

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION



Promoting an Environmental Culture for Children through Integral Art and the Earth Charter

Cardiela Amézcuca Luna¹

Introduction



Cardiela Amézcuca Luna is an art teacher, choreographer, and interpreter of what she calls “participative dance.” She is also a cultural promoter within the community, as well as an expert on regional development and environmental management. Since 1992, she has been undertaking an extensive task in rural Mexican communities – promoting and encouraging the arts, community culture, eco-tourism, gender equity, children’s rights, sustainable development, and caring for the environment.

Her endeavours consist of developing art projects and workshops that integrate the Earth Charter. By offering “integral art” workshops for children, Cardiela has worked towards her dream of setting up a solid ethical foundation for the harmonious growth and development of children within the different communities of Michoacán State, Mexico, where she lives.

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The Communities for Hope project

“Communities for Hope” is a non-formal education project for children from three to twelve years of age – pre-school and primary school – especially within the state of Michoacán. This project stemmed from the dream of strengthening those communities that are committed to building a more sustainable future for themselves and their children, and celebrating their shared commitment to life and collective creativity. This project is implemented in conjunction with two civil society associations: ProDanza (an NGO working since 2001 to promote and disseminate arts and culture) and Echeri (working mainly on community projects for sustainable development since 2006).² Integral art is the means of expression within the “Communities for Hope” workshops; it includes dance, drama, music, storytelling, reading, writing, drawing and painting.

The purpose of “Communities for Hope” is to help alleviate the lack of materials and knowledge in the rural and indigenous communities in Michoacán State, in order to generate processes of children’s environmental culture by using the most gracious, free and expressive means: integral art. This refers to dancing, painting, music and literature created by children to build bridges and communicate with the society to which they belong. Through this approach, children can develop the creative tools required to express what they feel, think, and do in order to protect, restore, and enjoy their natural resources.

This project has used the Earth Charter as its guide and inspiration. The focus is on training promoters of environmental culture for children through the arts. The first group of trainees comprised twenty promoters within ten of the Community Development Committees (CODECOS) of the municipality of Erongarícuaro in Michoacán (rural and indigenous communities living on the banks of Lake Pátzcuaro).

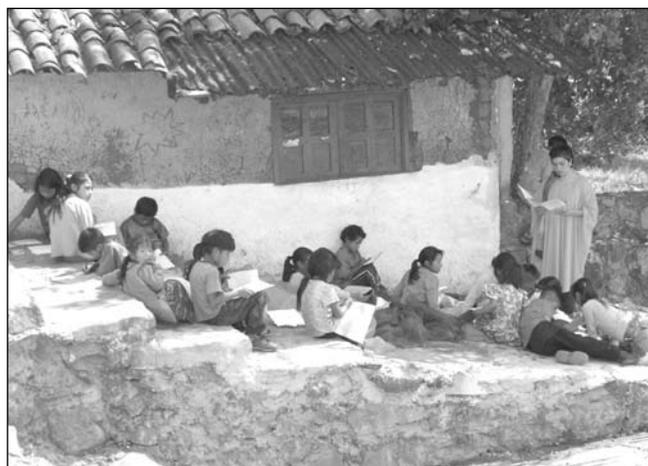
In order to encourage the establishment of the Community Spaces for Child Environmental Culture (ECCAI, its Spanish acronym), the project offered community workshops focused on creating an environmental culture for children using art and the Earth

Charter. The workshops concluded with the creation of a workbook for children where they shared – through drawings, paintings and literature – their views, reflections and experiences using the Earth Charter in their communities. This project was funded by the Programme in Support of Civil Society Organizations for Joint Social Responsibility of the State of Michoacán, through the Secretariat for Social Development.

From September to December 2006, a workshop was carried out to train interested stakeholders from the CODECOS in Erongarícuaro and other adjoining municipalities to become Promoters of Environmental Culture for Children. During the workshop, trainees were given the basic tools to encourage significant learning about environmental culture for children, as well as to strengthen regional campaigns for environmental education from the perspective of cultural art, community and family, and through the establishment of ECCAIs.

Following this, workshops in environmental culture for children were carried out in each of the ten CODECOS and their communities, under the name “Enchantment for making glow-worms grow.” These featured activities such as a dance and participative storytelling session called “Rag Feet and the Earth Charter.”

As a result of this experience, in February 2007, a basic manual and a graphic memoir of the workshops were released with the view to sharing (and replicating) the experiences of these teachers and cultural promoters for children.



Workshop at Colonia Revolución community.

²The members of this project’s working group are Paulina Odilia Molina Capilla and Santiago Marcos Cruz in cultural promotion; Ramón Merino Ayala in graphics, editorial and audiovisual promotion; and Cardiel Amézcuca Luna in coordination.

The Earth Charter for children³ is the instrument used to implement the workshops about creating an environmental culture for children through “integral art,” because it encourages a reflection upon existing values and promotes a love for life.

According to Cardiel, “...the Earth Charter is our guide, art is the means of expression, children are the fertile soil, their own culture is their nourishment, and the environment for sustainable development is the collective construction of a better world from within the community spaces of environmental culture for children.”

Methodology⁴

Various artistic actions (for each Earth Charter principle) are carried out in the workshops of environmental culture for children, to strengthen their understanding of – and awareness about – environmental care and the relations between human beings. The average duration of the workshops is three hours (for children of three to six years of age), and four hours (for children aged six to twelve).

The following materials are needed to carry out the workshops: a large, empty, well-lit, ventilated room, or a plaza, or football field (or any ample community space that poses no hazards); a recorder with CD player; plain, white letter-size paper; and Crayons. The special materials required, such as fabric, music, etc., should be made available by the workshop coordinator.

All materials are used on a collective basis, and we (“Communities for Hope”), encourage their handling and use based on collaboration, not competition. For example, a circle or a spiral is formed (depending on space) with crayons, from which each child will take only one crayon, use it for his/her drawing, put it back in its place, and then take the next colour s/he needs, in such a way that the circle is always in place, and no one argues or snatches materials away from someone else.

The process starts with a conversation about our actions, in general; we then disclose the principles of the Earth Charter adapted for children; and subsequently there is

a discussion about what can be done in various artistic areas. A starting and closing ritual for the session is created collectively and adopted as a greeting and farewell practice. This practice may consist in making a circle and jumping, giving one another a “bear hug,” or walking and looking into one another’s eyes and giving them your best smile.

As adapted from the Earth Charter for Children:

Principle I. Respect and care for living things

1. Get to know, respect and protect human beings, animals and plants.

- a) Get to know and respect the way of life of human beings, animals and plants.
- b) Provide care and protection to plants and animals.
- c) Act against animal cruelty.
- d) Collaborate in the defence of plants and animals in danger of extinction.

2. Care for and love all living things.

We, human beings, created the environment in which we live and it is up to us to make it better.

- a) Respect the lives of all living things.
- b) Get to know and defend your rights and those of others.
- c) Protect the wellbeing of people and other living things.

The following are suggested activities to represent these principles and sub-principles:

Dance

- Represent, with movement and without sound, an animal found in the local community such as a bird or a fish. First, do this individually, and then in pairs.
- Try to imitate animals from faraway places (like Africa or the North Pole, if you’re in Mexico). Move around trying to mimic the way in which they eat, play, and fall asleep. Learn to feel the difference between the animals that you know and those you do not.

³This refers to a specific Earth Charter version that was adapted for children and developed by a group of teachers in Mexico.

⁴This methodology is described and elaborated further in the ‘Basic Manual of Environmental Culture for Children through Art and the Earth Charter,’ posted on the Internet.

- Repeat this exercise, only this time mimic herds, making larger groups, and performing the actions that animals might enjoy the most and the least
- Represent the dangers faced by animals in extinction in the region, and in other areas of the world. Every time that the games are changed, all the animals go to sleep and once again wake up in the form of children.

You will need: Ample space and comfortable clothes, and a recorder with music from nature or an instrumental piece, if available

Music

- Mimic the sounds of animals; create a melody, singing softly at first, and then louder, slowly, and then faster.
- Add to the melody the sounds of objects such as stones, falling leaves, seeds rubbed between hands or shaken in a can.
- Use the same melody, but gradually eliminate the sounds until there is only one left, and then slowly incorporate all the sounds once again until everyone is making a sound all together.
- Vary any one of these themes; change the intensity and the speed; alternate sounds of voices and percussion objects.

You will need: cans, tins and containers of different materials (seeds, small stones, marbles, pods with seeds inside), sticks of different sizes and textures and, if available, small percussion instruments.

Visual Arts

- Draw your favourite animals.
- Draw them in different colours, sizes and textures.
- Draw them doing unusual things, such as a rooster swimming or a fish flying.
- Draw them in dangerous situations, and in situations of freedom and care.
- Turn the drawing into a collage, pasting things such as feathers, soil, flowers, buttons, or whatever you like.

You will need: Paper, Crayons, colouring pencils or felt-tip pens, glue and several materials such as pasta, soups, seeds, flowers, dry or green leaves,

buttons, yarn, small pieces of fabric, feathers, stones, soil and small branches.

Literature

- In teams, write a story about animals in the community and the way in which they are taken care of; describe the dangers they face and how to resolve them; describe the characters involved in the story and give them names; describe in detail the place and time in which the story takes place (there has to be a beginning, a conflict, a development, an outcome and an end).
- Join all the stories of the group together and turn it into one big story.

You will need: Paper sheets or notebooks to write on; pencils or pens; and an invitation for an oral narration by grandmothers and grandfathers.⁵

Drama

- Create a play based on the story you wrote.
- Assign the roles to be played by each character.
- Select a narrator.
- Make the costumes with the materials at hand.
- Give each character time to rehearse his/her role.
- Come together to direct the play as a collective production.
- Perform the play before the audience.

You will need: Old clothes and fabric for costumes and reusable make-up.



Workshop at Tenencia Lázaro Cárdenas Community.

⁵ The invitation to grandmothers and grandfathers has to be made ahead of time so that they may be able to become acquainted with the nature of the session, as well as the place and time. They can be asked to bring objects, photographs, newspapers or magazines to help them tell the stories they will share. It is important that the children get to know the experience of grandmothers and grandfathers because they are a part of a 'living history,' and part of the intangible community heritage.

Comments for facilitators

The theme is reinforced in each of the actions, and you can gradually incorporate the critical and creative reflections about what is done to build, and what is done to destroy; look at both possibilities and visualize where each action will take us. For example, when we give care, there's reproduction; and when we destroy, there's extinction.

You may use the same artistic actions, and vary the subject. For example, instead of using animals you could portray, draw and describe the people and plants in the community. What are interesting are the variables you can incorporate in different locations within the community. Keep in mind that the variations, mixtures and metaphors constitute the salt of life. You can blend dance and drama, sound and drawing, dancing and singing while you write a story – the door is wide open.

Lessons Learned

When working with children under six years of age, non-verbal communication works well. So does giving short and concise instructions, reading the Earth Charter out loud, using books with large pictures and little writing, free and expressive movement, and reflection based on personal stories regarding the environment and community living.

When working with children six years and older, who know how to read and write, verbal and corporal communication prove to be more effective. This age group likes more detailed instructions with examples, sensorial and entertaining stimuli, quiet reading, and individual reflection on the Earth Charter adaptation for children. It might be useful to start the conversation by asking the students on how the Earth Charter principles are reflected in their own family and community settings. They like books with more information and innovative pictures, their movement is more rhythmic and collective, and they like to practice choreographies with defined steps agreed between them.

In the case of adults, it is exciting to watch the moment they regress to their childhood and remember the free expression of their prejudice and fears. During the training of the promoters an emphasis is made on "going back to their own childhoods" to acquire the necessary elements to stimulate children during the workshops, it also helps to build links that transcend teacher-student relations and encourages meaningful learning that is circular, loving and ethical.

The project has generated an impressive response at the community, family and individual levels. This could be in large part due to the fact that art is a means of expression that dignifies action, and community members readily embraced the Earth Charter as an expression about what they would like to improve in their relationships, community, and environment. In



Activities at the community of La Zarzamora



Activities at the community of Nocutzepo.

addition, the document was found to clearly express the principles and values of the community's ancestral indigenous culture, which remains an important part of identity in the region.

Fundamental to the success of the project has been a 'bottom-up' approach: the needs of the community were clearly defined in order to minimize the imposition of external beliefs or values. It is necessary to be coherent with the premise of acting locally, but thinking globally. Instead of imposing, one learns to share; instead of convincing, one begins to fall in love – with every space, every moment, with every participant, with every expression.

During the training sessions for community promoters, we have been engaged in constant reflection. It is necessary to remind ourselves to intertwine local knowledge with a sense of strengthened global identity. This will allow us to value ancestral wisdom while drawing upon global knowledge and strengthening the community structure.

Thus, within the context of the "Communities for Hope" project, it has been important to define what we understand as identity. As noted by Mac Gregor:

...an individual's identity is nurtured by its immediate surroundings, it will prosper and be renewed with the modest but permanent contributions of the individuals of which it is made up. Identity is the past, the history and the collective memory, and it is also the present. So to make the best of it, it is important to respect it and appreciate it. It is necessary to defend what's yours, but it is also worthwhile taking others' experiences that may help shape, add to, or enrich your identity.⁶

And, as noted by Bonfil Batalla:

With this outlook on identity, the Earth Charter has become the leitmotiv of the artistic actions weaving the local wisdom of the Purépecha indigenous culture into the knowledge of the emerging global community, to stimulate every niche of one's own culture, to which children have always applied their resourcefulness, originality and creativity.⁷

In the process of working for and with children, we have come to learn that they are the architects of culture, and not only the recipients of culture and knowledge. With this in mind, it is crucial to develop meaningful relations with children through a dialectic and collaborative process, in which we can all participate, grow and learn.

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⁶Mac Gregor Campuzano, José Antonio. *Reflections regarding 'identity.'* PACAEP/SEP. 1995.

⁷Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. *Ones' Own and the Others' An Approach to the Problem of Cultural Control.* In *Theory and Analysis of Culture*. Ed. Jiménez Montiel, Gilberto. CONACULTA-ICOCULT. Mexico. 2005.