

The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair on Education
for Sustainable Development
and the Earth Charter



Prepared by Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE

Edited by: Alicia Jimenez and Douglas F. Williamson

Copy-editing: Melanie Gracy and Stephanie Hickel

Translations: Melanie Gracy, Andrea Zubialde, Gloriana Lara and Stephanie Hickel

Layout: Adriana Molina V.

I.S.B.N: 978-9977-925-85-1

370

H436h The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education: Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter [publicación digitalizada] / editado por Alicia Jiménez Elizondo y Douglas F. Williamson. – San José, C.R. : Universidad para la Paz, 2014.

1 recurso en línea (106 p.) : pdf ; 2 Mb

ISBN 978-9977-925-85-1

1. Educación. 2. Desarrollo Sostenible. I. Título.

This publication is developed under the UNESCO Chair on Education for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter, coordinated by the Earth Charter Center for ESD.

Earth Charter International and Center for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE C/O University for Peace

P.O. Box 138 - 6100

San Jose, Costa Rica

Email: info@earthcharter.org

Website: www.earthcharter.org

October, 2014



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



• UNESCO Chair on Education
• for Sustainable Development
• and the Earth Charter

Promoting sustainable schools through the Earth Charter: The Experience with Eco-schools in Venezuela

Rosa Maria Chacon, Nila Pellegrini, Juana Pujaco

We must be the change that we want to see in the world. For this, it is necessary to teach how to take care of our planet, because what is not loved is not cared for and what is not known is not loved.
(VUA, 2014)

Introduction

Planet Earth's future lies in the hands of today's youth. Principles such as care and respect for the Earth must be taught from an early age inside and outside of the classroom. Communication and training are the basic requirements for achieving coexistence between human beings and nature. Sustainable development entails the construction of more eco-friendly human settlements with respect for all life forms throughout the community with attentiveness to their cultural characteristics. That is the premise for the project: "Model for Eco-Schools, Educating for Sustainable Development". This project takes into consideration the Venezuelan's educational framework, where the Earth Charter has been incorporated as an ethical foundation for educating youth about sustainable development.

This article presents the experience of a project implemented by the Urban Life and Environment Research Group of the Dean of Investigation and Development of the University of Simon Bolivar (VUA-USB) in Caracas, Venezuela. This research group

developed educational programmes that respond to UNESCO's call to promote values and attitudes on sustainability. As a result, the Earth Charter's principles were incorporated as a component of the schools' current curriculum.

In 2011, VUA-USB created the Eco-Schools Model for Venezuela with the aim of promoting values and principles for sustainability by expanding knowledge and developing abilities and activities in a comprehensive manner within a participatory process (VUA, 2011).

The initial framework was developed in response to a group member's concern for maintaining values and guiding youth on a positive path; an abundance of youth are becoming disoriented and developing negative behaviors at an early age, which leads to delinquency. Thus, the model that is currently implemented in two schools in the State of Miranda in Caracas, Venezuela was developed with the intention of educating youth and keeping children out of trouble. Support of various multilateral organizations, such as NGOs, small donation programmes of the UN (PPD-PNUD), and the Development Bank of Latin America (Corporacion Andina de Foment, CAF) contributed to the funding and theoretical framework for the project.



One of the participating schools was the Educational Unit of the University Simon Bolivar (UEUSB). UEUSB is a private school located in Sartenejas Valley in the Municipality of Baruta, which is a transitional area composed of urban and rural development with medium-low socio-economic levels. The University of Simon Bolivar receives an average of four hundred students a year that ranges from pre-school through twelfth grade. Currently, there are forty-three permanent teachers and six full-time employees in the school. Roughly two hundred and eighty families send their children to UEUSB. The other participatory school is the State Educational Unit Abillio Reyes Ochoa (UEEARO). UEEARO is a public school located in La Mata sector of the Municipality of El Hatillo. Currently, the area is inhabited by agricultural land that belongs to families on a low socio-economic level. Five hundred and fifty students ranging from preschool to high school currently attend UEEARO. It is composed of thirty-one teachers, four full time employees, and students from two hundred and seventy families.

Implementation

Five documents were utilized for the initial development phases of the school model:

1. Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 aims to improve socio-environmental conditions in the schools and their surrounding environment.
2. The Eco-School's programme led by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), which promotes environmental awareness and education around the world.
3. The Earth Charter as the ethical framework, it contains 16 principles and 61 sub-principles that stem from four central pillars: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social/economic justice and democracy, non-violence and peace.
4. The UN's Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), whose objective is to build a just society, a better world and a more viable future thanks to the access of education and its benefits.
5. Legal framework, national guidelines and Venezuelan history were brought forward to provide direction and guidelines in the local context.

The methodological process adopts a participatory approach regarding the interaction of schools, the environment and society through discourse and action. A summary of the methodological process steps is as follows:

1. The establishment of an Environmental Sustainability Committee (III phase).
2. A situation analysis to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the schools. Consecutively, a vision of the desired future was established under the various perspectives of students, professors and the directive body. In this exercise, participants envisioned their schools as models that considered respect for the environment, societal and cultural aspects (step 4).
3. Initial behavioral codes were established to orient differing forms of action throughout the community to achieve sustainable community attitudes (steps 4 & 5).
4. Development of environmental educational seminars on topics such as climate change, education for sustainable development, risk factors, solid waste management, energy use, water management and the introduction of the Earth Charter.

Through an analytical and reflective process, we concluded that the "Earth Charter" offers a unique and transformative approach for education for sustainability. The Earth Charter is a framework grounded on principles and values that serve as modifiers of the traditional approach to environmental issues and education. Furthermore, the Earth Charter stresses the importance of a fully participatory holistic approach, which has allowed VUA-USB to promote the change of values and attitudes of the youth despite the hostile environment that they are compelled to live in.



Fuente: Elaboración propia

The VUA-USB group implements the following activities utilizing the Earth Charter's principles to help clarify the education's role on building more sustainable societies:

Activity 1: Introducing the Earth Charter (45 minutes): Lecture on the Earth Charter for school faculty members and high school students. It presents the origins and content of the Charter.

Activity 2: The Earth Charter as ethical framework for education (60 minutes):

Target groups are fifth and sixth grade students, high school students and teachers. The session aims at raising awareness on the importance of having a sustainable life based on the values and principles of the Earth Charter. An icebreaker activity during the session involved choosing words such as justice, peace, democracy, education, environment, solidarity, Earth, ecology, citizenry, consciousness, equity, respect and ethics. Participants were then asked to choose a word that spoke to them. As a result, a conversation was initiated regarding the words' meaning, connotations and their role in their lives. Students and professors then discussed their relation to the Earth Charter, the importance of teamwork, the basic knowledge of values that facilitate positive change in society, ecological integrity for the sustainability of social life, economic justice, and the search for building a sustainable, non-violent and peaceful society.

Activity 3: The Earth Charter for kids (45 minutes). A session for preschool through second grade. A short video and an audio-visual presentation on "Why an Earth Charter?" were introduced. Materials for painting and motivating messages were provided to encourage individual thought and expression.

Activity 4: Values cartoons (40 minutes). The target group were students of grades three through six. Two videos were presented that explained the Earth Charter's principles, which were later expanded upon by the VUA group. The cartoons aim at achieving full participation of the students in the identification of characters awash with messages and symbolism. A hands-on activity was then carried out that asks the participants to make drawings that represent the Earth Charter's principles, and the way in which the principles can be applied in daily life.

The project in these schools concluded with the creation of posters that represented what participants learned.

Results

Overall, students expressed a deep interest in learning, particularly those in grades pre-k through five. These students demonstrated their own knowledge of current environmental issues, affirming their duty and engagement in protecting Earth. Children under six years of age expressed a necessity for working with images and videos that presented environmental issues to conclude, "what should be" in the face of environmental and societal issues. Participants over six years of age, given their abilities to read and write, were able to interpret directives and rules more clearly, which allowed space for analysis and reflection on the motivating principles of the Earth Charter. With the oldest students and faculty members it was important to make extra efforts to motivate them so they could learn and unlearn some environmental practices. Nonetheless, positive behavioral changes were observed regarding water conservation, energy consumption, respect for colleagues, and interest in the participation of community activities.



Students' posters

Lessons learned

We recognized that learning occurs while actively participating in the creation of viable solutions that were formulated in accordance with age. Students were initially lacking the necessary background to engage in environmental discourse. However, a deep interest was encountered while addressing environmental issues amongst students throughout the various seminar groups. On the contrary, we perceived a lack of interest in addressing and discussing environmental issues amongst professors and the oldest students; this affected their interest in proposing ideas and participating in bringing about solutions. In this sense, we think that the implementation of training programmes for environmental educators and instructors using the Earth Charter is crucial to carry out successful environmental education programmes.

From the activities carried out in both schools, we conclude that in order to incorporate sustainability values in education it is important to link students' everyday actions with what is taught in class. When we tried to promote the Earth Charter's principles without linking them with the participants' local context we failed to convince students and teachers to bring about changes in their behavior.

Undoubtedly, is it not sufficient to promote the Earth Charter's sustainability values and principles solely with argumentation; it is essential to find the right way to transfer these values and principles in the classroom, which is by far the largest challenge (VUA, 2011).

Contact Information:

Rosa María Chacón

Coordinator of VUA Group, Professor
of Urban Planning

Simon Bolivar University, Venezuela

rmchacon@usb.ve

Nila Pellegrini

Researcher of VUA Group
Professor of Environmental Studies

Simon Bolivar University, Venezuela

pellegrini@usb.ve

Juana Pujaico

Research Assistant of VUA Group
PhD Student

Simon Bolivar University

juprodriguez@usb.ve

References

Earth Charter International Secretariat. ¿Qué es la Carta de la Tierra? Downloaded in 2008 from: <http://www.iepe.org/cartadelatierra/queeslacarta.htm>

SEMARNAT, Federal Government of Mexican United States. 2008. Experiencias Educativas con la Carta de la Tierra. Vivir Mejor. México.

VUA. Urban and Environmental Investigation Group. 2011. Modelo de Ecoescuela para Venezuela en el Marco de la Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible. University Simón Bolívar, Caracas, Venezuela. www.vua.grupos.usb.ve

Earth Charter International and Center for Education for Sustainable
Development at UPEACE C/O University for Peace
P.O. Box 138 - 6100 San Jose, Costa Rica
Email: info@earthcharter.org
Website: www.earthcharter.org

