

# Working Towards Anti-Opressive Schools – Lessons from WE Charity: A Critical Review

## Background and Context

### A Need to Focus on Systems and Structures

In August 2020, TDSB's Board of Trustees proposed to suspend its current agreements with WE Charity/ME to WE and any other related organizations in light of increasing media scrutiny on the organization (TDSB, 2020b). Further research about the impact of WE on students and schools suggests alongside media scrutiny due in part to the federal funding scandal (CBC, 2020) and other concerns regarding the organization's practices both locally and globally (Brown, 2020; Lilley, 2020), WE's practices are also problematic because it "draws upon humanitarian discourse to posit post-racial compassion while nonetheless reinforcing white supremacy" (Jefferess, 2021, p. 2), white saviourism (Jefferess, 2012, Klaassen, 2020; Paradkar, 2020), and the notion that issues of global injustice are a result of individual dispositions rather than wider systems or structures of oppression (Jefferess, 2021).

While the TDSB recognizes the enduring negative effects of colonial structures on Indigenous, Black, and other equity seeking groups (ETFO & TDSB, 2021; TDSB, 2017), WE's initiatives don't interrogate how an inherently anti-colonial approach is necessary to effectively work towards justice (Shultz & Pillay, 2018). Unlike WE's stance on social justice, it is imperative to work with an approach that recognizes a need to counter capitalist, neoliberal, neocolonial and other hegemonic structures that perpetuate violence through things like the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land, violation of UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'), exploitation of the Global South by powers in the Global North<sup>1</sup>, etc. (Clyne, 2020-2021; Maynard, 2017; Manuel & Derrickson, 2015; Warner, 2019). Organizations like WE contribute to the mainstream discourse that individual dispositions and niceties alone are sufficient to challenge issues like racism and poverty (Jefferess, 2021; Nieto, 2017), but this discourse negates the very real reality of structures that are legislated and

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<sup>1</sup> Bindra et al. (2018, p. 13) explain the "Global North refers primarily to nations in North America, Europe, Australasia, and developed parts of East Asia. These nations disproportionately control global resources in terms of wealth, housing, education, digital media access, and numerous other factors, while actively excluding countries in the Global South, which are home to the majority of the world's natural resources and population (Guzzetti & Lesley, 2015)." The Global North also actively overlooks its' role in perpetuating "need" in the Global South (i.e., "In 2012 the people/nations of the global North 'gave' more than \$126 billion in development aid to 'poor countries,' but more than \$3.3 trillion left these states through debt repayments, the profits of multinational corporations, and illicit capital flight, much of that a result of an unjust international system of trade" (Jefferess, 2021, p. 11).

institutionalized to contribute to systematic oppression of historically marginalized communities (e.g., the *Indian Act* in Canada; ETFO & TDSB, 2021). As such, even though the TDSB will be suspending its agreements with WE, to prevent collaboration with similar organizations in the future, it is critical to build capacity to center core pedagogical competencies that can allow interrogation of systems and structures of oppression.

## Rethinking Competencies for Success

While the Board has strategic priorities rooted in dismantling systems of oppression and racism, the approach to building competencies for success outside curricular goals do not clearly align with this vision. The Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP) currently emphasizes the need to transform student learning through Global Competencies (GCs; TDSB, 2019) that “help students build knowledge and skills by: investigating the world beyond their immediate environment, recognizing their own and others’ perspectives, communicating their ideas effectively with diverse audiences, [and], translating their ideas into appropriate action to improve conditions” (TDSB, 2019, p. 19). However, these competencies are not organized to facilitate conversations of structural oppression (Auld & Morris, 2019; Idrissi et al., 2020), and thus, can inadvertently contradict priorities of anti-oppression and anti-racism (Grotlüschen, 2018).

For instance, while the Multi-Year Strategic Plan (2019), TDSB Equity Policy (2017), and other Board publications (ETFO & TDSB, 2021; Spence et al., 2020) recognize complex issues of human rights, anti-oppression, anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Asian racism, homophobia, transphobia, and the discrimination faced by those with physical and intellectual disabilities, are a result of larger systems of oppression than just a result of individual prejudices or discriminations; Global Competencies frame difference or oppression as something individuals manage, without successfully centering the skills students and staff need to engage deeply with difference or consider the ways in which wider systems of oppression shape individual and group differences in local and global contexts (Idrissi et al., 2020). Similarly, while Global Competencies are widely accepted across the world, they also illustrate hegemonic educational ideals that ignore the Global South (Grotlüschen, 2018), making it important to interrogate which populations they are working to serve, who is driving them, and whether they are truly in alignment with strategic priorities of creating more anti-oppressive and anti-racist schools (Auld & Morris, 2019; Engel et al., 2019; Kaess, 2018).

Researchers who have analysed the negative impacts of WE and similar organizations on schools have suggested one way to focus on systems rather than individual dispositions is by turning to the pedagogical approaches offered by Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE) (Andreotti, 2006, 2012; Jefferess, 2012, 2021), which works to bridge the gap between GCs and anti-oppressive schooling (Idrissi et al., 2020; Pashby, 2021). While GCs facilitate what can be dubbed “soft” global citizenship learning (Andreotti, 2006), CGCE works to dismantle oppressive systems and “empower individuals to reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their

cultures, to imagine different futures and to take responsibility for decisions and actions” (Andreotti, 2006). CGCE helps students embrace a need to critically reflect on hegemonic structures and become agents of change in imagining radical futurities to solve the most pressing issues facing our world (Andreotti et al., 2018).

Instead of engaging in CGCE, however, organizations like WE frame social justice as a salvationist notion of “help as the burden of the fittest” (Pashby & Sund, 2019, p. 3). WE particularly framed social justice work through the orientation of saviourism, which “connotes the way in the global North, the global South is defined as (having) a problem, the global citizen or humanitarian is constructed as the solution to that problem, and the way it is the [white] “saviour” who has the power to delineate these roles and this relation” (Jefferess, 2021). Jefferess explains further:

“WE provides a variety of school-based Global Citizenship Education initiatives, including extra-curricular projects focused on entrepreneurship (i.e. fundraising), curriculum modules and workshops, as well as annual WE Day concerts, in which thousands of students pack into sports arenas to hear pop stars, celebrities, politicians, CEOs, and motivational speakers. While these activities are presented as providing much needed social justice education and personal empowerment, they provide what Andreotti (2006) calls ‘soft global citizenship education,’ constructing global inequality through a Northern lens that is ahistorical, depoliticized, and ethnocentric, offering simple solutions that reflect Northern paternalism and salvationism (Andreotti 2012).” (Jefferess, 2021, p. 3).

To effectively teach values of social justice in schooling it is important to shift from soft GC style global citizenship education to CGCE, which takes into account the inequities in the local contexts where such work is undertaken as well as the role of power and privilege as a result of structural and institutional injustices globally.

In an analysis of WE lesson plans in contrast to the Ontario Social Sciences curriculum, Jang (2018, p. 3) shares, “The current generations of youth are encouraged and highly motivated to “make a difference” and/or to pursue self-improvement by being responsible citizens that save the world through mission trips or NGO-sponsored activities in faraway countries (Andreotti, 2006),” but as Jang goes on to explain, while “this motivation has good intentions...it ultimately demonstrates the lack of awareness of the underlying power relations that compel one to act or think in this sort of civilizing way.” In 2018, a group of 15 economists explained this as, “Aid projects might yield satisfying micro-results, but they generally do little to change systems that produce the problems in the first place. What we need instead is to tackle the real root causes of poverty, inequality and climate change” (Alkire et al. 2018). Jefferess (2021) illustrates this as follows:

“The outflow of wealth from the South to the North, historical dispossession and ongoing displacement of people from their land (i.e. for industrial agriculture, mining, and wildlife

preserves), the exploitation of labour, neoliberal austerity programs that have decimated education and health care, as well as ineffective and harmful development projects – both micro and macro – make up a complex accounting of the ongoing history of impoverishment [aid projects otherwise aim to help]” (p. 13).

As such, to dismantle key issues like anti-Black racism or anti-Indigenous racism, which the TDSB has articulated as key priorities (TDSB, 2019, 2020a), a need to teach competencies that help students and staff understand oppression to be a result of ongoing, pervasive, and institutionalized structures than just a result of individual biases or prejudices, is necessary. Stemming from this, it is also necessary to teach competencies that don't just centre Eurocentric knowledge systems, but instead build from Africentric, Indigenous, and other non-Western knowledge systems to realize goals of Indigenous sovereignty and decolonial futurities.

## Need for Capacity Building

The messaging produced by WE schools can also be harmful to students and staff in some settings. In one instance, a teacher candidate shared the experience of similarly related campaigns having an unanticipated negative effect as follows:

“Some of the poverty relief funds raised were to be sent to places where many students have newly emigrated from, and students began to assume that every student coming from these countries have had the same impoverished experiences. These students felt, rightly, that their experiences before coming to Canada were being wrongly represented to the broader school community, and they were being marginalized and "othered" more than other new immigrant students were.” (Pashby, 2021, p. 10).

In this example though, staff decided to abandon such fundraisers and clubs instead of engaging with these types of complicated questions because they lacked the capacity to engage deeply with social justice work from a critical and anti-oppressive lens (Pashby, 2021). Consequently, it is necessary to help build capacity among students and staff to move away from saviourist, individualistic, and service-learning type pedagogic approaches to more critical understandings of global citizenship (Andreotti, 2006, 2012, 2018; Raddon & Harrison, 2015; Jang, 2018; Jefferess, 2012, 2021).

## Recommendations

Noting key issues emerging from the literature, the following recommendations are relevant to inform next steps with respect to informing future social justice work in TDSB schools:

1. Rethinking strategic priorities of transforming student learning using Global Competencies (GCs) and evolving towards a focus on Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE)

2. Revising criteria for working with NGO partners to include CGCE driven pedagogies as a core aspect of the partnership framework
3. Further research to think about the evolution of GCs and use of CGCE frameworks in TDSB's context

### **Rethinking strategic priorities of transforming student learning using Global Competencies (GCs) and evolving towards a focus on Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE)**

Given Board Strategic Priorities that emphasize the need to look at systems of oppression, particularly with respect to dismantling issues like anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism (TDSB, 2019; TDSB, 2020a), research suggests the need to move from a focus on Global Competencies (GCs) in schools to Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE; Idirssi et al., 2020). Where GCs frame difference as something individuals manage, CGCE centres the skills students and staff need to engage deeply with difference and consider the ways in which wider systems of oppression shape individual and group differences in local and global contexts (Idirssi et al., 2020). Furthermore, GCs tend to foster educational goals that centre Western, Eurocentric ideals while ignoring Indigenous Knowledge systems of the Global South (Grotlüschen, 2018; Klaess, 2018), but CGCE opens up possibilities for applying decolonial and anti-colonial approaches to competency-development (Andreotti, 2011; Shultz & Pillay, 2018; Abdi et al., 2015). When doing social justice work in schools, Andreotti (2006, 2012) talks about the importance of critically examining why poverty or social inequality exists in countries students are being asked to help in the first place, and the role western systems of power can play in continually perpetuating such inequalities (Hickel, 2017; Maynard, 2017; Jefferess, 2021). CGCE serves as a bridge for anti-racism and global competency-based learning by providing a way of thinking about anti-oppressive praxis in schools through a systemic lens (Pashby, 2021).

### **Revising criteria for working with NGO partners to include CGCE driven pedagogies as a core aspect of the partnership framework**

WE offered pre-made lesson plans to students and staff with little room for critical interrogation (Jang, 2018; Pashby, 2021); however, the partnership standards for working with organizations like WE need to include a critical perspective that serves to establish core critical pedagogic practices as an aspect of the partnership framework. CGCE and research about identifying historical patterns of oppression often reproduced in global learning identifies a need to think of seven key principles: hegemony, ethnocentrism, ahistoricism, depoliticisation, salvationism, uncomplicated solutions, and paternalism (these principles are dubbed as HEADSUP; Andreotti, 2012). HEADSUP helps make visible repeated systems of oppression in local and global contexts (Andreotti, 2012) and can be an effective tool to help educators recognize which NGOs and social justice projects to engage with. Andreotti (2012) explains, originating from discussions in education by the Kony 2012 social justice campaign, HEADSUP:



“...has become an educational tool...to support engagements with local and global initiatives to address social justice. In line with critical literacy approaches, it is based on the principles that, if we want to work towards ideals of justice, we need to understand better the social and historical forces that connect us to each other” (p. 1).

Frameworks such as this one (see Image 1) can help schools ask critical questions that look at social justice issues in all their complexity while simultaneously facilitating Board strategic priorities of transforming student learning and facilitating critical consciousness development in areas of anti-oppression and anti-racism.

**Image 1: HEADSUP Framework (Andreotti, 2012):** “The questions in the second column aim to identify the reproduction of the patterns in the checklist, the questions in the third column aim to identify awareness of and challenges to those patterns.” (Andreotti, 2012, p. 2).

<b>Hegemony</b> (justifying superiority and supporting domination)	a) does this initiative promote the idea that one group of people could design and implement the ultimate solution that will solve all problems?	b) does this initiative invite people to analyze things from different perspectives, including complicities in the making of the problems being addressed?
<b>Ethnocentrism</b> (projecting one view as universal)	a) does this initiative imply that anyone who disagrees with what is proposed is completely wrong or immoral?	b) does this initiative acknowledge that there are other logical ways of looking at the same issue framed by different understandings of reality?
<b>Ahistoricism</b> (forgetting historical legacies and complicities)	a) does this initiative introduce a problem in the present without reference to why this problem exists and how 'we' are connected to the making of that?	b) does this initiative offer a complex historical analysis of the issue?
<b>Depoliticization</b> (disregarding power inequalities and ideological roots of analyses and proposals)	a) does this initiative present the problem/solution as disconnected from power and ideology?	b) does this initiative acknowledge its own ideological location and offer an analysis of power relations?
<b>Salvationism</b> (framing help as the burden of the fittest)	a) does this initiative present helpers or adopters as the chosen 'global' people on a mission to save the world and lead humanity towards its destiny of order, progress and harmony?	b) does this initiative acknowledge that the self-centered desire to be better than/superior to others and the imposition of aspirations for singular ideas of progress and development have historically been part of what creates injustice?
<b>Un- complicated solutions</b> (offering easy and simple solutions that do not require systemic change)	a) does this initiative offer simplistic analyses and answers that do not invite people to engage with complexity or think more deeply?	b) does this initiative offer a complex analysis of the problem acknowledging the possible adverse effects of proposed solutions?
<b>Paternalism</b> (seeking affirmation of authority/ superiority through the provision of help and the infantilization of recipients)	a) does this initiative portray people in need as people who lack education, resources, maturity or civilization and who would and should be very grateful for your help?	b) does this initiative portray people in need as people who are entitled to disagree with their saviors and to legitimately want to implement different solutions to what their helpers have in mind?

## Further research to think about the evolution of GCs and use of CGCE frameworks in TDSB’s context

More research should be done to explore successes and limitations of Global Competencies, along with how current priorities of fostering GCs can be evolved to better align with strategic

priorities of anti-racism and anti-oppression. Frameworks like HEADSUP can also be useful starting points to identify the types of critical perspectives that are necessary to establish core pedagogic competencies; yet across other educational contexts, they are also actively adapted to meet varying local needs of educators (Pashby & Sund, 2019). As such, it should be explored how CGCE frameworks can be adapted to meet specific contextual and capacity building needs of schools in the TDSB.

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