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Vignette 4

Expressions of Global Citizenship in student protests in Albania (2018–2019): Fieldnotes and reflections

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Abstract

This vignette examines the idea of global civic engagement among student activists in Albania, contextualizing their protests within the current landscape of wider global and domestic protests. The concept of global civic engagement does what global citizenship and global competence have often failed to do, uniting individuals from distinctly different points of view via solidarity, a sense of shared identity and belonging, and a sense of agency in bringing about social and political change. The author considers the extent to which this approach to global civic engagement can help address some of the limitations of dominant models of global citizenship and global competence used today.

Introduction

During the summer of 2019, I stopped over in Tirana, Albania for three days between leading an educational trip to Bulgaria and joining a symposium on global citizenship education at the Georg Eckert Institute in Germany. Since completing my dissertation research in Albania in 2009, I have continued to engage with local education stakeholders there. I was honored to consult with UNESCO on their Education Policy Review for Albania (2017), and I have also served as a consultant for the Open Society Foundation for Albania, working to support local researchers in improving education quality and equity there.

In 2019, my research project aimed to comparatively examine expressions of global citizenship in student protests during 2018–2019 in three different contexts: (1) US student walkouts to protest gun violence (March for Our Lives); (2) Albanian

university student protests (the Meme Protest); and (3) international school strikes for climate action. My project was titled: ‘*Pushing the boundaries of Global Citizenship Education: Solidarity and youth civic engagement on a global scale.*’ Briefly, this project adapts a theoretical framework from the work of Rogers, Mediratta and Shah (2012) who present a typology of civic development outcomes focusing on civic knowledge, skills, and identity across two dimensions: participatory engagement and transformative action. I argue that their typology provides a valuable framework through which to examine the idea of *global civic engagement*, particularly among youth activists. The concept of *global civic engagement* encompasses specific knowledge and skills while also drawing on a shared sense of civic identity that is transformative in terms of confronting injustice. The crux of this sense of shared identity is forged not through the abstract and intangible vision of a common humanity, but in concrete action on the basis of solidarity to achieve shared political, social, and/or economic goals. In this sense of solidarity, the idea of *global civic engagement* does what global citizenship and global competence have yet failed to do – it unites individuals across distinctly different points of view into a sense of belonging, purpose, and agentic action for social and political change. I believe this idea of *global civic engagement* can help address some of the limitations of dominant models of global citizenship and global competence, and can offer important insights for a range of stakeholders committed to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other areas of collective social and political transformation.

To pursue this research inquiry, and collect some first-hand accounts from Albania, a friend of a friend put me in touch with student participants in the Albania protests. I received a text from one participant, whom I will call ‘Keti’; in her text, she indicated that she has been a part of the student protest since the first day it started and that I should feel free to ask her any questions. We arranged to meet in a café in central Tirana the next day.

Fieldnotes: June 18, 2019

Keti and Lena (aliases)

I sat down with Keti and Lena on a bright summer afternoon in an air-conditioned café in the city center. I offered them a drink of water but they declined. After securing a verbal informed consent and selecting her alias, Lena, the more talkative of the two, launched into an account of the protest movement. From her description, I gathered that students from the faculties of Engineering and Architecture had started the protests in December 2018 when an additional fee was added to their university expenses. Lena explained that the new fee was around 80 euros per credit hour, in

addition to all the other fees resulting from higher education reform laws in effect since 2015, when there had also been protests.

Students took to the streets of Tirana and gathered in front of the Education Ministry on December 2nd, 2018, calling for the Minister of Education to resign. Soon, as more people joined the protest, eight demands emerged and were delivered to the government; these included reduced fees, better conditions in student accommodations, expansion of university library resources, and more open and transparent decision-making processes.

After about a month, the protesters addressed the Prime Minister Edi Rama directly. He tried to call for 'dialogue' with them, turning to social media to try to engage them. But they mocked his requests and thus began the 'meme protest' on social media. In January, Prime Minister Rama removed and replaced seven ministers, including the Minister of Education. But the students pressed on to have all eight of their demands met.



In January 2019, things heated up at the Faculty of Law, and the police got involved. The fees were reduced, but only for one year, and the protesters did not find this sufficient. They felt their eight demands were basic and reasonable and should be met in full. Keti sent me two photos of the protests. The first juxtaposes the December 2018 university student protests with an image from the December 1990 protests that eventually caused the fall of the communist system in Albania. Underneath the photos, the text reads (translated from Albanian): “There is still hope, we will rise again whenever injustice is done to us or whenever our rights are violated. Students are the future of the country!!!” The second photo shows how the students piled up the desks and chairs in the Faculty of Law to barricade themselves inside, protecting themselves from the police. According to Keti and Lena, there was a violent altercation when police tried to penetrate the barricade, and some students were injured.

Fabian (alias)

About half an hour after Keti and Lena left the café, I met Fabian, a young student from the School of Agriculture. Fabian was very concerned about the fees, which he felt were unfair and unreasonable. He explained how students were prevented from completing their exams on time because faculty were not available and were not teaching at a high level, yet it was the students who had to cope with financial penalties for overdue exams.

Fabian explained how he received messages through Facebook Messenger about the protests. Students were outside in the streets with a megaphone in a process developing the eight demands. He felt it was very well organized and democratic. The person with the megaphone would call out demands, and then ask people to vote yes or no. For Fabian, it was a very sociable process too; there was music, pizza, and community support for the protesters. Everyone was singing while they marched. He thought at least 4,000 students were participating.

The biggest issues that concerned Fabian were the low quality of the student accommodations and the lack of a university library, although, like Keti and Lena, the former issue did not affect him personally. I reflected later that this disposition to take an active stand for the rights of others is a key component of the solidarity aspect of youth civic engagement. Fabian became involved in the protests because he felt that one person speaking up could be punished, but as a group, you can do more. He worried that the leaders of the protest would suffer intimidation from the government or their supporters. He noted that there were some fake pictures being published. As a result, the student protesters ‘denounced’ those who were ‘political’ – i.e. youth acting on behalf of their political parties rather than the students’ cause. He said the protesters wanted to remain independent of political party influence.

Researcher reflections

What did I learn from my interviews with the students? What themes and key points permeate them? What do the students' perspectives tell us about their particular struggles and about youth civic engagement in a wider sense?

As I reflected on the Albanian student protests, I wrote up several points that connected their experiences to the concept of youth civic engagement. First, I reflected on what I learned about the protest organization, strategy, and process. The protesters made narrow claims of eight 'demands' or requests, with the aim of pressurizing authorities to meet them. The use of social media was also central to the protests' development and youth engagement. Indeed, the protests emerged and spread almost exclusively through social media and digital communications, including Facebook Messenger, the Facebook website, and texting. The students adopted the term 'meme protest' due to the use of social media memes to spread their messages and make their demands known to the government. In terms of location, although the protest movement started in Tirana (Albania's capital), it quickly spread throughout the country, communicated across social media which enabled widespread participation.

The protests were also designed to evoke the historical memory of student power from the past. The first demonstration deliberately began on the 2nd of December (2018) in order to symbolically evoke the memory of the historic 2nd of December student protests in 1990 that led to profound social and political change in Albania. The meme that juxtaposed these two student protests linked them with the phrase, "students are the future of the country."

Strategically, the student protesters used diverse tactics. First, they demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Education, which led to the new law being cancelled immediately. They continued to engage in one month of non-violent demonstrations, without much change occurring during that period. Then they shifted their attention to directly pressuring the Prime Minister using memes and social media to express their criticism. By focusing on their specific eight demands, they used a narrow frame in which to advance their cause, insisting on independence from political parties.

Although the students maintained a national focus in their demands and sought to pressure government officials, their demands reflected many students' broader international aspirations such as the desire to travel abroad for graduate school or for future employment. Furthermore, although the specific goal of the protest was the fulfilment of students' right to education in their country, their understanding of educational rights was embedded within a more universalized human rights discourse. The students recognized that the eight issues on which they sought government action were preventing Albanian students from claiming and fulfilling their human right to education. One student said that, in effect, by denying their eight

demands, and thus denying students' right to education, the government was "making them leave" in order to fulfill their educational rights elsewhere. In this way, although the protest was national/local in focus, the students had a 'global' perspective regarding human rights and sustainability, noting about the latter, "it is the future."

Comparative case analysis

While the main focus here is on the insights gained from the Albanian student protests, a wider comparative analysis with similar cases (e.g. the US 'March for our Lives', Albania university protests, and climate strikes) illuminates several important shared aspects relating to the development of youth civic engagement on a global scale. For example, in each case, youth expressed their solidarity by demonstrating for collective rights, whether they directly benefited from the demands or not. They were thus motivated by empathy and/or shared identity with others in the collective concerns of protecting the rights to education and sustainability. In this way, while each protest movement was sparked by local and national events, they all drew on wider global narratives and claims, pointing to new dimensions of what constitutes global citizenship. What were once primarily local or national concerns (protecting the environment, access to education, and ending gun violence in schools) have now, due to globalization, become shared concerns among youth across diverse nations and locations.

Another common thread running through the cases is that in each instance of protest, local youth enacted wider global and international perspectives on justice and empowerment. They stepped out of schools and demonstrated in front of government buildings in order to call attention to the rights and demands not only of themselves as individuals, but within collective identities forged through identification and solidarity with others. In each case, in different ways, the movements were rooted in young people's articulation of their right to a livable and just future, whether through sustainable environmental policies, a reduction in preventable gun violence, or, in the Albanian case, through more fair and equitable policies concerning the provision of education.

Finally, the three instances of youth protest were linked in their strategies and methodologies of civic engagement. All three protests were nearly 100% non-violent in form; instigators from outside the central organizing unit that attempted to use violence or politicization were denounced. Related to this approach, and representative of global youth culture, the protesters relied heavily on social media and digital communications to organize and spread their messages for change and mobilization. This approach enabled youth to connect with the movement regardless of their

physical location, and it also kept the messages consistent and coordinated. Finally, in terms of their approach, walkouts, protests, and school strikes, however temporary, sent a strong message of youth empowerment and a symbolic rejection of compliance with the status quo.

As I reflect upon the significance of this comparative analysis in light of questions about youth civic engagement, several interesting questions arise. First, is it possible that young people around the world are becoming more engaged in questions concerning their rights and the rights of others? Are they more willing to join in solidarity to stand up for those rights? Second, has the rise of global social media platforms enhanced the creativity with which young people can connect with other like-minded youth to enact shared expressions of civic and political identity? Are they becoming more prominent as civic actors in national and international political spheres? And has the prevalence of youth voices in leading protest movements increased their legitimacy and representation in more mainstream media sources?

In terms of research on global citizenship and education, I believe these cases, considered comparatively, indicate a need for further research to explore new epistemologies and positionalities that locate youth agents as situated knowledge producers. Furthermore, these cases remind us as educators and scholars that much of the work of civic learning and engagement may increasingly take place outside of traditional spaces of learning, that is, outside of school grounds and beyond the scope of the planned curriculum. At the same time, based on these cases, it seems that learning about collective human rights and developing a sense of empathy for others who have been deprived of their rights seem to be necessary pre-conditions for youth civic engagement and the enactment of civic identity through acts of non-violent social and political protest.

Conclusion

Rethinking this project in light of the current mobilizations in the United States has been illuminating. Right now, young people are flooding the streets of major US cities, as well as small towns, to demonstrate for racial justice, to claim their human rights, and to assert that ‘Black Lives Matter.’ In the wake of the killing of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police, and after months of experiencing the trauma and weight of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic costs, the US public is in upheaval. Young people, clad in facemasks, are claiming their voices through demonstrations and protests, shouting “no justice, no peace.”

Meanwhile, concerned educators and experts who were already rethinking schooling in the wake of COVID-19 are now considering how education can adequately address the painful and traumatic societal impact of white supremacy and

racial violence in the United States. Like many others such as Brookings expert Rebecca Winthrop (2020), I too am wondering what is needed from our schools to shift and transform systemic cultural violence and build a more just, democratic, and sustainable future. Youth civic engagement and global solidarity have never been more important.

The need to reimagine global citizenship education from the perspective of those whose full rights to education are being systematically denied is one lesson that comes to mind in the wake of the current social unrest. Education represents hope, but schooling can also be a location of destructive social reproduction. In many countries around the world, youth are speaking out because they envision themselves to be the future of the nation (and the planet!). Experts and academics should not be the only ones who frame and shape that future for them through the construction of powerful social imaginaries like the ‘globally competent student’ (OECD, 2018; Gardinier, 2021). Students themselves have a right to envision and craft their own identities in meaningful and productive ways. Paradoxically, it may be in taking action – and occasionally walking *out* of school in order to do so – that young people are best able to enact a powerful form of civic learning by asserting their new visions for system transformation within the public sphere.

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