



Learning to feel global: Exploring the emotional geographies of worldschooling



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ABSTRACT

Worldschooling is a small but growing alternative education and lifestyle practice adopted by families who take their children out of conventional school settings and educate them while traveling the world. Many worldschooling families document their journeys on blogs and in social media forums, where they explicitly embrace the educational potential of travel and claim the world as their classroom. Drawing on a mobile virtual ethnography of worldschooling, including analysis of online materials along with interviews and field notes from seven months of fieldwork as a worldschooling parent, I explore the intersections of emotion, learning, mobility, and global citizenship in these accounts of worldschooling. While many parents design their mobile curricula around destination based content, they emphasize the repertoire of social and emotional skills their children learn while traveling around the world, often aligning these skills with aspirations of global citizenship. In this sense, global citizenship is about emotions as much as it is about exercising certain rights and responsibilities. In this article, I chart the overlapping emotional geographies that emerge around these performances of 'feeling global,' focusing especially on the tensions between individual emotions and broader affective climate of neoliberal globalization.

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1. Introduction

Carissa¹ is a middle-class professional writer and mother of two school-aged children. She normally lives in New York with her husband, a tenured professor, but during his recent sabbatical, the family spent nine months traveling the world. Armed with books, projects, and plans for educating her children while on the road, Carissa soon found herself participating in a new phenomenon called worldschooling. Worldschooled sits at the intersection of alternative education movements, like homeschooling or unschooling, and forms of educational travel, such as study tours and study abroad programs. Worldschooled families, most of whom come from countries in the Global North, take their children out of conventional school settings to travel the world, sometimes for an academic year, like Carissa and her husband, and sometimes indefinitely.

In an article she wrote for an educational website, Carissa describes some of the initial challenges she faced while educating her

son and daughter on the road:

A year ago last fall, I sat among huge potted ferns and birds of paradise on the patio of a guesthouse in the self-styled adventure town of Jinga, Uganda, with my then eight-year-old daughter. We were both crying. I was trying to get her to write an essay about an arts organization we had visited outside Kampala, Uganda's capital city, a week earlier, and she didn't want to do it. We (my husband, my daughter, my five-year-old son, and I) were barely a month into a nine-month trip around the world, and I'd already lost my patience for homeschooling. I'd been hoping that our travel through Africa and Asia would inspire my kids to learn more about what they were seeing, but each time we sat down to 'do school,' there was more resistance, and now tears.

Discouraged by her daughter's resistance, Carissa decided to seek guidance online from other worldschooled families. The advice she received was to set aside the worksheets and let her children's interests determine what to study. Instead of meting out 'hard-and-fast rules about how to worldschooled or any set curriculums or pedagogies,' Carissa writes, parents advised her to 'trust

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¹ The names of all respondents have been changed throughout the paper.

that children by nature want to learn and that the world is the best classroom one could ever hope for.' Carissa was encouraged by other worldschooling parents' examples of nine- and ten-year-old kids conducting independent research projects on currency markets, foreign political systems or irrigation techniques, but she was especially inspired by stories of 'daily demonstrations of compassion – the trait American parents say they value most in their children – and grit.' And she concludes: 'What these traveling families had in common was the context for learning – the world around them – and the goal of preparing their children to live in an increasingly global and diverse world.'

Starting with her daughter's tears and Carissa's own aspirations and impatience with homeschooling, moving on to worldschooling's commitment to interest-led learning and outcomes of compassion and grit, and ending with a reference to the common goal of preparing children for a global and diverse world, Carissa's story hints at worldschooling's complex and layered emotional terrain. Emotion, especially as it relates to children becoming global citizens, is a central theme in worldschooling parents' accounts of traveling and learning, and I take the emotional geography of worldschooling as the key focus of this article. I propose the orienting concept of 'feeling global.' This concept refers to several things: the emotional skills children acquire on the road, the emotional climate of globalization in which these families travel, and the affective global citizenship that arises at this intersection. My aim in this paper is to explore the interplay between these layers of an explicit emotion curriculum and the implicit structures of feeling that shape the landscape of worldschooling, and to examine the global subjectivities and forms of global citizenship that this landscape enables.

In the sections that follow, I begin by outlining the theoretical context and methodological approach on which my analysis is based. Next, I describe the 'emotional curriculum' of worldschooling and detail the emotional learning outcomes parents ascribe to traveling. I then place this curriculum in a larger affective context by reflecting on the 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977) that characterize the current mood of neoliberal globalization. I conclude by examining the limits and possibilities of political agency in affective global citizenship.

2. Emotional geographies of education and citizenship

The analysis I offer in this article is informed by several theoretical frameworks, beginning with the concept of emotional geographies, and more specifically emotional geographies of education. As Bondi et al. (2005: 3) describe it, the concept of emotional geographies draws attention to the way emotions mingle with places:

Indeed, much of the symbolic importance of ... places stems from their emotional associations, the feelings they inspire of awe, dread, worry, loss or love. An emotional geography, then, attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states.

In the case of worldschooling, emotional geographies are not exclusively connected to specific places, but rather to the mobile geographies of travel, to the spatial symbolism of the world as a classroom, and to feeling at home in the world as a global citizen. Worldschooling thus presents an intriguing case study of the emotional geographies of education and citizenship in the context of mobility. At stake here are questions of how emotion, learning, and belonging fold into one another across multiple spaces and scales and on the move.

2.1. Emotional geographies of education

In a special issue of *Emotion, Space and Society*, Kenway and Youdell (2011) extend the concept of emotional geographies to the field of education (and see Holloway et al., 2011; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2013; Pimlott-Wilson, 2015). Recognizing a void in educational theory where questions of space and place should be, and seeking to resist the tendency of mainstream educational discourse to privilege rationality over emotion, Kenway and Youdell call instead for a socio-cultural-spatial analysis of education and emotion. Their introduction highlights three aspects of emotional geographies of education that are salient for my analysis of worldschooling: first, emotional geographies of education are multiscalar; second, they entail both articulated feelings (such as love, hate, or compassion) and pre-discursive affects as embodied sensations; and third, in these educational landscapes, emotions are experienced as both individual and social phenomena. In this section, I elaborate on these three aspects of emotional geographies of education and draw on relevant literature on transformative learning, structures of feeling, and affective citizenship to establish the theoretical basis for my analysis.

2.2. Multiscalar and mobile geographies

Rather than assuming that educational spaces are merely passive containers for a set of reasoned and logical learning practices, Kenway and Youdell's socio-cultural-spatial approach pays attention to the various scales through which emotions are produced (2011: 132). The studies collected in their issue span from conventional educational places (desks and classrooms, campuses and playgrounds) to spaces outside of school (such as a class excursion along a canal tow-path) and to scales that extend beyond, and yet shape the emotional climate of, schools (such as educational policy reform measures at the national level). The result is what Kenway and Fahey (2011), following Appadurai (1990), call 'emoscapes' – 'the movement and mobilization of emotion on intersecting global, national and personal scales' (Kenway and Fahey, 2011: 187).

The emotional geography of worldschooling is similarly multiscalar and mobile. Learning takes place on guest house patios, as we saw in Carissa's story, in cafés, at historical sites, and anywhere families happen to be. In turn, these places are all constituted as educational spaces, as are sites of mobility, such as aboard trains or ferries or in bus stations and airport waiting areas. Learning also takes place within larger geopolitical contexts, for example against a backdrop of national educational policies that promote neoliberal educational agendas or, in some cases, prohibit alternative education movements like homeschooling or unschooling. But perhaps most revealing of this interweaving of personal, national, and global scales is the worldschooling philosophy that the world itself becomes a classroom. Presumably, every destination and every social encounter, and especially the act of moving between places, holds the possibility of learning something new.

2.3. Emotion and affect

Kenway and Youdell observe that emotion enters educational theory in various ways, circulating through discourse and spaces both in the form of articulated feelings and as pre-discursive affects. On the one hand, scholars conceive of emotion in somewhat rational terms as one of multiple 'intelligences,' as a form of literacy, or as a 'language of emotions in which feelings are identified through words – love, hate, fear, joy and disgust' (133). Kenway and Youdell worry that framing emotion as a form of literacy merely corrals emotion within the confines of rational logic, effectively validating some emotions and emotional subjects while

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