

Journal of Education for Sustainable Development

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Journal of Education for Sustainable Development 2010 4: 219

DOI: 10.1177/097340821000400209

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Going Global in Arlington, Virginia

EDGAR MIRANDA

Abstract

In July 2008, the Ashlawn Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, began the implementation of the Global Citizenship Project, which is designed around the four guiding principles of the Earth Charter: respect and care for the community of life; ecological integrity; social and economic justice; and democracy, nonviolence and peace. The intent of this project is to develop an understanding among students of what it means to be a global citizen through an instructional program that is hands-on and weaves the four principles throughout the curriculum. This article provides some background on the school, the planning process, the design and the implementation of the project.

Keywords: Global citizenship, social justice, diversity, integrated curriculum, multicultural education, Earth Charter

BACKGROUND

Ashlawn Elementary School is one of the smallest elementary schools in the Arlington, Virginia school district. Located just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., this neighbourhood school serves approximately 380 students. Despite its small size it is highly diverse, with a student population body representing

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over 30 different countries. Almost 20 per cent of its students receive English as a second language instruction. It houses two preschool special education classrooms serving youngsters as young as two, and a Montessori class with students aged three to five years. It is also a school that has consistently exceeded the standards of performance set by the Virginia State Education Department.

Despite its academic successes, this school made the decision to take its students to a new level. Believing that the purpose of school is more than just to get students to perform well on standardised tests, Ashlawn took the steps to provide students with an educational experience that serves to develop their intellect as well as their sense of what it means to be a citizen.

Taking inspiration from the Earth Charter (2000) and using some of the best models in multicultural education, service learning and sustainable education, Ashlawn has implemented a program with the goal of developing lifelong learners and responsible global citizens, and the expectation that students will extend themselves beyond strong academic achievement to become true global citizens with both an awareness of and a concern for the people of the world and the Earth, on which we live.

Visitors are met by the school's mission statement posted on the wall facing the front doors:

The mission of Ashlawn Elementary School is to provide our students with responsive and stimulating instruction that will nurture a lifelong love of learning and create contributing members of our local, national and global communities.

With this spirit and vision, staff and parents convened during the 2007–08 school year to begin the process of developing a project that would dramatically impact the vision and design of the school. Building on the global ideals of the Earth Charter organisation, this group developed the Global Citizenship Project by incorporating those principles into the framework of the strategic plan of Arlington Public Schools. One of the goals of this strategic plan specifically calls for schools to prepare students for success in a diverse and changing world. Working over the span of several months, seven staff members, four parents and two administrators collaborated to create this new design. The group met several times to brainstorm ideas and draft portions of the proposal that would eventually have to be presented to the Arlington Board of Education for its approval. The collaborative work of this group further integrated the four components of the Earth Charter into the curriculum, which gives this project its distinct design.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

During the planning phase, the team reviewed the work of leading researchers in education and multiculturalism. In the following paragraphs, there is a brief summary of three of the sources they found most helpful.

One of the leading experts in multicultural education is James Banks, the director of the Centre for Multicultural Education at University of Washington–Seattle. Banks (1995) describes five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration,

knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy and empowering school culture and social structure. Content integration happens when teachers include a variety of cultures and peoples in the curriculum. Knowledge construction is a process that takes place when teachers help students challenge biases and cultural assumptions through an array of activities and techniques. When teachers work with students to change cultural and racial strategies, they are moving towards prejudice reduction. Equity pedagogy occurs when teachers strive to reach and teach all students using a range of techniques. The last dimension, empowering social culture and social structure, requires altering the entire system of a school—changes in one area must be followed with changes in others in order for real reform to take place. Working together, the dimensions have ‘the potential to transform schools and other educational institutions in ways that will enable them to prepare students to live and function effectively in the coming century’.

In reviewing research on the effects of education for global citizenship, Eva Zygmunt and Lynn Staley (2006) note positive outcomes including greater ‘global intelligences’, understanding of global issues and improved attitudes towards others. They note that ‘these opportunities can equip children with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to succeed in our increasingly complex and interconnected world landscape’. By learning about the interconnectedness of systems and collective responsibility through active participation, students become empowered and more accepting of cultural diversity and build an ethic of volunteer service.

Applying the service-learning approach to environmental education, James McDonald and Lynn Dominguez (2005) find that students who take ownership of knowledge through connections between the classroom and the real world remain involved in environmental issues after they have left the classroom: ‘Effective citizenship requires active participation in real-life, meaningful experiences’. The service-learning model that McDonald and Dominguez used featured collaboration between school and community, integration throughout the curriculum, opportunities to use knowledge in real life and chances to enhance and extend the program. As a result, students increased engagement and had a stronger sense of caring for others and for issues in the real world.

Ashlawn’s Global Citizenship Project (GCP) incorporated elements of this research into each of its four components. By incorporating curriculum integration, real-life experiences, ownership of knowledge and partnerships with the community—as well as other aspects of multicultural education, service learning, and sustainability education—this exemplary project seeks to create a strong school community made up of budding global citizens.

THE EARTH CHARTER AND THE GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP PROJECT

As was stated earlier, the Earth Charter, specifically its four principals, was key to the development of the GCP.

- Respect and care for the community of life
- Ecological integrity

- Social and economic justice
- Democracy, nonviolence and peace

Unfortunately, the language in the original principles was intended for an adult audience, not for children. Therefore, one of the first things the planning committee did was seek to put the four principles into 'child friendly' language. In its first year of implementation the principles were rewritten at a level more appropriate for children.

- Diversity
- Conservation
- Social justice
- Peace through nonviolent means

Although the new descriptors were understood by most of the children, they were revised once more, based on the response to the following question, 'What does a global citizen do?' The students were also introduced to an acronym, APHW, to help them remember the responses to that question.

A global citizen:
A - Accepts all people
P - Protects the environment
H - Helps those in need
W - Works for peace

THE FOUR COMPONENTS

Figure 1 shows the interconnection among the four components of the global citizenship project: diversity, conservation, social justice and peace.

Component 1, Diversity: Develop and Foster Respect and Care for Cultures around the World and within our School Community

Building on the assumption that the world is a global village, this big idea aims to expose children to different cultures around the world and in the local community. Activities are intended not only to teach facts about new places, but also to provide authentic interaction with individuals and groups from the countries being studied. Each grade focuses on a different continent:

Pre-K/Kindergarten: Survey of continents; focus on Antarctica and Australia
Grade 1: South America
Grade 2: Asia
Grade 3: Africa
Grade 4: North America
Grade 5: Europe

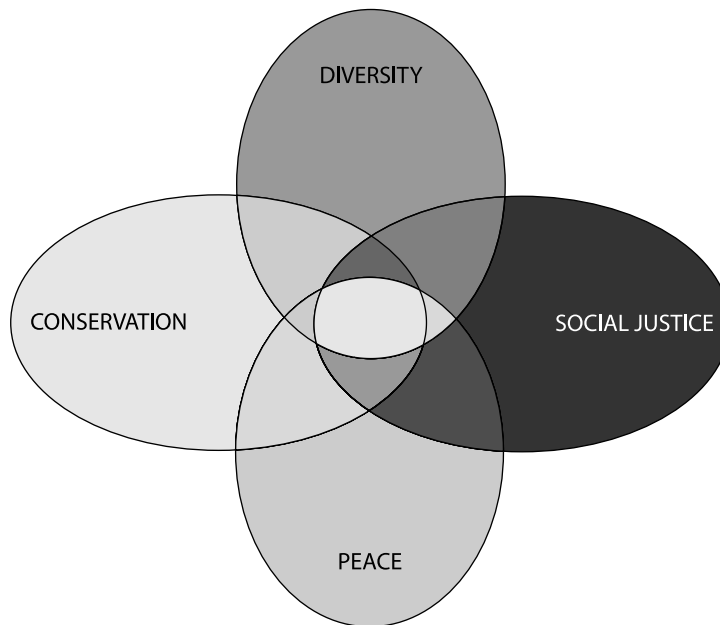


Figure 1 The four components of global citizenship

Component 2, Conservation: Develop and Foster Respect and Care for the Earth's Ecological Systems

Under this component, Ashlawn students will take action to protect and restore the integrity of ecological systems, adopt patterns of production and consumption to safeguard our environment and learn new information regarding ecological sustainability. Ashlawn already has numerous programs focused on the importance of Earth's ecology and the need to protect it. These activities are now viewed through the lens of the Global Citizenship Project, showing the interconnection of protecting our local environment and the global environmental situation.

Component 3, Social Justice: Develop and Foster Respect and Care for Human and Economic Development that is Equitable and Sustainable

This component explores the principles of equity and equality in terms of economics, gender and racial/ethnic diversity. Activities under this objective provide students with experiences that help them better understand the role they can play in eradicating poverty, ensuring gender equity, upholding the rights of all without discrimination and promoting a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity. Within each grade, overarching themes of the school curriculum will guide instruction:

- Pre-K/Kindergarten: Needs and wants, community helpers
- Grade 1: Goods and services, saving money
- Grade 2: Consumer economics, resources

Grade 3: Economic choices and interdependence

Grade 4: Local economy

Grade 5: Global economy

Component 4, Peace: Develop and Foster Leadership Skills to Promote Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace

This component empowers students to be active participants in decision-making processes and to make educated choices. Students will actively help select and create activities which provide them with opportunities to take on leadership positions, demonstrate democratic principles, and promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace.

In addition, Ashlawn highlights an historical figure as a role model for each grade, choosing these figures based on the school curriculum. Figures may include international leaders that exemplify qualities of tolerance, nonviolence and peace.

Pre-K/Kindergarten: Pocahontas

Grade 1: Benjamin Franklin

Grade 2: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Grade 3: Rosa Parks

Grade 4: Harriet Tubman

Grade 5: Each class to identify a Nobel Peace Laureate

IMPLEMENTATION

Summer of 2008

In July 2008, the staff at Ashlawn initiated implementation of the GCP. It began with a group of teachers meeting during the summer to design and write the curriculum that would launch this new project. Everyone agreed that successful implementation would depend on how easily the design could be integrated into the curriculum, rather than proposing that GCP be one more topic added to a busy curriculum. As an 'add-on' or 'fringe' topic that might go away in time, GCP would not be taken seriously. The key to a successful implementation was whether the four principles could be woven into the existing curriculum so they would become part of the norm.

The teachers, meeting as grade-level teams, developed lists of the major topics and themes they would cover throughout the year. They then brainstormed ideas and activities under each of the four principles that could be incorporated within the topics and themes they were already planning to cover. The result of this was a 'teacher friendly' management design. The 'implementation plan chart' was key in helping to achieve this goal.

Three-Year Plan

To thoughtfully introduce GCP, a three-year plan was designed that would gradually phase in different aspects with the hope of full implementation by the end of the third year.

Year 1

- Provide 'Understanding by Design' (UBD) staff development
- Write 'Understanding by Design' units in Summer 2008
- Publicise the features of the exemplary project to the Ashlawn community
- Implement 'Understanding by Design' units in Fall 2008
- Design the student portfolio with input from instructional staff
- Connect current evening and service events to the curriculum and the exemplary project
- Identify exemplary project coordinators
- Refine humanities project artist selection to meet the needs of the exemplary project
- Establish new student groups such as peer mediation or a recycling team
- Establish grade level pairings for a learning buddies program

Year 2

- Continue 'Understanding by Design' development and collection of study units
- Establish additional partnerships with organisations outside Ashlawn
- Integrate new evening events and community service projects that focus on student activism and relate to the curriculum
- Establish a sister school program
- Increase student and parent involvement in the planning and implementation of service activities
- Review/revise/continue activities from year one

Year 3

- Create annual culminating exemplary project visuals such as school murals or a quilt
- Encourage staff exchange program
- Encourage staff members to pursue Fulbright scholarships
- Review/revise/continue activities from years one and two

Highlights of the First Year

When the Ashlawn students returned for the 2008–09 school year, they were immediately engulfed in this new project. The GCP provided them with a multitude of exciting learning experiences throughout the school year. Here is a list of some:

- Kickoff activity in October featuring Lynne Cherry, author of *The Great Kapok Tree*
- Chalk for peace in September
- Pen pal project for grades 3–5 with the American International School in Costa Rica

- Student exchange between grade 5 Ashlawn students and students from the American International School in Costa Rica
- Second grade mosaic on the GCP
- Visits and programs with numerous artists in residence
- Monthly preparation of meals by students in grades 3–5 for homeless shelters
- Unit on biographies of Nobel peace laureates in grade 5
- Heifer Project fundraiser in grade 3
- Unit on endangered species and adoption of animals in grade 2
- Full implementation of school-wide composting project
- Partnership with senior residence
- Clean up of local park by grade 4 with community partners in Arlington Hilton Hotel
- In-school visits to the seven continents by kindergarten classes
- Quilt on energy conservation by grade 3
- Installation of Peace Pole in closing ceremony in June.

As the year progressed, the planners were asking, ‘Are they getting it? Are the students developing an understanding of what it means to be a global citizen?’ An answer was provided in January during an activity in one of the second grade classes. During this month the students composed their own ‘I Have a Dream Speech’ in honour of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday and his famous 1963 speech in Washington D.C. This is a common practice in many schools across the United States and the themes and ideas expressed often call for equal rights, peace and so on. However, some new themes popped up in the speeches among the second graders at Ashlawn. Students were saying things such as, ‘I have a dream that one day all people will have clean water...enough food to eat...safe housing’, and so on. It was truly an inspiring and affirming experience. It illustrated to everyone that elementary school children are not too young to understand what is needed to change the world for the better—that is what the long-term goal of the GCP is all about.

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