

# Approaching quality of global education practices through action research

## A non-governmental development organization–university collaborative experience

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### **Abstract**

This article intends to describe a collaborative experience between a non-government development organization (NGDO) and a university in the area of development education. The experience has included the design, following an action research methodology, of a system of quality criteria for experiences promoted by the Network of Educators for Global Citizenship. The network comprises a wide range of people from Spain and is supported by the NGDO Intermón Oxfam. The experience has enabled stakeholders to acquire valuable knowledge, primarily in understanding educational practices and about how to tackle their analysis.

**Keywords:** Global citizenship, teacher training, evaluation, programme theory, action research, university, non-government development organizations

## 1. Introduction

Education for global citizenship (hereinafter, EGC) has gradually become more prominent in the discourse of the different European NGOs. Hence, for example, CONCORD/DEEP's (2011) proposal underlines the importance of EGC to: 1) promote key values and attitudes for a global responsible citizen; 2) provide for an informed public debate on the issues that affect development; and 3) support and provide NGOs and governments with legitimacy for determined action for global justice. In the case of Spain, the development coordinator of the Spanish Network of NGOs put the EGC forward as a strategic approach for NGOs' work, highlighting research, learning, and the evaluation of development education actions (CONGDE, 2012). More recently, this same need was broached at the Congress on Global Education, held in Lisbon in September 2012. The Congress focused on the need for quality support and monitoring, linked to critical research, studies, and other evidence-based initiatives on all issues related to global education, and the interconnectedness between practice and theory (European Congress on Global Education, 2012).

To accomplish these goals, the role of research is essential, and universities and NGOs are potentially important partners. However, relationships between academia and organizations are not always easy. Dissimilar intellectual approaches and different discourses and ways of being involved when conducting research could lead to misunderstandings or lost opportunities to enrich mutual learning (Roper, 2002). Also, as Roper *et al.* (2003) have observed, different attitudes between academics and practitioners could generate mistrust and lead to distinct priorities with regard to research.

Acknowledging the existence of such problems, this article highlights a successful research experience between a university team, a NGO, and a Network of Educators currently practising development education. We argue that in paying attention to attitudes, sharing knowledge between all actors, and having in mind what the main goals of the process are, we not only generated knowledge relevant to understanding what is quality in education for global citizenship practices, but reinforced a strong sense of partnership between all participants that allowed us to overcome typical barriers such as those highlighted above.

We start by describing the three leading actors in the experience: the Network of Educators for Global Citizenship, the Education for Global Citizenship section of Intermón Oxfam (hereinafter, IO), and the university team who took part in the process. We pay special attention to the expectations and goals they had of the process and their viewpoint of quality prior to its start. We then describe the action research process before presenting the two results to have come out of it: 1) the main elements of the quality system; and 2) the process's learning outcomes. Regarding

the latter, we pay special attention to those that emerged through the relationship between the three actors.

## **2. The leading actors**

The Network of Educators for Global Citizenship is a pluralistic group of 100 people belonging to different autonomous communities in Spain. While it mainly works from the area of formal education (basically teachers and students), it has a comprehensive vision of education, and intends to include members and practices from informal areas.

The Network is organized into local groups and networks, inter-territorial theme groups (where local groups belonging to different territories are grouped around a particular theme), and national commissions where teachers prepare didactic proposals, receive training on subjects and methodologies related to global citizenship, and share experiences upon which they attempt to critically reflect to enrich both practice and theory.

As one of the foundations of the Network's political and pedagogical project is to share educational experiences and proposals, a virtual resource bank ([www.kaidara.org](http://www.kaidara.org)) was developed in 2008. Since Kaidara's launch more than 40 activities, 130 educational proposals, and 19 other miscellaneous documents – positions, articles, seminars, and workgroup reports – have been posted, and teachers are encouraged to develop the habit of documenting and systematizing their experiences to develop a comprehensive knowledge base from their teaching practice. Nevertheless, the Network is not only interested in the quantity of experiences and educational resources that might be generated and shared in Kaidara, it also aspires to become a point of reference for quality in the area of education for global citizenship. It therefore favours the process of continuously improving educational practices that become – or might become – transformational.

We should highlight that the meaning of 'quality', in the Network's viewpoint, differs significantly from that which is typically designated by inheres business models, where efficiency, customer satisfaction, productivity, etc. are paramount. Indeed, the notion of 'quality' includes a certain regulatory aspect, an aspiration of what an educational practice or resource 'should' be, prompt, or contain with regard to EGC. However, the difference lies in the fact that such ideal features, such quality criteria, are not a straitjacket or parameter which validates or renders void certain practices or proposals. Rather, they put forward a series of routes, methodologies, and desirable destinations which might accompany improvement processes adapted to the changing contexts where the aforementioned practices develop. The 'quality' we refer to has more to do with offering opportunities for critical reflection, of being

capable of suggesting pointers for improvement, keys for innovation, and things to bear in mind in the future as a process logic is adopted.

This idea of quality is similar to other approaches to development education evaluation highlighted by O'Loughlin and Wegimont (2008), where quality is discussed in relation to evaluation. In their review of several European case studies, Hartmeyer and Löber (2008) pointed out a number of recommendations for conducting good evaluations in the development education field. Most of them align clearly with the vision of quality discussed in this paper: among others, they include the importance of introducing methods of self-evaluation to initiate participatory learning, to recognize the importance of 'who' evaluates, to define and see evaluators as critical friends, and to accept the aim of an evaluation as the improvement of the work of the evaluated themselves.

The second actor is the Education for Global Citizenship section of IO (AEGC), which forms part of its Campaigns and Studies Department and is entrusted with leading the organization's educational project. As it intends to reflect the democratic and transformative values that characterize the EGC, its working structure is divided into commissions which allow for participation (on different levels) between the teachers comprising the Network, the technical team contracted, and external teams in specific subjects or methodologies. One of the commissions is the Strategic Commission, the body that defines the working lines, strategies, and projects in the educational arena. It comprises members of the AEGC, the educational territorial team (ascribed to different IO offices throughout Spain), and teacher representatives from each territory.

The Strategic Commission deemed it relevant to answer the Network's need for the aforementioned quality criteria, and despite initially thinking it could be prepared by the Network (by an *ad hoc* commission), they thought it would be interesting and enriching to have an external point of view that might contribute a tested reading, some innovative features, and a complementary view. Thus, they asked the Group of Development Studies from the Universitat Politècnica de València to prepare an initial proposal of quality criteria which would subsequently be validated, worked with, and tested by a group of teachers from the Network to make sure that they truly believed the criteria met expectations and would indeed drive the materials and experiences prepared by the Network.

The third actor is thus the aforementioned Group of Development Studies, a research group created in 2006 to extend the university's transformative reach in its three main components – research, teaching, and social extension – to impoverished people and communities. The Group has a clear vocation of enhancing social mobility and of working with social organizations to generate transformative knowledge. Research

on the development field using participatory methods is one of its main lines. Because of that, a major and influential precedent in the process of determining the quality criteria was the use of action research on education for global citizenship in the formal area developed between 2010 and 2012 (Boni *et al.*, 2012). In fact, at different points during the process, participants in the action research debated and validated the contributions being produced in that area. Likewise, the action research process was a source of methodological inspiration to design the criteria.

Starting from these premises, it is not by chance that, from the very beginning, the university researchers intended to take advantage of the process to provide an invitation for thinking and sharing reflections about the educational experiences, shying away from the business-quality focus so much in vogue in universities (Temple, 2005). However, while the process was given importance, the researchers also intended to provide the quality criteria system with a series of variables that might be used to present in a structured and connected way the different elements that have an influence when undertaking actions that educate for global citizenship. To take such variables into account means, from our standpoint, rationalizing the interventions by the Network that lay the foundations for collaborative learning and improvement.

### **3. The action research process**

In this section we include a brief introduction to the action research methodology used from March 2012 to February 2013. In addition to the various milestones we describe below, a fluent and constant relationship existed at all times between the researchers and the AECG team, which allowed the process to be more accurately defined by the selection of the most suitable methodologies and participants for the goals of the research.

The first stage between March and April 2012 included characterizing the inspiring principles in the Network's proposal for the education for global citizenship. For this purpose, various key documents produced by the Network<sup>1</sup> and the information available in Kaidara were reviewed, and four teachers identified as having a special background were interviewed. In the second stage from May to the beginning of July 2012, the first proposal of system features was developed, debated at a workshop with six teachers and IO representatives in València, and shared with the whole Network at its National Seminar. To test the product with experts in development education, the outcomes were discussed with the participants in the action research process developing simultaneously (third stage, end of July 2012). In the last stage from September to December 2012 the model was validated at a workshop with ten teachers from the Network, invited on the grounds of their extensive experience

and participation in different Network groups and commissions, and three people from the AECG. The seminar 'premiered' the system, clearly advertising how it could be of interest and useful to teachers, although steps to fine-tune and implement it still need to be taken. Starting in spring 2013, a second validation stage checked the practical use of the system on the basis of specific experiences. This stage included the first step to increase the knowledge of the system among the Network's teachers and, in parallel, to try to identify the people interested in applying and incorporating the quality criteria into certain educational practices or materials. On the basis of these practical exercises, comments and suggestions were gathered to improve the system.

#### **4. The quality system**

One of the main outcomes of the action research process was the design of a quality system inspired by programme theory from a systemic approach (Funnell and Rogers, 2011). It is a logic model which asks that thinking on interventions be integral, as it proposes to bear in mind the different aspects that affect - and are affected by - educational practices of EGC. The model implicitly suggests that formal education does not take place in a vacuum, but rather, as a permeable system, is capable of producing a series of influences, effects, and impacts.

For this reason, the quality system proposal includes the following aspects: context, structure, processes, and outcomes. The context describes the reality we want to influence, the obstacles and opportunities arising from it regarding educational practices, and how the aforementioned features constrain or enable the intended changes. The structure asks that we bear in mind any and all resources, starting conditions, and available supports to implement the educational practices. Taking the processes into account means describing and analysing the educational practices teachers undertake within their spheres of influence - classroom, centre, surroundings, etc. - as a basis for identifying learning, errors, and successes, and suggesting potential improvement.

The outcomes are the last feature. As we shall see in section 4.2, they refer to the attributes of citizenship and offer a framework to establish whether we are achieving the intended changes and, on the basis of which, we can thus reconsider the educational practices.

One specific feature of the system was its consideration of the principles inspiring the work of the Network of Teachers and which should, following programme theory, be part of the structure. However, we wanted to consider the principles as a separate component as they materially inform and affect its other aspects. The

system is enriched by a network of influences among its different elements: how the context affects the structure, how the structure and principles affect the educational practices, how this relationship in turn affects the characteristics achieved, and lastly, how these characteristics interact within and with the context and change it.

#### **4.1 The system substratum: The principles inspiring the EGC**

As we mentioned previously, the first task was to reach a consensus on the key principles defining the EGC proposal and which are summarized in the following five:

1. The political vision of education refers to the idea of citizenship as denoting an individual who is not only a holder of rights but who also engages in citizen practice. It also refers to the political function of education and the educational community to act as an agent for change. In addition, it includes the approach to social justice and the importance of the impact of social mobilization for change.
2. The ecosystemic vision comprises a broad understanding of the environmental problem, seeing it as not only limited to the environment but as being interdependent. It also includes reflections on the quality of life, the sense of environmental values, and the 'greening of the ego' - i.e. the fact that people should recognize themselves as part of both the problems and the solutions.
3. The element of identity relates to anything concerning the acknowledgement and appreciation of differences, the multiple identities that make up the human being (including the identity of the global citizen), and the exclusions arising from the differences.
4. The 'glocal' feature links active citizens in the local environment with the global world. It also comprises the vision of the school being open to the local environment and to the Network of Educators as a privileged space in which glocal citizens can be developed.
5. The pedagogical feature is linked to the tradition of critical pedagogy originated in popular education. It includes, in particular, the experiential and collective construction of knowledge and the vision of awareness-raising and transformational education.

These principles are interconnected: the pedagogical feature cannot be understood without the political feature, nor can the ecosystemic vision be kept apart from the glocal feature. Figure 1 provides a detailed description of each of the five principles.

**Figure 1: The Network of Educators' key principles of the EGC**

Political vision	Ecosystemic vision	Identity item	Glocal item	Pedagogic item
Education as a public arena, as a space to learn and practise democracy (concept of citizenship as a practice)	Ecological problems are not only environmental, but also societal issues. Protecting nature is protecting the quality of life	Acknowledgement and appreciation of difference. Learning from acknowledgement	Living citizenship on a local level. Opening the school to the environment: involves the school opening and letting external experiences in as well as out, participating and cooperating in individual and social problems	Popular education model. Awareness-raising and transformative education. Practice-oriented
Educational community as an agent for change. People with the power to change	'Greening of the ego.' Each person should recognize themselves as part of the world problem but also as a solution	Acknowledgement of the many identities that make a human being (gender, race, ethnic origin, community, etc.), identities that are not excluding or static but inclusive and changing	Living citizenship on a global level. Procuring spaces for learning how to connect global and local issues	Acknowledgement of popular cultures and knowledge
Citizenship as denoting a holder of rights, obligations, and responsibilities (concept of citizenship as a legal status)	Simplifying our lives and living a life that reaffirms environmental and human values	Acknowledgement of the exclusions based on gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc.	Teachers, students, families, local community, NGOs, and different groups are acknowledged as constructors of common knowledge through dialogue	Building knowledge and learning from experience
Vision of justice: importance of the political impact and social mobilization for changing national and global rules that perpetuate poverty, insecurity, and inequality	A systemic and interdependent vision of life (overcoming North/South geographic differences, of compartmentalization of knowledge, of unidirectional approaches, etc.)	Acknowledgement of a cosmopolitan identity based on the sense of belonging to a wide community based on solidarity and the common good	The Network of Educators as a privileged space to build the glocal citizenship	Collective construction of knowledge
....	.....		....	



#### 4.2 The system horizon: The attributes of global citizens

The principles and their features develop a series of attributes that shape the ideal of the global citizen. If the principles are the substratum, the attributes are the horizon of the educational practices for global citizenship. Following Merrifield's proposal (2002), we preferred the term attributes rather than competences as it is more descriptive than prescriptive. It is usually understood that people who are not competent are unable, for example, to do something. However, the term attribute only describes the knowledge, skills, and values of the global citizen ideal. In other words, the purpose is not for the individual to be trained 'to be competent' in global citizenship, but rather for the educational task to promote some of the attributes mentioned. The definition and description of these attributes stemmed from the aforementioned principles. Hence knowledge, for example, does not solely refer to information, but also to a type of knowledge that raises awareness and which is not always expert (educator) but includes popular knowledge arising from experience in addition. As regards skills, those which are linked to interrelationships with other people, in accordance with the political principle of education, have been given priority. And lastly, attitudes include those values referring to all principles in the proposal.

The definition of each attribute started from the review of the Network documents, together with the reflections of different authors (Boni, 2006; Boni and Leon, 2013; Merrifield, 2002; de Paz, 2007). Figure 2 gives further details of the different attributes.

**Figure 2: Attributes of global citizenship**

Attributes
<u>Knowledge and awareness-raising (not mere information)</u>
Social justice and equity: Understanding inequality and injustice within and between societies. Knowledge of human needs and human rights, particularly those of the most impoverished people
Understanding the economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental interrelationships between North and South and within societies
Understanding one's own identity and the diversities existing within societies, as well as how other people's lives may enrich our own. Knowledge of the prejudices against diversity and how they may be fought
Understanding the ethical meaning of a world peer community, of our responsibilities as global citizens, and of the political proposals for its materialization
Knowing the power and how to impact to revert situations through the processes and mechanisms of participation and citizen influence
Understanding gender inequalities caused by the patriarchal system and how to produce changes aimed at gender equity
Knowing the nature of conflicts and how to manage them constructively
<u>Skills (the skills of active citizens particularly in relation to other people)</u>
Ability to negotiate and compromise

Ability to influence other people and exert a shared leadership
Ability to communicate and cooperate with other people
Ability to deliberate, have a voice, and listen
Ability to imagine and make projects oriented towards the common good
<u>Value-based attitudes</u>
Respect for and acknowledgement of the environment and life within it. Will to consider the future generations and act in a responsible way
Empathy: Sensitivity towards the feelings, needs, and lives of other people in the world. Sense of common humankind, of common needs, and rights
Identity and self-esteem: A feeling of one's own value and individuality
Will to live with differences and to solve conflicts without violence
Critical awareness: Researching and nonconformist attitude
Commitment to social justice and equity: Interest in and concern for global issues. Commitment to justice and disposition to work for a fairer world
Sense of efficiency and that we may impact other people's lives. Optimism for social transformation

Building this framework of attributes allows teachers to question their own practice while they are developing it. It asks them to think about what they hope to achieve with their practice and what types of educational practices are required to achieve the desired attributes. It also lays the foundations for evaluating whether they have been able to improve the proposed attributes, and if the desired effects and impacts have been achieved through such practices.

#### 4.3 Pathways towards attributes: The educational practices

Once these two first steps have been taken (defining principles and attributes) the system questions us about the pathways to reach such attributes. In doing so it brings us into the domain of the educational practices.

To develop criteria that will organize the range of educational practices adopted by teachers, we paid attention to four items: 1) *Subjects* that provide conceptual keys; 2) a *methodology* that refers us to pedagogical approaches and the proposed tasks and activities; 3) *teachers* and the *school* organization; and 4) the *link* between the centre and *local and global* issues.

We need to bear in mind that the principles of EGC also inform these educational practices. Examples of such practices might thus include the following.

Regarding subjects, they should deal with such issues as: citizen participation, equity and rights, power, the local-global relationship and interrelationships, development models, the relationship between economy and ecology, historicity and transformation and the role of the subject therein, and the generation of knowledge and why and for whom it is generated, etc.

Regarding methodology, approaches would include those with critical, problem-making, social-affective, and experiential focuses, a pedagogy of question, cooperative learning, learning by project, service learning, etc.

Regarding teachers and the school organization, items considered might include: spaces for reflection, learning and training, horizontal relationships and decision-making, curricular approach of the centre, etc.

And lastly, regarding the relationship between the centre and local and global issues, considerations would address including other local actors, activities pertaining to local and global issues, and the use of new technologies as tools to promote the link between local and global issues.

#### **4.4 The system structure**

The last aspect of the quality system is the structure, meaning any structural features which significantly affect or condition the implementation of educational processes and the achievement of outcomes (Ligero, 2011). These features might be tangible – for example, the available resources in the centre – or intangible – for example, the social perception of public education.

The first set of features relates to the *context*, or any external factors that affect the educational process. For example, the disparity between social values and those promoted by education for citizenship, the depreciation of public education, the current economic adjustment in Spain, etc.

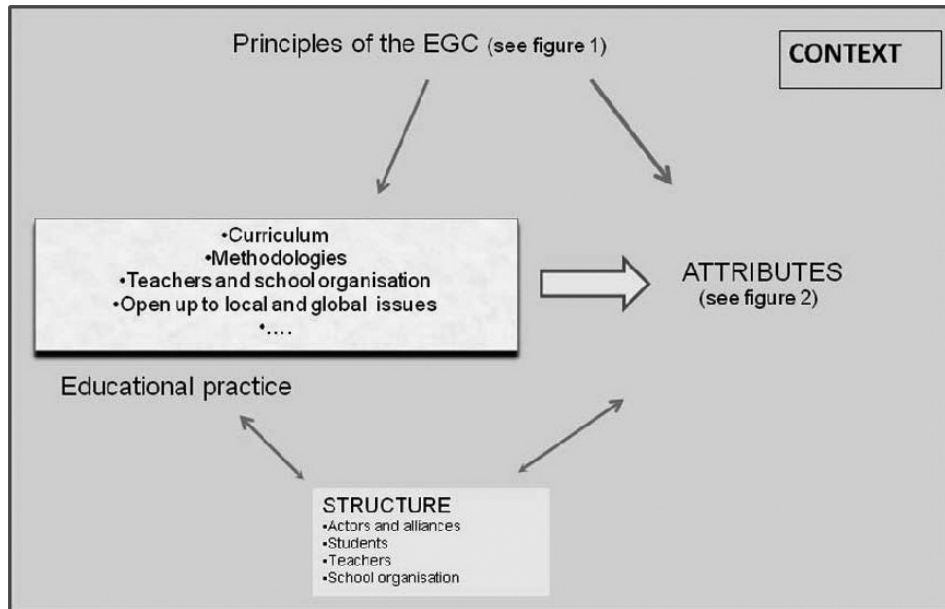
The second set of features relate to the *tangible and intangible structure* available to the teacher for their educational process. For example: 1) *Actors and alliances*: the teaching staff and headmasters, who may be for or against, or sensitive or hostile towards, EGC; 2) families, who might or might not become involved in activities for EGC, or who could be for or against it; 3) NGOs that provide materials, teacher support, methodological support, spaces for reflection with other teachers, etc.; 4) teacher training centres; and 5) neighbourhood associations or cooperative companies, etc.

This set of features would also include *teaching staff and students*. Regarding the former, we would question their training in the EGC, methodologies, skills, and values. Regarding the latter, the structural features taken into account would include, among others: diversity, the group dynamics generated, and students' family backgrounds, etc.

The last structural feature is the *material resources* available in the centre for the EGC. These might include, for example, the classrooms or spaces available and the access to new technologies, etc.

Figure 3 shows the four components of the quality system: 1) the principles inspiring the attributes and practices; 2) the educational practices leading to the attributes; 3) the structure that influences the practices and the achievement of attributes; and 4) the attributes themselves.

**Figure 3: Elements of the quality system**



## 5. Key lessons from the process

As we identified at the beginning of this paper, development education needs to improve quality support and monitoring. For this purpose, research showing interconnections between practice and theory is essential. In this section we present some key lessons that emerged out of our personal reflections through the action research process. We do not wish to offer any definitive conclusions but some thoughts on the experience which could inspire further research and projects.

We consider the experience described in this article to be a good example of a strong link between research and practice which aimed to produce a valid framework to interpret quality. In that sense, capturing the cause-and-effect relationships between different aspects of the system illuminates its various components and how they interact with each other. We hold this to be an important starting point to foster meaningful learning.

Following our deep analysis of the structure of the Network of Educators, we found it to be an interesting space for participation and decision-making and where citizenship might be exercised. In this space, moreover, local dynamics are perfectly articulated with national dynamics. As such, we deem these network working spaces, with their different participating actors and decision-making processes, to constitute an arena in which an interesting democratic practice takes place. In fact, among participants we clearly observed the discourse of teacher practice being problematized, which suggests that reflections and analysis within the Network space are reinforcing teachers' capacity to act as agents for change, although an evaluation would be required to validate this.

It was also important to understand the role played by IO (through its AEGC) in the Network of Educators. As we were able to observe and evidence, there is an evenly balanced power relation between IO and the teachers, so that the role played by staff at the former sometimes diffuses among the latter. This was particularly interesting to observe as specialized organizations can often create a level of dependency among the groups of people they are involved with. In this case, by contrast, the teachers have taken over the Network and IO has left room for this gradual appropriation.

Moreover, by participating in its organizational dynamics at different times, we were able to observe the affective bond established between people in the Network. They know each other by name, understand and share their problems, and constantly show an interest in how other participants are doing and in providing support, etc. Mutual respect and spaces for affection seem to enrich the exchange of experiences and learning.

Regarding the involvement of different actors in the research, the team of researchers initially assumed that consulting processes arising from a mixed point of view, as advocated by people outside the organization – in this case, the researchers – but qualified and given the approval of the AEGC and the Network, both enrich and make the learning more powerful and contextual.

In this case, it was particularly relevant to work and agree on the proposal, as the purpose was to prepare a tool for teachers to guide the development and self-evaluation of their actions. It was also hoped that teachers would decide to use a tool for reflection on a voluntary basis. No doubt, if the Network teachers deemed the tool irrelevant – if it did not meet their needs and interests, say – they would not use it. We are thus drawn to conclude that consulting processes are pointless if they do not take into account from inception how future users will appropriate their output, even if they offer a thoughtful and rigorous technical and academic exercise.

The assessment made by the AEGC and the Network was also hugely positive. They contend that it was highly enriching to have an external point of view to help

systematize the work performed, to provide it with a name, and to test it from the standpoint of theory and academic knowledge. People engaged in 'direct action' usually find it hard to explain what they do or to provide theoretical support for it. Cooperating with the researchers facilitated such reflection, however, allowing them to think in relation to different ideas and criteria that improve strategies and methods of social intervention. In this sense, it particularly enhanced how receptive and flexible researchers' attitudes were, how open and available they made themselves to using their expertise to better service the mission and the Network itself.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has described the process of developing a quality criteria system for EGC actions undertaken by teachers belonging to IO's Network of Educators and its main components. As previously mentioned, this is a process where the finished product is only the beginning. Numerous activities are pending development which will see the Network teachers take over the system and modify, expand, and enrich it.

The relationship between the university, the Network, and IO's team has been equally as fruitful and enriching. We believe the process has highlighted the importance of the attitudes inherent in the EGC when performing research and linking the academic world and practice. It would have been very difficult to drive the process in this way without the attributes referred to in this paper, including, among others, understanding and acknowledging diversity and interrelationships, or skills and attitudes such as empathy and the ability to negotiate, or analysing the power experts have.

Lastly, we would like to underline the importance of understanding 'quality' in a different way. The 'structure' leads us to link quality to efficiency, efficacy, and compliance with external indicators, where the role of the teacher is limited, on many occasions, to filling in index cards. We believe this work might widen such a vision by presenting different elements and tools and giving greater prominence to the educational actors themselves in analysing and constructing the quality criteria. This is a difficult task, particularly nowadays, but not impossible when one benefits from the engagement and enthusiasm of the teachers comprising the Network of Educators.

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## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Among them we should highlight: the institutional guiding framework on citizenship dated 16 July 2009; Report III of the seminar 'Educar para una ciudadanía global' [Educating for global citizenship]; Report IV of the seminar 'Educar para una ciudadanía global' [Educating for global citizenship]; and de Paz (2007).

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