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Practicing ESD at School

Integration of Formal and Nonformal Education Methods Based on the Earth Charter (Belarusian Experience)

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Abstract

The Earth Charter represents the philosophy and ethics necessary to create a new period of human civilization. Understanding and adoption of this new vision is the most important mission of education for sustainable development (ESD). This article argues that for successful implementation

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of ESD principles at school, the school education system should be changed into a resource centre that initiates and supports students' inclusion into processes of sustainable development in their own communities. Teachers' self-definition as co-learners in the educational process is an essential part of this change. Moreover, in many instances the integration of nonformal educational initiatives led by youth into the formal educational system makes the transition to ESD more effective and sustainable. By introducing the activities of Youth International Education Club NEWLINE (Belarus), the authors provide examples of nonformal educational tools and methods implemented in several Belarusian schools.

Keywords: Earth Charter, nonformal educational methods, education for sustainable development, Belarus, school education

The mission of the Earth Charter Initiative is to promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace.
(The Earth Charter Initiative 2010)

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

The most important mission of education for sustainable development (ESD) is clarifying and adopting the philosophy, ethics and psychology necessary for the new cultural and historical period of human civilization.

The new vision of our civilization, the intergenerational effort in developing sustainable lifestyles and clear understanding of common but differentiated responsibilities is the way to a radical change in the quality of life for each of us and for future generations. The vital necessity to preserve the unique features of our local communities in the context of the emerging global society is an indispensable part of this vision. Such a holistic approach to the mission of education is gaining momentum among Belarusian educators as they begin to realise that one of the important goals of any national educational system is to develop the methodology to integrate this vision of sustainability into peoples' mindsets and lifestyles.

This integration is an important objective for the reform processes in all educational subsystems: tertiary, vocational, lifelong, adult and preschool; but it is of a paramount importance for public school education. A school is a unique social institution which, to a certain extent, reaches out to every person on Earth. To ensure a high quality of life for future generations we need to start the transformation of school educational policies as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, almost all existing school curricula, which are officially approved by the formal educational systems in the world, fail to help their students embrace the emerging global ethics, as their main function is to preserve and reproduce the existing cultural traditions and policies characteristic of the consumerist society. Although education is proclaimed at a high level as the key to a more sustainable society, it plays a daily part in reproducing an unsustainable society. If it is to become an

agent of change towards a more sustainable society, it has to become the subject of change itself, and needs to be transformed and reoriented (Huckle and Sterling 1996).

In order to implement successfully the goals and objectives of ESD, and transform traditional policies in secondary education by integrating the lifelong approach, teachers need to help their students to gain experiences as real-life agents of change; agents who influence the quality of life of their immediate communities, and who at the same time demonstrate knowledge, skills and values indispensable for global citizenship.

Such transformation is impossible unless the school, as an educational institution, reconsiders its function in the educational process and becomes a resource center that initiates and supports students' inclusion in the processes of sustainable development in their communities (by reforming the existing social environment instead of focusing on successful socialisation of its students into it).

Educators need to reconsider the outdated perception of their dominant role in the learning process and empower students to act as equal and active partners. Students need to be introduced to a variety of socially meaningful activities which will help them to take part in decision-making processes in their own communities and beyond. To accomplish this task we recommend the active application of the methods of nonformal education (mostly used in various forms of adult education) and the existing resources in the area of sustainable development such as basic international and national agreements and documents.

We believe that the Earth Charter is one of the most important resources for the development of the content and practice of secondary school education.

THE EARTH CHARTER: AN ETHICAL ROAD MAP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Earth Charter is one of the most significant international documents, a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the Charter demonstrates the 'basic design' of the transition to sustainable ways of living, which anticipates the use of innovative vision and holistic approaches and helps to implement the most important value of sustainable development: the wellbeing and security of the Earth, our mutual home.

The Earth Charter focuses attention on the importance of the acknowledgment and promotion of the values shared *by all peoples and nations*, cultures and religions—what philosophers call 'universal values':

- Respect and Care for the Community of Life
- Environmental Integrity
- Social and Economic Justice
- Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace

The Earth Charter could be viewed as a road map for research on the main themes of sustainable development and globalisation. It can be used as an ethical guide for a

critical comparison of our daily realities of life with our ideals and the vision of a better future. The Charter's ethical guidance and innovative practices can help people to set personal goals and to cooperate with others in their quest for positive changes.

The Earth Charter can also be used to assess and reconstruct the entire curriculum and management practices of an educational institution in an effort to ensure that the institution is doing everything it can to prepare students to meet the great challenges of our time. Thoughtful study of the Earth Charter text provides a clear vision of sustainable ways of living and facilitates the development of innovative methodologies that help students discover new ways of integrating sustainable development principles in their own lives and the lives of their community.

NONFORMAL EDUCATIONAL METHODS IN FORMAL EDUCATION PRACTICES

One of the main requirements for the successful implementation of ESD practices and policies into secondary education is, first and foremost, openmindedness and the creative combination of formal and nonformal educational practices. Nonformal education initiates the research and adoption of innovative resources, while formal ('official') education ensures their use and reproduces them nationwide.

The specific character of transformative teaching and the use of innovative approaches and methodologies is based on the assertion that the 'learner' cannot benefit from them in the course of a traditional 'information transfer' or simply by receiving descriptive information about the new methods. Educators need to create new educational settings based on the active interaction with their learners, and in doing this, mutually 'live' and 'act' these new ideas in collaboration with other participants of the learning process (classmates, schoolmates, members of learning groups, etc.)

Furthermore, the sustainable development 'knowledge carriers' (teachers, advanced students, invited SD practitioners) should establish active collaboration with other members of their communities (parents, neighbours, students of other classes and different schools, experts, representatives of local government) and promote integration of sustainable development values in all their activities (Savelava 2008). Such cooperation can be effective if the organisers provide participants with understandable explanations of their ideas and goals by addressing such independent and trustworthy sources as the Earth Charter. By assuming the role of organisers of collaborative processes, young people better understand the methods of successful cooperation as well as the concepts and principles of sustainable development.

In other words, school management needs to encourage the creation of educational spaces for direct interaction between students and adults where they can 'live' the experience of common responsibility and interdependence, care for the welfare of the whole community of life and engage in intergenerational cooperation and other Earth Charter principles through their collaborative effort in solving concrete local problems that reflect global challenges (Savelava 2009). Such an active hands-on approach to ESD practices is consistent with the need to localise global challenges and

ensure inclusive participation—the main principles of implementation of the Earth Charter’s vision of sustainable development in international sustainable development (SD) agreements and articulated in the ‘Agenda 21’.

The effectiveness and success of intergenerational interactions in the course of transformative education depend on the support from the official (formal) educational system, as well as nonformal and lifelong learning. These interactions have to be initiated by the learners themselves in their efforts to resolve locally the pending goals of the UN Millennium Campaign, complex environmental, social and economic issues, participation in decision-making processes and so on.

Examples of effective forms of such interaction can be found in Belarus in the projects of the initiative ‘School Agenda-21’ (local strategies for students’ initiatives to promote sustainable development in their communities). Youth initiatives supported by the practices of nonformal education serve as a precondition for setting up ‘meeting points’ between the young SD activists and adult population. These practices are gradually being adopted by schools.

What are the necessary tools that can help young people become effective promoters of the Earth Charter vision in their own lifestyles, educational practices and finally, the transformation of their communities? Besides the knowledge and commitment to the SD vision and its principles, several critical skills are also needed:

- critical analysis of the situation,
- practical research and identification of existing problems,
- shaping up prospective ideas,
- developing initiatives and their promotion among different groups of the population,
- search for partners and professional experts,
- developing fruitful cooperation and multicultural interaction in the face of adversarial situations: unresolved conflicts, ethnic tensions, lack of resources, social, communication and collaboration skills, and others.

The achieved proficiency in these skills is the essence of the nonformal educational practice set up as a sequence of project activities for school students and youth. This is the essence of the expected results of the integrated educational policy that benefits from the integration of formal and nonformal methodology in school.

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

As stated above, openmindedness and the creative combination of formal and nonformal educational practices are some of the main requirements for the successful implementation of the ESD practices and policies into secondary education. The nonformal education initiates the research and adoption of innovative resources, while the formal (‘official’) education ensures their use and reproduces them nationwide.

Below we shall demonstrate that the educational activities of the Newline Club are, indeed, an attempt to help the existing practices of formal school education by

means of the nonformal methodology (YIEC NEWLINE). The Club's project activities became a tool for the application of the nonformal methods in the general system of formal education in Belarus.

The Youth International Education Club (YIEC) Newline joined the organisational processes for nonformal education for sustainable development from the early days of its foundation in Belarus in 1999. The first step of the new organisation was to bring together the participants of the First Children's Forum in Belarus 'We Are Together' held under the auspices of UN Children's Fund. The earliest project of the new organisation was to identify national priorities for sustainable development and set up the policy of active youth involvement in the development of important implementation strategies.

As Belarusian delegates at the Millennium Young Peoples Congress (Hawaii, 1999), the members of the Newline Club presented their vision of national sustainable development priorities:

- Promote the value of health and healthy lifestyles
- Ensure the rights of children and adults
- Progressive development of the national educational system
- Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life
- Sustainable economic development of Belarusian regions and support for the free market systems and structures.

These priorities have become the guiding program for Newline Club activities for the last ten years. The young people organise their work under a slogan: 'We are your educational alternative,' while the Club has become a youth program of the 'Transformation of Humanities' Association.

Project *Garden-Park Millennium* developed in 1999 by the then 7th grader Dmitry Savelau became the first independent project of Newline Club dealing with sustainability issues. The project has become an important experience in developing strategies and implementing them, looking for sustainable partnerships in the country and at the international level, successes and failures, leaps of faith and bitter disappointments and finally, the acknowledgment of the rights of secondary school students in developing meaningful and important initiatives for the civil society (for more information see Savelau 2003).

Parallel to the ongoing sustainable development projects, the Club activists never stopped acquiring new skills and knowledge to become agents of change in real-life projects. They acquired proficiency in modern media technologies by actively participating in various projects of the International Education and Resource Network-*iEARN* (*iEARN* 2010: www.earn.org) and the national educational community *iEARN*-Belarus (*iEARN*-Belarus 2010: www.earn4u.com). Participating in the multicultural communication and cooperation projects (YouthCaN, Laws in Life, Learning Circle, etc.) they learned to appreciate the importance and significance of the combination of the 'unique self' and 'the universal', as well as the competence in a global means of communication with the whole world for the inclusion of one's 'unique self' into the global context of youth cooperation.

Such a process of self-education can be observed in the development of the long-term discussion project 'World We Live In' (YIEC Newline 2009: <http://wwli.iatp.by>) under the leadership of Sofia Savelava. Working together to answer a question 'how can we improve the world together?' the participants used the following methods of cooperation:

1. Comprehensive internet discussion during the period of October–March 2009 (iearn-wwli@lists.iearn.org). The ideas suggested for the educational discussion correspond with the ideas and principles articulated in the Earth Charter, its values and the ways of developing lifestyles for the sustainable life in the twenty-first century.
2. Annual online project conferences are the space designated for virtual meetings of all project participants who live in different cities and countries. The multichannel project chat room (five simultaneous chat rooms on challenging issues) was operated in Belarusian, Russian and English languages (occasionally also German). The discussion became an example of real-life consensus building and multicultural interaction.

The designers and moderators of the thematic chat rooms gained valuable experience in coordination of the fruitful exchange of different ideas, goals, values, visions, languages and life experiences, while the ideas and values of sustainable human and societal development served as a general framework for consensus building.

As the project progressed, with it grew its influence on the participants in Belarus and abroad, and the Newline Club became a member of various international projects, such as 'Spring Day in Europe', 'Europe School' and others.

3. Spring discussion camps became for the members of the project 'World We Live In', a special educational environment where they could evaluate and better understand the meaning and ethical framework of sustainable development in the course of the game. During their stay at the Discussion Camp the participants were engaged in debates over the most challenging issues of sustainable development: 'Humankind and Modernity' (2002), 'Belarus–Europe 2025' (2003), 'Building the Piazza/Platz/Пляц' (2004) and others. This experience helped develop the youth standpoint on the development priorities which could make it easier for the people in the communities to perceive the urgent necessity for the change and assist this change in a practical manner.

In general, the long-standing practice of the project 'World We Live In' has proven its effectiveness in assisting the four main educational goals of sustainable development:

- changes in people's mindsets and the development of self-identity;
- sensitisation of values and principles for sustainable development;
- perception of one's own actions, their interconnectedness with the actions of others
- acquisition of project development skills.

The experience gained by the Newline Club activists helped them to develop a new educational technology for the internet game 'Our Belarus'. This new knowledge allowed them to promote the ideas of sustainable development and considerably increase the number of educators and students participating in the educational projects.

EDUCATIONAL METHODS OF THE INTERNET GAME 'OUR BELARUS'

The educational internet game 'Our Belarus' (YIEC Newline 2010b: <http://www.newlineclub.net/ourbelarus/>) is another example of a nonformal educational resource designed for the promotion of understanding of sustainable development principles and the creation of educational initiatives for their dissemination in local communities by the young people. Its methodology is based on developing conditions for the implementation of ESD principles:

- Open, consensus-based and collaborative educational activities
- Transdisciplinary approach
- Experience-based education
- Transformative education instead of 'informative' education
- Promoting global and local dialogue on the ethical framework of sustainability
- Local focus of the educational materials developed

The methodology of this internet game was developed by the members of the Newline Club with the help of the matrix of the interactive game 'Joining Nations' (the international project 'This is Our Time' for secondary schools initiated by the UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network-ASP Net).

1. The first step was to adapt the ASP Net methodology for ESD needs and goals, and incorporate the real-life situation with the internet availability in Belarus.
2. This led to the creation of an interactive methodology that allows students and their teachers to attain practical knowledge of the goals and challenges of sustainable development; formulate their vision of their own future and of the future of the global community; feel the interdependence of global security in their personal lives, plans and actions.
3. All registered participants of the internet game receive assignments via the game's website or e-mail and set up game teams. Each team has three hours to complete its task with the help of the acquired knowledge of the mini-research and all available information at hand, including the resources on the Internet. Upon the expiration of three hours the teams have to send the results to e-mail addresses indicated by the organisers.

Since 2005 the following sustainable development themes have been covered by the methods of the internet game 'Our Belarus':

- Our Belarus: Intercultural cooperation (2005)
- Our Belarus: MDGs (2006)

- Our Belarus: Unique features of global issues (2007, spring)
- Our Belarus: Developmental strategy (2007, autumn).

In the course of the last game, 42 school teams (281 student and 97 teachers) received recommendations to study and analyse the most important international and national documents: the Earth Charter, Agenda 21, the Millennium Declaration and the Belarusian National Sustainable Development Strategy to 2020. Their assignment was to reflect on their own perception of sustainable development, define and prioritise concrete goals and targets for the development of their respective schools, universities, families and communities.

The team members tried to articulate the youth vision of the mission and priorities of global development and offer practical ways to apply this vision to local contexts and define the scope of their personal input to the implementation of sustainable development principles and practices in their country, Belarus.

This game helped many school teams to later participate in the German-Belarusian project 'School Local Agenda 21'.

Each game was concluded with a 'master class'. The master classes of the national internet game 'Our Belarus' are an effective educational method designed for those who wanted a deeper understanding of the game tasks and discussion themes. In the course of master classes the participants were given the opportunity to apply the acquired knowledge in practical ways by developing their own model projects.

THINK ACT MDGS!

Another youth educational project 'Think Act MDGs!' helped develop the educational support system for students' initiatives promoting sustainable development (YIEC Newline 2006: www.newlineclub.net/mdg).

The main objective of the project was to raise awareness about the MDGs among Belarusian youth as was recommended by the 3rd World Youth Congress in Scotland (2005). The activists of Newline Club came to the conclusion that an effective way for the young people of Belarus to make an input into the process of global awareness would be their close cooperation with local communities. The educators had a definite goal: acting on a local level while keeping in mind the big picture of the global challenges. This helped to formulate the youth vision of MDGs with the help of:

- Analysis of capacity and needs of the Belarusian youth regarding the MDGs
- Development of MDG-related projects and activities
- Development of a guidebook to show the ways to participate in the campaign.

This project is still going on at the Youth Center for Project Design which helps new organisational participants: schools, universities, youth NGOs and local communities. Thanks to this project, the Newline Club 'discovered' the Earth Charter Youth Program in 2006 and became the Earth Charter Affiliate in Belarus (The Earth Charter Initiative in Belarus 2010: www.newlineclub.net/earthcharter). The members of this project translated the Earth Charter into Belarusian and it is now available to all visitors of the Earth Charter International website.

Today the International Youth Educational Club Newline is a networked community of youth, educators, students, schools, NGOs and educational institutions from different parts of Europe who participate together in educational internet projects. This inclusive participation provides the organisers of the Newline Club with the resource for new educational methodologies and practices for the successful implementation of education for sustainable development in Belarus.

CONCLUSION

Incorporation of nonformal educational practices into formal educational activities and methods based on the Earth Charter framework demonstrates the benefits of increasing quality and effectiveness of sustainable development processes locally and globally. The example of the educational experience of the Newline Club's work with schools demonstrates the possibilities of the creative merging of these two educational policies with the Earth Charter as an ethical foundation. It is possible to conclude that the most important resources in ESD are school projects that interlink formal and nonformal educational spheres. In order to be successful in realising the principles of ESD, however, these projects should meet several important criteria. The projects should be:

- inclusive of various groups of society (students, educators, parents, local government representatives, etc.), who participate as equal partners in educational collaboration;
- based on international cooperation or links to the international community, which would enable the necessary interregional and global cooperation in discussing common problems and developing solutions;
- preferably long-term partnerships among the project participants, who would maintain permanent communication among themselves in terms of sharing of knowledge and outcomes, as well as in building up a public dialogue and public opinion to support and further develop the outcomes of the initiative;
- should visibly strengthen youth participation in decision-making processes, demonstrate students' ability to make a difference and contribute to the solution of relevant problems in their communities.

The most valuable result of the Newline Club projects and initiatives is the fact that students and youth joining the activities become the 'change agents' expressing interest in the new methods of the learning process and providing the actual change in society. The experience of the Newline Club proved to be a framework focused on contributing to the development of the ESD experiences and practices in schools and other formal educational institutions.

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