RESTORATIVE APPROACHES, GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP, AND THE MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM

Cultivating Citizen Diplomats Through Empathy, Safe Space, and Soft Power

A Scholarly Practitioner Paper Integrating Restorative Practices, Citizen Diplomacy, and Global Citizenship Education in Schools Serving Multilingual Learners

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of restorative approaches, global citizenship education (GCED), and diplomatic competency in schools serving multilingual students, with particular attention to implications for inclusion practices in U.S. contexts. Drawing on scholarship in citizen diplomacy, education diplomacy, and Global Citizenship Education, as well as the practitioner perspective of an educator working with refugee girls, this paper argues that restorative approaches function as a form of applied diplomacy in the multilingual classroom. When students learn to listen deeply, communicate across difference, and repair relationships through structured dialogue, they are acquiring the very skills diplomats use, skills now recognized as essential in an era of growing neonationalism and contested global norms. The paper centers safety, identity, and empathy as foundational conditions for both restorative practice and global citizenship formation, and offers implications for how U.S. schools can build inclusion practices that go beyond compliance toward genuine global competency.

Keywords: restorative practices, multilingual learners, global citizenship education, citizen diplomacy, soft power, inclusion, refugee education, safe space, empathy

I. Introduction: The Classroom as Diplomatic Space

Diplomacy is, at its core, a relational practice. Koepke defines it as "the art and practice of building and maintaining relationships while using tact," and citizen diplomacy as the conviction that "we as individuals have the right and ability to shape U.S. relations with people of other countries." These definitions, drawn from the professional world of foreign service, describe with striking precision what happens in every morning meeting circle, every peer conflict conference, and every structured discussion in a classroom that takes relationship seriously.

For educators working with multilingual learners, many of whom have arrived in the United States carrying experiences of displacement, conflict, and interrupted schooling, the classroom is not a metaphorical diplomatic space. It is a literal one. Students navigate multiple languages, cultural frameworks, social norms, and political histories simultaneously. The teacher who creates conditions for those students to be heard, understood, and empowered is not merely managing behavior or meeting a language benchmark. She is practicing diplomacy.

This paper takes that convergence seriously. It examines how restorative approaches function in multilingual classrooms through the dual lenses of citizen diplomacy and Global Citizenship Education (GCED), and what insights this convergence offers for inclusion practices in U.S. schools. It draws on published scholarship, practitioner resources in empathy-building and communication, and the reflections of an educator working directly with refugee girls, a practitioner whose daily work embodies what Koepke's framework describes and what GCED theory aspires to.

II. Restorative Approaches in the Multilingual Classroom

What Restorative Approaches Do

Restorative practices in schools, including circle processes, affective questioning, community conferencing, and peer mediation, share a foundational assumption: that harm is best addressed not through punishment but through relational repair. The wrongdoer is asked not simply "what rule did you break?" but "who was harmed, and what do you owe them?" The community is brought in, not kept out. Voice is distributed, not concentrated in authority.

In multilingual classrooms, this relational architecture carries particular weight. Identity-safe spaces are not automatic. Students who speak languages other than English, who hold cultural frameworks that differ from dominant school norms, or who have experienced violence and displacement often arrive with heightened vigilance about whether they are truly welcome.

Research consistently shows that psychological safety is a prerequisite for learning, and that it is earned through evidence, not declared by policy.

It is important for students to feel safe when discussing these very personal elements.

(Course text, Chapter: Identity and Respect, p. 37)

This is not a soft claim. The literature on trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, and multilingual learner development converges on the same point: students cannot access academic content when they are managing social threat. Restorative approaches address this directly, not as an add-on to instruction, but as the relational infrastructure that makes instruction possible.

Morning Meetings as Diplomatic Practice

One practitioner working with refugee girls describes a daily structure of morning meetings as central to classroom culture. What is remarkable, viewed through the lens of citizen diplomacy, is how closely this structure mirrors the protocols of formal diplomacy. Both begin with acknowledgment. Both create structured time for each party to speak and be heard. Both prioritize relationship before transaction. Both assume that the quality of the process shapes the quality of the outcome.

The Social Identity Wheel, a structured activity through which students identify and share elements of their own identity, mirrors the function of diplomatic icebreakers and cultural exchange protocols described in international education literature. When a student from Somalia, a student from Guatemala, and a student from rural Georgia sit in the same circle and discover that they all have a grandmother whose cooking defines home, something has happened that no textbook can manufacture. Similarities become visible across the dividing lines that political discourse insists are categorical.

Restorative Practices in Schools	**Citizen Diplomacy in Practice**
• Creates conditions for psychological safety • Distributes voice across power differences • Addresses harm through relationship, not punishment • Builds skills of active listening and empathy • Honors cultural frameworks as valid knowledge	• Builds and maintains relationships through tact • Facilitates dialogue across cultural difference • Navigates conflict toward mutually beneficial outcomes • Cultivates skills of communication and perspective-taking • Recognizes each party's humanity and valid interests

Figure 1. Convergences between restorative approaches and citizen diplomacy.

The Specific Challenge of Multilingual Contexts

Multilingual classrooms introduce layers of complexity that restorative frameworks must account for. Apology, accountability, and harm carry culturally specific meanings. A direct expression of remorse, standard in many North American restorative circles, may be experienced as deeply shaming in cultural contexts where face-saving is paramount. Silence may signal respect, not defiance. Eye contact may be avoidance, not honesty.

Effective restorative practice in multilingual settings therefore requires what GCED theorists call "cultural sensitivity" alongside universalism, the ability to hold core values (dignity, repair, voice) while adapting forms and expressions to reflect the diverse cultural traditions present in the room. This is not relativism; it is precision. It is the difference between a diplomatic protocol that works and one that inadvertently causes the rupture it sought to prevent.

III. Global Citizenship Education: Promise and Contested Terrain

GCED's Foundational Vision

Global Citizenship Education emerged from post-World War II aspirations to build peace through education. Its vision, articulated through UNESCO's Delors Report and formalized in Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, positioned learners as active participants in an interconnected world, not merely national subjects, but holders of a wider responsibility.

> GCED positioned learners not merely as national citizens, but as active participants in an interconnected world, capable of addressing complex global issues.
>
> (Auh, 2025)

For educators working with multilingual students, many of whom have crossed national borders, fled conflict, or navigated statelessness, this vision resonates with a particular intensity. Their students are, in very literal terms, citizens of a world that did not protect them with the tools of national citizenship alone. The aspiration to form students who see themselves as moral actors in a wider human community is not abstract idealism in these classrooms. It is the daily work.

The Current Contestation

GCED now occupies, in Auh's phrase, "a paradoxical space." It is more urgently needed than ever, as climate disruption, digital misinformation, and rising authoritarianism demand education that fosters critical consciousness and intercultural understanding, yet its legitimacy is increasingly contested. Neonationalist movements across multiple countries have framed

transnational educational efforts as subversive, and in the United States specifically, classroom content addressing global perspectives, climate justice, or United Nations frameworks has come under legislative and parental scrutiny.

Schools implementing GCED, particularly those serving immigrant and refugee populations, therefore navigate a charged political landscape. The very students most in need of a framework that honors their transnational identities attend schools operating under governance structures that may regard those identities with suspicion.

> The challenge now is not to defend GCED in abstract terms, but to reconceive it as a flexible, locally grounded and ethically resilient framework, capable of navigating contested terrains while remaining anchored to its moral core.
>
> (Auh, 2025)

Pluralism over Homogeneity

One of the most significant theoretical developments within GCED is its turn toward pluralism. Rather than advancing a singular, universalized model of the global citizen, which critics, not without reason, have identified as frequently reflecting Western liberal norms, current scholarship argues for cultivating diverse pathways to global consciousness, grounded in varied cultural, historical, and political traditions.

> Rather than advancing a singular, universalised model of the "global citizen," it must cultivate diverse pathways to global consciousness, grounded in varied cultural, historical and political traditions. Embracing pluralism strengthens GCED's relevance and guards against perceptions of cultural imperialism.
>
> (Auh, 2025)

This move toward pluralism has direct implications for restorative practice. If there is no single correct way to be a global citizen, there is likewise no single correct form that restorative dialogue must take. The practitioner working with refugee girls enacts this insight: her classroom honors the multiple cultural frameworks her students bring without collapsing them into a single standard. The morning meeting is structured, but the content of belonging it generates is plural.

IV. Education as Soft Power: Implications for Inclusion

Soft Power and the School

Joseph Nye coined the term *soft power* in 1990 to describe the capacity to attract and co-opt

rather than coerce, to use economic, cultural, and political force as a means of persuasion rather than compulsion. The application of this concept to education diplomacy has grown substantially: Amirbek and Ydyrys (2014) argue that education is one of the most effective soft power strategies for advancing national interests in the international arena, and the Diplomatic Insight blog identifies eight specific techniques through which education functions as soft power, including cultural exchange programs, language education, educational diplomacy in conflict zones, and global education partnerships.

What is striking about applying soft power theory to the classroom level is that it reframes what teachers do every day. When a teacher creates conditions in which a student from a refugee background feels genuinely welcomed and empowered, when that student's language, knowledge, and family traditions are treated as assets rather than deficits, the teacher is exercising soft power in the most direct and sustainable sense. She is building positive regard across cultural difference. She is creating the conditions under which a future adult might navigate the world with more trust than suspicion, more empathy than fear.

> Soft powers can create sustainable solutions in foreign policy. Currently our country is not modeling a soft power approach. This can be detrimental to our foreign relations.
>
> (Practitioner reflection)

This practitioner observation is not merely political commentary. It describes a structural gap between the relational and diplomatic competencies that students need and the environment in which those competencies must be developed. When the national policy environment models coercion rather than persuasion, educators working to develop global citizens are swimming upstream, but that is precisely why the work matters.

The Digital Access Equity Problem

The Diplomatic Insight blog's eight techniques for educational soft power include virtual education and distance learning as a mechanism for promoting cross-cultural understanding among students who might not otherwise have access. The practitioner voice in this paper raises a critical challenge to the uncritical embrace of virtual modalities:

> Although virtual education can provide for many opportunities, I fear that it can also leave behind many communities in rural areas that do not have the resources to participate on a global level. This leaves out a vital perspective, the voice of those without.
>
> (Practitioner reflection)

This concern deserves serious weight in discussions of global citizenship education and inclusion. A GCED framework that privileges digital connectivity as its primary vehicle inadvertently replicates the hierarchies it claims to challenge. The student in a rural school without broadband, the refugee student whose family cannot afford a personal device, the community whose oral traditions and place-based knowledge have never been represented on global digital platforms, these students are excluded from the very conversations that purport to include everyone.

True inclusion requires that global citizenship education be accessible through multiple modalities: face-to-face community engagement, fieldwork, storytelling circles, embodied cultural exchange, and the classroom-level restorative practices described throughout this paper. Virtual tools can supplement, but they cannot substitute for, the relational infrastructure of safety and belonging.

V. Teaching Communication as Diplomatic Competency

The Diplomatic Dimensions of Communication Pedagogy

Citizen diplomacy depends on communication, not merely the ability to express oneself, but the capacity to adjust one's message across audiences, listen with genuine attention, navigate disagreement without rupturing relationship, and build shared understanding where none previously existed. These are not natural talents. They are learnable skills, and schools are the most democratic institution we have for teaching them.

Participate Learning's framework for teaching communication in K–12 identifies a set of competencies that maps with remarkable precision onto the Foreign Service Officer dimensions used to evaluate diplomatic professionals. Students who learn to explain their thinking with evidence, adjust tone and message for different audiences, listen actively to understand rather than to reply, use body language and visual communication effectively, and ask meaningful questions are developing the functional toolkit of diplomacy, not as an abstraction, but through daily classroom practice.

> When students learn how to engage with others in ways that are thoughtful, respectful, and effective, considering their audience, organizing their thinking, and responding with clarity and empathy, this is a shift from the idea that the one who appears to be powerful over compassionate is the more successful.
>
> (Practitioner reflection, citing diplomacy curriculum)

Concrete Strategies That Build Diplomatic Communication

Drawing from restorative practice and communication research, the following classroom strategies build the foundational skills of diplomatic communication:

- *Turn-and-talks before whole-class discussion* build confidence and clarify thinking, particularly for students who need additional processing time.
- *Structured circle protocols* distribute voice equitably and create the expectation that every perspective will be heard.
- *Active listening practice with sentence stems* ("What I hear you saying is...," "I'd like to build on that...," "I have a different perspective...") mirrors diplomatic dialogue frameworks.
- *Perspective-taking activities using Social Identity Wheels* surfaces shared experiences across cultural difference.
- *Purpose-driven writing for real audiences* (school leaders, community partners, younger students) develops diplomatic sensitivity to context and stakeholder.
- *Student-led presentations and TED-style talks on global issues* build public communication competency and cultivate sense of civic agency.

Empatico (now a Builders initiative) offers a library of online activities specifically designed to foster empathy and cross-cultural understanding among students worldwide. While direct classroom exchanges are currently suspended, the pedagogical framework it embodies, structured interaction between students across geographic and cultural difference, guided reflection on similarity and difference, and intentional empathy-building, reflects the same principles that underpin both restorative practice and citizen diplomacy.

Generation Global similarly provides frameworks for structured dialogue across difference for young people. Both resources exemplify how communication pedagogy can function as global citizenship formation when it is oriented not merely toward self-expression but toward mutual understanding.

The Practitioner as Citizen Diplomat

One dimension of this analysis that deserves explicit attention is the role of the educator herself. The practitioner working with refugee girls describes her work in terms that are precisely those of citizen diplomacy: she is an advocate for her students and their families outside the classroom, and she carries the responsibility to empower her students to be successful inside it. She is, in Koepke's terms, shaping U.S. relations with people of other countries, not through formal channels, but through the daily relational work of creating belonging, building trust, and developing the competencies her students need to navigate the world.

This is not a romanticization of teaching. It is a recognition that the diplomatic work that

matters most is often the most local, the most unglamorous, and the most consistently undervalued. The morning meeting, the identity wheel, the restorative circle, these are the instruments of soft power that no foreign policy brief will ever catalog, but that shape the international relations of the next generation more durably than most of what appears in diplomatic cables.

VI. Implications for Inclusion Practices in U.S. Contexts

The convergence of restorative approaches, citizen diplomacy, and GCED in schools serving multilingual learners has specific implications for how U.S. schools approach inclusion, not as compliance with legal mandates but as the genuine development of what every student deserves.

1. Safety Is Not a Prerequisite, It Is the Curriculum

Inclusion frameworks in U.S. schools too often treat psychological safety as a precondition for learning rather than as a learning objective in its own right. The research is clear, however, that students cannot access content when they are managing social threat. Restorative approaches that build genuine community, not the simulated community of behavioral compliance, are the infrastructure of inclusion, not its prerequisite. Schools serving multilingual students should budget time, professional development, and instructional minutes accordingly.

2. Identity Is an Asset, Not a Barrier

Students' linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds, including experiences of displacement, conflict, and multilingual code-switching, are not deficits to be remediated. They are forms of knowledge that, when honored, become the content of global citizenship education. The practitioner who uses the Social Identity Wheel to help students find shared experiences across cultural difference is not running a supplementary program. She is teaching the core curriculum of a world that will require her students to work across difference every day of their professional and civic lives.

3. Advocacy Is Part of the Job Description

Teachers of multilingual learners, particularly those who serve refugee and immigrant communities, function as citizen diplomats whether they name it that way or not. School districts and policy frameworks should recognize this explicitly, providing educators with the preparation, time, and institutional support to play that role effectively. This means professional learning in restorative practice, global competency frameworks, and community engagement, not as add-ons to an already overwhelming workload, but as the core of what it means to teach in a multilingual school.

4. Global Competency Must Be Locally Grounded

The GCED literature's turn toward local-global reciprocity offers an important corrective to inclusion frameworks that locate global citizenship in far-away places and cosmopolitan experiences. Global consciousness begins in the classroom, in the community, in the act of hearing someone whose experience differs radically from one's own and choosing to stay curious rather than retreat. For students in multilingual classrooms, this is not a future aspiration, it is the present reality. Schools that recognize this and build on it are doing the most sophisticated form of global citizenship education possible.

5. Access and Equity Must Shape Technology Choices

As schools move toward digital tools for global connection, virtual exchanges, collaborative platforms, digital storytelling, inclusion requires explicit attention to who is left out. Any program that builds global consciousness among students with reliable broadband and personal devices while leaving out students without those resources is reproducing the inequalities that GCED claims to challenge. Meaningful inclusion means ensuring that the students most in need of global connection, those living in rural communities, those in underfunded schools, those whose families have limited digital literacy, are at the center of program design, not its afterthought.

VII. Conclusion: The Moral Core of the Daily Work

This paper has argued that restorative approaches in multilingual classrooms function as a form of applied citizen diplomacy, that the skills students learn through structured dialogue, active listening, perspective-taking, and relationship repair are the diplomatic competencies the world urgently needs, cultivated in the most democratic space available: the public school classroom.

It has also argued that Global Citizenship Education, despite its contested political terrain, provides an essential framework for this work, one that, at its best, embraces pluralism over

homogeneity, local grounding over abstract universalism, and relational safety over institutional compliance. The challenges are real: neonationalist resistance, digital equity gaps, and the persistent tendency of well-intentioned frameworks to reproduce the hierarchies they claim to dismantle. But the work continues, every morning, in classrooms across the country.

> The challenge now is not to defend GCED in abstract terms, but to reconceive it as a flexible, locally grounded and ethically resilient framework.
>
> (Auh, 2025)

The practitioner who wrote that she loves the GCED framing of students as "active participants in an interconnected world, capable of addressing complex global issues" is already living that framework, in a school for refugee girls, in the morning meeting circle, in the advocacy she carries beyond the classroom door. Her work demonstrates what the scholarship argues: that inclusion, done well, is global citizenship education. And that global citizenship, practiced honestly, begins at home.

The world the students in these classrooms will inherit will require of them exactly what restorative practice, citizen diplomacy, and GCED all attempt to cultivate: the capacity to hold relationship in the presence of difference, to repair harm without erasing complexity, and to act from a sense of shared humanity that is harder and more necessary than any political moment makes it look.

> Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.
>
> (Margaret Mead)

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This paper integrates perspectives from the sources above with original practitioner reflections. Practitioner voice is drawn from written course reflections and is cited throughout as "Practitioner reflection." The author's position as a teacher of refugee girls informs both the critical engagement with the literature and the emphasis on safety, identity, and relational practice as foundational conditions for global citizenship formation.