic English courses for students in grades 9 and 10, the *Free the Children* study asserts it will “raise awareness among your students, inspiring them to become active global citizens” (McAllister, 2012, p. 4). These aims, however, raise questions for educators: About what does this unit hope to “raise awareness”? What kinds of “action” does it hope to inspire, particularly as the unit is materially and ideologically grounded within *Me to We*? *Me to We* itself has been critiqued for promoting a kind of global citizenship which is linked with consumer fulfillment or pleasure in a way

that impedes social action by foreclosing the possibility of recognizing how “we” are implicated in the structures that produce suffering and inequality (a.k.a. global “poverty”). Further, it prevents us from recognizing how we might connect ourselves to the ideals and strategies of social movements around the world that seek not aid but the transformation of these structures of inequality and the worldviews that normalize them (Jefferess, 2012, p. 19).

As a result, it is worth looking more carefully to what extent this unit fosters critical global citizenship or manifests the issues of its originating organization.

Applying the frameworks of Slaughter’s humanitarian reading and Stone-Mediator’s notion of enlarged thought to critical forms of GCE, this paper will undertake a close reading of the unit materials for *Free the Children* to consider the effectiveness of reading the memoir of an exemplary humanitarian for critical CGE, particularly as it is rooted within an enterprise with a strong humanitarian agenda. Further, it will examine the empathetic reading activities

and reflective practices that constitute the unit plan, as well as the recommended expressions of citizenship, to consider how this unit may reinforce for students existing normative beliefs and a moral basis for action, rather than promoting meaningful engagement with a text that leads to the questioning of assumptions and acknowledgement of privilege.

### **Reading for Critical Global Citizenship Education (GCE)**

Considering GCE’s diverse forms of implementation across subject areas and within diverse school communities, often without specific provincially mandated curricular outcomes, educators are facing “important questions...about what the global and/or globalization should look like in teaching and learning” (Eidoo, 2011, p. 61). These questions are being tackled through ongoing research that addresses power and privilege through what may be defined as more critical notions of GCE (Andreotti, 2006; Marshall, 2009; Pashby, 2011; Pike, 2008; Richardson, 2008; Schultz, 2007; Tallon, 2012; Taylor, 2011). In contrast with liberal approaches, which depend on a moral framework for understanding global relations and promote responsibility *for* others based on normative definitions of the “ideal” world, critical CGE seeks to expose and address assumptions, biases, contexts, imbalances, injustices, relationships and structures that maintain the privilege of some at the expense of others. Rather than prescribing humanitarian modes of behavior, critical approaches encourage students to “analyze and experiment with other forms of seeing/thinking and being/relating to one another” (Andreotti, 2006, p. 7). For readers in positions of privilege, reading for critical global citizenship must involve serious listening to the voices of those who may question or oppose dominant structures and epistemologies as they imagine

alternative futures, rather than reinforcing power structures through hierarchies of pity and sympathy. Within this context, Slaughter provides the beginnings of reading for critical GCE, whereby readers are introduced to the complexity and diversity of humanity; however, he inadvertently reinforces Western privilege through the impetus to provide help for those who suffer. By contrast, Stone-Mediatore encourages readers to seriously engage with others people's stories in order to question dominant knowledges and positions, leading to greater opportunities for imaginative dialogue and potential change.

### Joseph Slaughter: Humanitarian Reading

In harmony with critical approaches to CGE, Slaughter's notion of "humanitarian reading" opens up a new position for readers within critical GCE that moves beyond pity; rather than viewing themselves as benevolent sympathizers, readers are invited to imagine themselves as the kinds of people who would respond in care to anyone who requires it. In readers' attempts to identify with sufferers, Slaughter recognizes "the philosophical and practical limits of our generous imaginings, our historically feeble capacity to imagine ourselves in the place of the suffering other" (2006, p. 102). Instead of calling readers to empathize with the sufferer, Slaughter demonstrates how Dunant's *Souvenir de Solférino* invites readers to instead imagine themselves in the position of the humanitarian, so they may reflect upon their own capacity to respond to suffering, rather than to empathize with it. *Un Souvenir de Solférino* is Dunant's account of witnessing wounded soldiers at the Battle of Solférino in 1859 and subsequent mobilization of civilians to care for soldiers from both the Austrian and French sides of the conflict. His work eventually resulted in the founding of the International Committee of the

Red Cross and his ideas led to the signing of the first Geneva Convention in 1864. Drawing on this text, Slaughter theorizes the humanitarian as accidental or indifferent, so that almost anyone (even a horse!) could be an agent of humanitarian assistance; it is "simply a position in a grammar of relief that may be occupied by anyone who disregards nationality in the face of human suffering" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 99). Dunant is presented as modeling this humanitarian "indifference to difference," and "anyone who exhibits similar pity and compassion for the sufferings of others will discover a similar route" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 100). Slaughter thus contributes to critical CGE by overturning neo-colonial or benevolent attitudes that could result from sympathetic reading practices, instead advocating for a kind of humanitarian reading characterized by indifference, whereby "cosmopolitan fellow feeling matches the indifference and disregard for nationality that suffering and death themselves [display] on the battlefield" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 95). In this way, he addresses the issue created by liberals who "imagine a world in which the privileged portion has cultivated capacities for sentimental identification with the despised and oppressed; a larger portion of the world (the unsympathetic sufferers) contains endless stocks of sad and sentimental stories, the raw materials for the refinement of the humanitarian imagination" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 105). Slaughter's reading practice thus challenges liberal notions of reading that lead to relations of sympathy and pity for others.

There are limits to Slaughter's notion of humanitarian reading, however, with the practical humanitarian disposition being presented as one of "indifference to difference" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 95). The reduction of all people to "grammatical units," where nationality and individual subjective differences are

removed in the face of death, certainly upsets normative power structures where the humanitarian is set in a position of privilege and benevolence. At the same time, this indifference to difference does not create space to question how people are, in fact, different: why one side is winning the war, why the war is being fought in the first place, or why these particular men are on the battlefield. In this way, this humanitarian reading practice ignores the historical power inequalities and complex relationality embedded in global issues.

Furthermore, by arguing that anyone may act as a humanitarian, Slaughter does not address the fact that humanitarianism (or, similarly, global citizenship) may be conceived and expressed differently by people with different subject positions. Pashby (2011) and others (Andreotti, 2006; Lapayese, 2003) criticize this Westernization of the global citizen, which is based on the “inherent assumption that citizen identities are neutral and transferrable to any local, national or global context” (Pashby, 2011, p. 438). Instead, she calls for the inclusion of “a range of epistemologies and ontological traditions so that multiple ‘global citizen selves’ are conceptualized not solely through the Western norm, but also through diverse perspectives that challenge Western humanism and that employ non-Western ontologies to define global citizenship” (Pashby, 2011, p. 439). Thus, reading for global citizenship would not only involve the recognition that anyone may act as a citizen or humanitarian, but that citizenship may be expressed differently according to a person’s positioning, including everything from their access to political decision-making to their ability to publicly express agency (cf. Lapayese, 497). Readers should thus be led to question the projection of Western citizenship norms onto others around the globe as they explore alternative expressions of global citizenship.

As a result, though Slaughter opens the notion of “humanitarian” beyond the typical Western position, there is no question that the primary method of engagement with suffering is through humanitarian aid. Rather than imagining new ways of engaging with others, Slaughter presents a very limited call on the reader to respond with care, or at least to “avoid deliberately stepping on the heads of the dead and dying if...we were to find ourselves unexpectedly travelling through a battlefield” (Slaughter, 2006, p. 103). This limited humanitarian response is perhaps a more realistic expectation of the reader than the empathy and compassion recommended by liberal scholars. However, within the context of critical GCE, further responsibility could be placed on the reader to reflect meaningfully upon her own position, to listen seriously to the “radical and disruptive voice of the Other” (Tallon, 2012, p. 10), and to work to discover what an appropriate response may be, given the context. As readers are encouraged to “reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their cultures and contexts, to imagine different futures and to take responsibility for their decisions and actions” (Andreotti, 2006, p. 6), they may be led beyond a humanitarian response to a more political or ethical engagement with Others.

### **Shari Stone-Mediatores: Reading for Enlarged Thought**

In this context, Stone-Mediatores’s work with stories and standpoint theory contributes to the field of critical GCE as she advocates for critical engagement with dominant perspectives and power imbalances by reading through the perspectives of others. Through her recognition of how marginalized narratives create oppositional knowledge, along with her critical and self-reflexive approach to such texts, she provides educators with a strong theoretical

basis for literary study that may lead to more ethical and accountable expressions of citizenship, moving beyond the familiar humanitarian framework that dominates Western thinking about the Global South. While her work is focused on folks who are marginalized within one's home community, her work can easily be applied to a global community, as readers may engage with the stories of those marginalized on a global scale in a similar manner.

Stone-Mediatore's notion of enlarged thought is grounded in an understanding of how "people in socially and culturally marginalized positions daily endure the uneven, contradictory effects of a society's accepted beliefs and institutions" and may thus "offer critical insight... [that] can help us to transform those beliefs and institutions toward the end of a more just, democratic world" (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 162). This insight may be offered in texts that diverge from normative narrative patterns, which are themselves entwined in dominant epistemologies. Those in positions of privilege are thus responsible to not disparage work that eludes dominant Western frameworks but instead be attentive to how marginalized texts create meaning through experimentation with narrative forms. As readers so engage with these texts, they may participate actively with marginalized writers in the creation of "oppositional knowledge" (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 169) by dialoguing the perspective offered with their own common sense beliefs.

Stone-Mediatore's work thus creates space not only for a greater engagement with people in other positions and contexts, but also for critical examination of one's own life and assumptions, leading to the reflexivity that is key to critical GCE. Here, it is key that readers do not "romanticize 'the exotic,'" "abstract people's differences from the historical institutions that produced those differences," nor "reduce the

people whose different perspectives we investigate to 'victims' or easily known subjects of our analysis, for such approaches only expand our authority while failing to engage the others' perspectives in their depth and complexity" (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 169). Instead, by taking the complexity of others' identities and contexts seriously, readers may begin to face how we all inadvertently frame, silence or domesticate others' stories through the very process of narrative interpretation. Through such exploration of complex interrelations with others, story-reading may thus lead not to simplified sympathetic responses but to "enlarged thought," where marginalized stories are understood not as more true than one's own but as offering insight into structures of privilege and injustice within complex global relations.

The imagination, critical thought and creativity involved in enlarged thought leads to political and ethical accountability and a reconsideration of the reader's engagement in public life, neither prescribing for readers either a specific emotional response or a particular form of humanitarian engagement. While much GCE presumes the global citizen to be in a position of privilege, Stone-Mediatore's active and dialogical reading practice allows for multiple readers from multiple subject positions to engage with and respond to marginalized texts differently. Reading for enlarged thought does not therefore promote particular expressions of global citizenship such as familiar humanitarian responses, but it instead creates space for students to explore alternative forms of ethically engaging with others. Stone-Mediatore thus contributes to the field of critical GCE by providing a theory of reading that promotes critical and creating engagement with others, rather than by simply motivating readers to "make a difference."

### **Novel Study Analysis: *Free the Children***

With Stone-Mediatore's standpoint theory and the critiques of Slaughter as a theoretical framework for critical GCE through literary studies, it is necessary to consider how to implement such a reading practice within a classroom setting. The Me to We novel study of *Free the Children* (1999) by Craig Kielburger provides a site to consider the effectiveness of reading memoirs of an exemplary humanitarian, particularly one rooted within an enterprise with a strong humanitarian agenda. To examine this unit plan in relation to Stone-Mediatore's notion of enlarged thought, I will engage in a close reading (Bardzell, 2009; Culler, 2011; Gallop, 2000), a form of literary criticism that takes a holistic approach to a text, including its themes and associated context. I will thus examine the unit's structure, aims, and teaching materials, in relation to its context within the broader Canadian culture and classrooms.

A helpful tool in examining the unit's reflective reading questions through a close reading practice is "Critical Literacy in Global Education," a professional development resource for global citizenship educators. Though this resource focuses on reading both the word and the world in various critical GCE classrooms, the summary of traditional reading, critical reading, and critical literacy – which is foundational to much critical GCE theory – is a helpful lens through which to examine the reading practices in these units. Traditional reading treats knowledge as universal and asks students to what extent a text represents the "truth," and critical reading examines the context of a text to explore the validity of the author's interpretation of reality. By contrast, critical literacy is based on an understanding of knowledge as partial, dynamic and contingent, and it is thus concerned with the assumptions behind and implications of particular

representations and interpretations. The extent to which students engage in critical literacy practices gives an indication of how well a unit educates for critical global citizenship, particularly depending on whether students come to question their own beliefs and assumptions through encounters with those from different backgrounds and perspectives.

This unit plan under analysis works with the memoir, *Free the Children*, which details the experiences of Craig Kielburger in learning about child exploitation and founding We Charity. The neatly-packaged, seven-lesson unit for students in grades 9 and 10 is available online, and it is intended to work with English curriculum guidelines to "engross students in Craig's journey to self-discovery, while educating them about culture, social justice issues, children's rights, child labour, struggles and triumphs, childhood and more. This study will raise awareness among your students, inspiring them to become active global citizens" (McAllister, 2012, p. 4). The unit opens with a letter to teachers from Kielburger himself, which introduces his personal story, the role of the unit in educating around complex global issues, and the work of Me to We. Following the lesson plans and materials, the unit package includes a section on "Empowering Students to Take Action," which outlines how to involve students in Me to We activities and campaigns. Through a close reading of the text selection, empathetic reading activities, and reflective practices that constitute the unit plan, along with the recommended expressions of citizenship action, we begin to see how the unit may reinforce for students existing normative beliefs and a moral basis for action, rather than promoting meaningful engagement with a text that leads to the questioning of assumptions and acknowledgement of privilege.

### **Text Selection: Memoir within the Context of Humanitarian Enterprise**

Before addressing the activities contained in the book study itself, it is key to first consider the selection of *Free the Children* as the subject of the unit. Where Stone-Mediatore promotes the study of experience narratives by marginalized people, this unit focuses on a memoir that is not only materially embedded in the popular social enterprise, Me to We, but also promotes the story and subjectivity of the enterprise's founder, a humanitarian who is familiar to many Canadian teens. In associating with this celebrity humanitarian, students are not led to face their complicity in injustice, but instead are directed towards self-fulfillment through quick fixes.

The memoir itself and unit plan are integrated with the greater social enterprise of Me to We, as the teacher resources are produced and distributed as part of Me to We's educational imperative, and book sales directly support the organization via Me to We Books. The close link between the text and the Me to We enterprise is evidenced through a lack of critical questioning of the development model supported by Me to We, as will be explored in more detail below. Instead, there is evidence that the unit itself is a marketing tool through its support of both the overall brand and specific Me to We projects. The unit is used to cross-promote other Me to We initiatives, such as the "Adopt a Village," "Halloween for Hunger" and "Vow of Silence" campaigns. Such packaging of stories to support humanitarian brands is familiar practice for NGOs who

solicit and package stories to attract readerships. The kinds of stories they choose—sensationalized, sentimentalized, charged with affect—target privileged readers in anticipation that they will identify with, contribute to, and become advocates for the cause. The frames they impose on stories are designed to capture the interest, empathy, and political responsiveness of readers

elsewhere, in ways they have learned will "sell" to publishers and audiences. NGOs harness their rights agendas to the market and its processes of commodification. (Schaffer & Smith, 2014, p. 27)

Because the unit is, in part, a tool for recruitment, and because it is the product of an organization that focuses on humanitarian activities, the unit avoids critical questioning of the development enterprise in general. Further, readers never evaluate how the memoir functions within the specific humanitarian imperative of Me to We. So, while readers are introduced to the genre of memoir at the outset of the unit (cf. McAllister, 2012, p. 10), they are never asked to consider which voices have space to speak while others are silenced, why the memoir was written, how and to whom it is distributed, and how it may have been crafted for these purposes and audiences. The power of this unit to help students question dominant norms and learn from the voices of others is extremely limited because of the active cross-promotion of the parent organization.

Furthermore, the familiarity of Craig Kielburger to Canadian teens leads to a natural reinforcement of the humanitarian model promoted by this organization, at the expense of the marginalized groups of child laborers the unit seeks to represent. Unlike familiar celebrity humanitarians, such as Ed Sheeran or Angelina Jolie, who are famous first as musicians or actors and leverage their status for humanitarian means, Kielburger is solely known for his work within the popular Me to We enterprise and thus carries a different form of celebrity status as a face of the Me to We brand. Kielburger is well known as the founder of this popular humanitarian organization. He is a frequent speaker at We Day events, which have been attended by over one million youth since 2007, with over four million social media supporters ("What is We Day," 2018). Furthermore,

Kielburger's face dominates web materials and posters for Me to We, he co-authors a column in the *Globe and Mail* with his brother, Marc, and he participates in speaking engagements at student leadership conferences, corporate events and more ("Craig Kielburger," 2014). Thus, Kielburger's story is both materially and ideologically bound to Me to We; his celebrity-style status means he lacks the marginalized perspectives that Stone-Mediatore asserts will help readers reflect on dominant assumptions and beliefs. Instead of providing a basis for critical reflection, the focus on Kielburger's perspective through unit activities reinforces his subjectivity, while the voices and viewpoints of child laborers are co-opted by the humanitarian enterprise. As a result, the unit thus leverages Kielburger's personal growth stories as an exemplary humanitarian to motivate students towards a particular form of action within the Me to We enterprise, instead of leading students through the potentially uncomfortable confrontation with subversive or challenging perspectives that is necessary to transformation within a critical GCE classroom.

The subjectivity of Kielburger dominates each unit, while the voices of those he meets on his travels remain subordinated to his personal development story. The complexity of the narrator is foregrounded while child laborers and activists across Asia remain supporting characters in the development of Kielburger as a humanitarian, who speaks for these people (cf. Jefferess, 2013, p. 76). For instance, in studying *Free the Children*, readers take note of the "role [other characters] play in Craig's journey" (McAllister, 2012, p. 12). Thus, readers are led to understand that the actions of activists, community members, parents, political leaders and child laborers hold no power to effect change in their contexts; instead, they are seen as supporting characters in the Western humanitarian's story. Even the powerful story of

Iqbal Masih, the Pakistani activist against child labor, is appropriated so that his "real power" is not his own activism within the context of child labor but his impact on Kielburger and the development of We Charity. For instance, as one unit activity, students create a mural incorporating "symbols, themes and events in the book to represent the impact Iqbal had on Craig" (McAllister, 2012, p. 23). Furthermore, the culminating unit questions do not examine structures of inequality that contribute to child labor but instead trace Craig's development as an exemplary humanitarian "pre- and post-Asia." Students are thus led to consider "how Craig has grown" through his travels, as well as "the lasting effect Craig's trip to Asia had on the organization" (McAllister, 2012, p. 31) of his charity. The unit thus demonstrates the liberal approach to GCE critiqued by Slaughter, whereby "sad and sentimental stories" from elsewhere provide the "raw materials for the refinement of the humanitarian imagination" (Slaughter, 2006, p. 105), where the subjects of such stories are used for the cultivation of global citizens in the West, rather than being acknowledged as the thoughtful originators of their own generously shared stories. As a result, the focus of the unit becomes Kielburger's journey toward self-discovery; within this context, global citizenship is framed as personal development through humanitarian action, rather than the critical engagement across borders that leads to social justice and transformed relations of power.

The unit thus demonstrates limits to Slaughter's notion of humanitarian reading, whereby a narrative such as Dunant's or Kielburger's "invites us to project ourselves into the position of the humanitarian" (2006, p. 94) in order to help us understand ourselves in relation to suffering others. Rather than reflecting the kind of humanitarian indifference Slaughter reads in Dunant's narrative, this unit



demonstrates how the humanitarian position may instead be invested with power, voice and celebrity. Due to the powerful positions of this exemplary humanitarian within Canadian teen culture, reader empathy with Kielburger may simply reinforce privileged student identities as “the kinds of people” who act for suffering others. Unfortunately, instead of cultivating relationality between readers and others elsewhere, humanitarian campaigns that leverage celebrity humanitarians tend to entrench existing imbalances between the West and those in the Global South:

While ostensibly about the lives of those whom they seek to uplift and save, discourses of high-profile Western benevolence, concern and compassion, actively position “our guys” as the stars of the development show, while the objects of national (and Northern) benevolence merely function as the backdrop to a story which is really about “us”... [while] insufficient attention [is given] to their own participation in relations of domination. (Bryan & Bracken, 2011, p. 73)

With “our guys” as the stars, the complex issues, global relationships and identities introduced by these memoirs are quickly glossed over by the “celebrity [who] embodies the false promise of individual power as a force of social change, the illusion of a single person fighting against structures of injustice. The consequence is a reduction of the complex problems of development into ‘soundbite’ politics that carry the logic of a ‘quick fix’” (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 4). Such simplification of issues is counterproductive to the hard work of making sense of the complexities of global relationships and one’s position within them. In the case of these units, the quick fix is involvement with various Me to We campaigns, as promoted by the unit documents.

By examining Kielburger’s story as a journey of individual development and fulfillment within the context of simplified global issues, this novel

study thus motivates students to follow a particular form of humanitarian action.

### **Text Reflection: Safe and Empathetic Reading Practices Maintain the Status Quo**

Text selection is only one aspect of unit development; it is thus necessary to turn now to how this unit designs engagement with the text. Just as the genre of humanitarian memoir forecloses the learning that occurs through confrontation with marginalized perspectives, so would a pedagogy that features safe and sanitized reflection rather than leading students through a more uncomfortable and reflexive space where critical learning may occur.

There are some helpful reading practices introduced within the *Free the Children* unit. Students are instructed to read actively, reflecting on the text through both individual and collective practices such as daily journals, active reading strategies, and class discussions. Individually, they respond to qualities of the text itself, being prompted to identify powerful images or language, ask questions about confusing or unfamiliar aspects of the text, and connect the text to themselves, other texts, and the world around them (McAllister, 2012, p. 8). While introductory, these activities may help students to recognize the intentional use of language to create particular meanings and to acknowledge their relationality with these texts, as well as the identities and topics they represent. With an educator present who is attuned to the practices of critical literacy, students could begin to recognize the construction of the text for particular audiences, within particular global relations and for particular ends.

At the same time, the neutrality of the students’ subject positions and the centrality of Western society remain assumed within the unit, so students are not led into potentially

unsettling encounters either with oppositional perspectives or with their own complicity in the issues raised by the text. Most activities exemplify traditional reading practices, as students work to understand the content and context of the memoir, decipher what the author is trying to say, and appreciate the style of communication. For instance, students work through a concept map that helps them recognize connections within the text, either between plot events, characters and character relationships, and social justice issues (McAllister, 2012, p. 15) in order to cultivate a richer appreciation of the memoir's context. They also underline key words and phrases that help them decipher the main message of each chapter, helping them decode the content of the text. Without testing, contextualizing or questioning their own understandings, however, students face neither the situatedness of their own perspectives nor how that positioning may make it difficult for them to think otherwise. By simply sharing their responses without critical questioning, students may come to think that they are the arbiters of truth, in the position to know and interpret those about whom they are reading, rather than considering how their own lenses may leave others beyond their comprehension.

Just as the students' positions within a mainstream, Western classroom remains unacknowledged, so does the Western orientation of the text remains unquestioned, leaving people in South Asia to be viewed through an invisible Western lens. As already discussed, the perspectives and assumptions of Kielburger within the context of the Me to We organization are not examined. Furthermore, Western institutions and assumptions outside the Me to We enterprise remain uninterrogated, naturalizing and universalizing the mainstream perspectives with which students are familiar. As an example, the familiar Western notion of a

humanitarian "hero" is normalized and reinforced in *Free the Children's* "World Council" activity. In this activity, students are asked to select an "inspirational figure," framed as those who, like Mother Teresa, "make an impact on society" (McAllister, 2012, p. 20), and then form a World Council of such figures with the goal of creating new world agreements on child labor. Unfortunately, the promotion of particularly impactful "inspirational figures" as spokespeople in the World Council will profoundly shape students' selections as to who may be a global citizen or make a difference to child labor, as Western notions of "action" or "impact" often fail to recognize the "social background conditions that enable some people to express their will, in both the home and public arenas, and that place constraints on others" (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 138). The limiting guidelines around this activity thus provide little space for students to imagine "inspirational figures" or "action" outside a humanitarian framework. As a result, the assignment parameters may prevent students from selecting internationally recognized figures from outside the West such as Nobel Peace Prize winner and child rights activist, Kailash Satyarthi, and they would certainly limit them from selecting activists who have made significant impacts in their local spaces but may be unfamiliar to Canadian students, as well as "regular" people from around the world, whose impacts are limited to "everyday" actions. Even if students do have ideas of alternative figures such as these, they may feel discouraged from sharing, due to the narrow scope of the activity. As a result, while the World Council activity hopes to help students examine "issues from another angle" (McAllister, 2012, p. 19), it may instead simply reinforce the perspectives of those recognized by the assignment as influential, global actors, and the students' new world agreements on child labor may thus reflect a

Western perspective on behalf of those in the Global South, rather than inclusive of them. In this way, global citizenship may be framed for students as the dramatic, globally recognized actions of privileged individuals that address the perceived lack or need of others. Further, by relating to these inspirational figures, students are reinforced in their subjectivity as privileged, Western subjects, rather than being challenged to question their assumptions and positions in order to learn from activists in the South Asian countries they are studying. They are not led to consider the complexity of child labor as it is reflected in a diversity of perspectives, from Canadian government members to parents in Lahore, big business owners to teachers in Pakistani schools. If the World Council were to integrate a diversity of perspectives, it would more effectively introduce students to the complexity of the topic and allow students to participate from the diversity of their own positions.

With dominant culture remaining invisible and a lack of dissenting perspectives being presented, students are guided through activities that lead them to see others through a frame of empathy or pity from their presumed positions of privilege. Empathy appears to be the goal of many writing assignments within the unit. For instance, readers are encouraged to imagine themselves in the positions of child laborers in order to write a creative piece that “tells the child’s life story from their own perspective... address[ing] their feelings, misfortunes and hopes” (McAllister, 2012, p. 27). While an imaginative piece like this may be a reasonable place to begin, it runs the risk of reinforcing a presumption that students may easily understand the perspectives of others and speak on behalf of them. In taking on the voices of child laborers, students are not led to explore their own perspectives and voices; furthermore, they do not reflect upon their own limitations in

writing from another person’s perspective, whose experiences may be considerably different from their own. Instead, by focusing on the hardships of other people’s lives, “it is only possible for the pupils to feel their lives are different and undeniably superior,” perhaps leading them to “appreciate what they have more,” as one teacher experienced in the “Learning to Read the World” study on GC classrooms in Ireland (Bryan & Bracken, 2011, p. 144). In this way, Smith argues that “using Others’ lives to help students feel better about their own lives reinforces constructions of ‘Others’ in terms of negative differences and constructions of ‘Self’ in terms of positive privilege” (Bryan & Bracken, 2011, p. 144). Similar to the empathy promoted by NGOs, the outcome of these activities is thus not transformational but self-serving: “The radical and disruptive voice of the Other, their thoughts, opinions, anger or accusations is silent, unless mediated through the NGO. The educational goal is to imagine the suffering of the Other, but the actual thoughts, desires or actions of the Other are not really part of the equation. The Other’s suffering becomes a tool for our own learning, our own development” (Tallon, 2012, p. 10).

### **Text Misdirection: Quick Fixes within a Development Context**

Simple solutions are more easily avoided when students have a deeper understanding of the complex and relational nature of the peoples and topics they consider in class. It is thus worthwhile to explore to what extent the *Free the Children* unit works towards a contextual and interdisciplinary approach, which encourages students to draw introductory connections between what they are reading and the greater historical, geographical and political context. By engaging with others in their depth and complexity, including their rootedness

within particular contexts, this unit would guide students through the crisis inherent in transformational learning that leads to critical expressions of global citizenship. With this in mind, a close look at the unit's recommended sources of information, approach to global interrelatedness, and recommended expressions of citizenship will help educators consider how to concretize reading for enlarged thought.

Though time is limited within a novel study to cover related fields in depth, unit activities do promote some awareness of the geographical, political and cultural settings of *Free the Children*. Mapping activities, research assignments and group discussions help students develop introductory understanding of the layered nature of the topics and identities introduced in the text. For instance, in mapping the key locations and subsequently conducting group research on the "geographical features, cultural practice, social justice issues, type of government, urban/rural life, current state of the government, and more" (McAllister, 2012, p. 7), students reading *Free the Children* are required to go beyond the information provided in the memoir to develop deeper understanding of the countries in Southeast Asia that Craig visits. Furthermore, they are asked to explore the impacts of both local governments and the Canadian government on child labor in Pakistan, in conjunction with a chapter in *Free the Children* that introduces the possibility of Canadian complicity in child labor issues: "Was it a case of the rich wanting to maintain their wealth, and not caring what went on in the Third World? Was this bonded labor on an international scale, with high interest rates keeping countries poor, with no hope of ever repaying their loans?" (Kielburger, 2010, p. 155).

While the unit provides a cursory introduction to child labor, however, students' understanding of these complex issues is reduced to a criticism of Pakistan for neglecting

responsibility for its own people, a responsibility that Canada presumably holds the potential to fulfill. Though the memoir introduces the complexities surrounding child labor, including political unrest between Pakistan and neighboring countries, conditions made by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) surrounding loans and loan repayment, the struggles of Pakistani labor movements to promote adult employment, and the perpetuation of child labor through Canada's purchasing power (cf. Kielburger, 2010, p. 154-158), the unit questions and activities focus on Pakistan's "lack of commitment" or "motivation" to enforce child labor laws. By contrast, Canada is represented as possessing the possibility to impact child labor in Pakistan and elsewhere "through their laws and regulations" (McAllister, 2012, p. 23), reinforcing the "exaltation" of Canadian subjects above Pakistani people (cf. Thobani, 2007, p. 5). Further, fact-finding activities run the risk of perpetuating "epistemic blindness," whereby students continue to see themselves as "autonomous, individuated and self-sufficient beings inhabiting a knowable and controllable world" within which "we are able to describe...and define for others the best pathway for their development" (Andreotti, 2012, p. 21). Within such a Cartesian-constructed world, students may remain blind to their relationality with others, such as those in Pakistan, as well as to possibilities for very different futures. To counter this reductive perspective, students' understanding of child labor could be further developed through sources that extend and question issues introduced within the memoir and activities could go beyond fact-finding to encourage students to question Western framing of child labor and proposed solutions. In this way, students would be better prepared to engage with the limits of Kielburger's representations and ask critical questions about

the context of child labor in each South Asian country and at home.

As the unit goes on, students are encouraged to further develop their awareness of the political and historical context of child labor in various South Asian countries. Through a “Know – Want to Know – Learned” (McAllister, 2012, p. 15) activity, they continually revisit their understanding of child labor as they proceed through the text, building upon their knowledge at the outset of the unit. The focus of this activity is the straightforward, cumulative acquisition of knowledge about child labor, and students do not engage with the power relations embedded in knowledge production. However, the ongoing revisiting of this topic does help students to grasp the partiality of their knowledge, encourage them to develop and modify their understandings, and lead them to identify gaps that may lead to further learning. These outcomes would also result from the unit’s culminating conference, which involves the exploration of unit issues through speeches, demonstrations, and debates, as well as the proposal of long- and short-term goals, all of which are to be carried out within a community atmosphere of collaboration and support (McAllister, 2012, p. 32-33). Though activity instructions do not provide explicit direction to students, this conference would be particularly valuable if students were encouraged to approach the topic of child labor not as humanitarian “saviors,” but as critical thinkers, reflecting on the complexities of, for instance, influencing government policies or participating in anti-sweatshop activism. With more specific direction than the activity provides as it stands, students could be instructed to research products commonly found in Canada that have been produced by child laborers, to critique the deceptive labeling of consumer products to disguise the exploitation of workers in their production (Silvey, 2004), to look into the

exploitation of workers in Canada, to consider and critique who is driving the global labor agenda, to explore activist groups who are striving for fair pay and working conditions in the localities mentioned in *Free the Children*, and to question the consumptive habits of Canadians that drive the need for cheap labor. By approaching their learning from diverse angles within an atmosphere of both support and debate, students may question the representations within *Free the Children*, and potentially go beyond the bounds of the text itself to explore the complexities of the issues introduced therein.

Problematically, the forms of simplification and depoliticization described above tend to minimize global interrelatedness, except through the lens of development, where those in the West and others in the Global South are connected through development aid. Without acknowledging historical, economic and political global interconnections, it becomes difficult for students to face their complicity in the very issues they aspire to help through aid. For instance, while *Free the Children* references Canadian complicity in child labor through the purchase of fireworks made by children (Kileburger, 2010, p. 35), promotes solidarity across borders with Asian-based organizations, such as Child Workers in Asia, that are advocating for structural change (Kileburger, 2010, p. 75), and reminds readers that “we are part of the problem, too” (Kileburger, 2010, p. 64), the unit tends to localize the issue. Students learn about the caste system in India and how this impacts child labor (McAllister, 2012, p. 27), but they learn nothing of India’s colonial past and economic reliance on child labor, as well as the current impacts of neoliberal economic policies and Western demand for low priced goods on ongoing child labor. Furthermore, they do not explore local Indian movements that strive for better wages and working conditions,

nor do they consider notions of solidarity or how students may connect with and support the work of local movements or transnational organizations. As a result, students may come to see child labor as a solely local issue, without any sway on student identities or practices, aside from participation in humanitarian aid.

In response to the need they see in the people they are reading about, students are accordingly encouraged to consider the work of international development agencies, as well as how they, as young people, could join in this development work. The unit uncritically supports the work of development agencies, actively promoting the work of We Charity and its related projects. Readers of Craig's story consider how his experiences led to the ability of We Charity to "help thousands of children around the world" (McAllister, 2012, p. 31). More broadly, *Me to We* appeals to teachers by listing school-based results to their fundraising programs: students will "learn important leadership skills, bring together the student body for a common cause, and know that their actions are making a difference in their community and around the world" (McAllister, 2012, p. 53). All of these recommendations reflect a "band aid" approach, whereby overly-simplistic and ineffectual solutions are recommended, based on a desire to enable students to help or "make a difference," reducing "the lives of inhabitants of the Global South to 'causes' about which 'we' in the Global North can feel good – or at least better – about ourselves," rather than helping students face "complex realities which would require radically different responses if they were to be meaningfully addressed" (Bryan & Bracken, 2011, p. 77). As a result, the development orientation of the activities leaves dominant ideologies unquestioned, minimizing the possibility of transformation that would lead to political and ethical accountability and a

reconsideration of the reader's engagement in public life.

Unfortunately, these recommended actions leave little space for students to explore other ways of relating to those beyond their borders, except for what is offered through the humanitarian model. For instance, students are not introduced to transnational organizations such as Child Workers in Asia, a "network of over seventy eight organizations and child workers' groups" that works across borders to address the complexities of child labor by lobbying for education and "laws that addresses the worst forms of child labour," to "advocate and monitor the ratification and implementation of all international conventions and standards on the elimination of child labour" and to protect children in conflict ("Child Workers," 2013). By considering the work of such organizations, students would be more prepared critique the mandates of humanitarian organizations such as We Charity, who – by contrast – work to implement an "international development model designed to achieve social change" ("About Us," 2018). Furthermore, students do not turn their gaze back upon themselves to question Canadian consumptive practices that perpetuate child labor. As a result, students never work through potentially unsettling alternatives to dominant Canadian conceptions of "development" and "poverty"; without critical reflection on these assumptions, it is unlikely that students would be able to imagine alternatives to the kinds of development aid presented by *Me to We*. By learning about such alternatives to the familiar development discourse presented by *Me to We*, students might begin to challenge the notion that change and development originate in the West, with students who "make a difference."

### **Recommendations: Critical GCE beyond Humanitarian Heroes, Empathy, and Quick Fixes**

While the *Free the Children* unit provides some space for reflection and takes steps towards a contextual approach to the memoir, it reinforces for students normative humanitarian beliefs and a moral basis for action, rather than promoting meaningful engagement with difference that leads to consideration of how knowledge and understanding are situated. Instead of encountering the voices of marginalized writers, as recommended by Stone-Mediatore, students learn about global others through the experience narrative of an exemplary humanitarian, whose experiences remain foregrounded and whose assumptions remain largely unquestioned throughout the unit. By assuming students will learn from and potentially emulate this exemplary humanitarian, the unit thus constructs global citizens as privileged subjects with the potential to instigate change in the world. Thus, while this unit presents some practical examples of how Canadian classrooms may read for critical global citizenship, there is still further to go in pedagogically developing and implementing Stone-Mediatore's reading for enlarged thought within literature classrooms. While I explore alternatives elsewhere (Karsgaard, 2018) through cycles of learning and unlearning through literary study of marginalized experience narratives, I offer here two alternatives to the empathetic and "quick-fix" approaches of the unit developed by Me to We.

The *Free the Children* unit does little to approach the critical literacy that is key for global citizenship education, whereby students are encouraged to "unpack [their] lenses (their assumptions and how those were constructed) and their implications" (Andreotti et al., n.d., p. 22). By not being encouraged to question their own relationality to those they read about, or

their complicity in some of the global relations covered throughout each unit, students' subject positions remain neutral, universalized and unchallenged, and their focus remains on others across the globe, who can be known and subsequently pitied. To counter this, Andreotti and de Souza recommend replacing the empathetic practice of putting oneself in another's shoes with the reflexive work of examining those shoes and thinking about the difficulties of putting them on, as well as reflecting on one's own shoes, which cannot ever quite be removed (2008, p. 26). Unlike the practice of writing from another's perspective, such reflexivity would help readers approach marginalized experience narratives in a different way from "the customary empiricist fashion, [where] they tend to collect information that fits within their preconceived narrative frameworks and tend to overlook elements incongruent with those frameworks" (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 167). Andreotti and de Souza's reflexive practice may thus help students move beyond what is relatable to begin to consider how their lenses may prevent them from fully comprehending others. Such a practice may help students take small steps towards acknowledging there are other ways of conceiving of things that are far different from a Western understanding, ways that "cannot be easily captured by our conditioned senses: non-anthropocentric, non-teleological, non-dialectical, non-universal and non-Cartesian possibilities" (Andreotti, 2014, p. 45). In these ways, students would better approach the critical literacy required to deconstruct their own assumptions, potentially beginning to acknowledge their own entitlement in presuming to know and understand others – including what may be best for them. By doing so, students may be moved to consider alternative expressions of more critical global citizenship than are expressed through the prescribed humanitarian action of this unit.

Secondly, with the alleviation of tension and complicity through quick fixes and simple citizenship expressions through activities such as the ones described above, students may come to believe that global citizenship is meant to always be “fun,” “easy” and “fulfilling.” Jefferess argues that self-fulfillment is central to the Me to We vision of global citizenship: “rather than exposing their audience to multiple voices and viewpoints, ‘Me to We’ centers the experience of the benefactor and reinforces the message that ‘making a difference’ leads to personal happiness” (2012, p. 25). By contrast, Ahmed (2010) argues for the transformative value of unhappiness: “we need to think about unhappiness as more than a feeling that should be overcome. Unhappiness might offer a pedagogical lesson on the limits of the promise of happiness. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there” (Jefferess, 2012, p. 25). When students experience the uncomfortable or unhappy effects of injustice, they can then begin to face the dark side of humanity, as Todd (2009) recommends, acknowledging the causes of injustice both elsewhere and at home. In doing so, they may begin to acknowledge their complicity in injustice, leading to opportunities for meaningful change, rather than simply finding self-fulfillment through quick fixes. For students of *Free the Children*, this may involve facing not only how their individual purchases may directly support companies that exploit children but also how Canadian society’s demand for affordable products perpetuates the need for cheap labor on a global scale. With unhappiness as a critical element of transformative learning, it is key for students to encounter stories of others that may challenge assumptions and cause them to rethink their behaviors, rather than simply celebrating exemplary humanitarian successes. Within a classroom pursuing critical GCE, such marginalized stories would be key to the

sometimes uncomfortable work of challenging existing reality with the hope of finding new ways of being together in the world.

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us return to the role literary study may play in critical global citizenship education. Despite the fact that more critical forms of GCE are often interdisciplinary, providing rationale for school-wide, cross-disciplinary educational initiatives, the uneven application of GCE points to the need for more critical, discipline-specific work at both the theoretical and curricular levels. Even where school-wide global citizenship initiatives exist, they typically involve activities influenced by social studies curriculum, where youth forums and debates, case analysis, model councils, and community participation activities dominate school-wide initiatives. While these activities are certainly valuable, they focus on action and accomplishment, potentially leading students to do things *for* others, rather than on the critical thinking and reflexivity that helps students learn *from* others. Furthermore, their limited scope does not provide for the kinds of learning that may take place in disciplines other than social studies, such as literature, art, science, or media courses, which may approach GCE from different angles. With disciplinary courses still foundational to many education systems, content-area educators could further develop GCE by engaging in the critical work of determining how global citizenship may be applied within their specific courses, with a thought for how school-wide initiatives could one day become truly interdisciplinary. Such work is particularly necessary as NGOs such as Free the Children are quick to fill the gap with curriculum materials that direct students towards such organizations’ humanitarian causes, without educating for the critical thought and self-reflexivity that are key to more critical



forms of GCE. While these unit plans may be accessible, they demonstrate the need for educators to develop their own curriculum materials according to theories of reading like Stone-Mediatore's that foster critical global citizenship. This is indeed difficult work, even for the most critically-minded educators, as new knowledges and solutions may lead to new problems, requiring further consideration and experimentation. At the same time, such creative and iterative work is necessary to make possible real transformation and change through education for critical global citizenship.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Though the unit plan for *Free the Children* uses the former name of "Free the Children" in reference to the international charity of Me to We, this paper will use the current term, "We Charity," throughout the paper.

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### **About the Author**

**Carrie Karsgaard** is a doctoral student in educational policy studies at the University of Alberta (Canada), specializing in theoretical, cultural, and international studies in education.