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Promoting the Earth Charter in São Paulo's Municipal Education System

ROSE MARIE INOJOSA

Abstract

This article presents the process of widespread teacher training based on the Earth Charter in the municipal area of São Paulo, Brazil, South America. This effort diffused knowledge of the Earth Charter through 800 educators and by means of them, to one million children. This process was developed by the team from UMAPAZ—Open University of the Environment and the Culture of Peace—working with the city Office of Greening and the Environment and the city secretary of education. It was one of a set of municipal initiatives regarding climate change.

Keywords: Earth Charter, teacher training, municipal education system, sustainability

VISION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN URBAN LIFE AND COMMUNITY

The city of São Paulo, capital of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, is the most important economic center in Latin America. São Paulo city has 11 million inhabitants and its public education system, with 1,200 schools, has one million pupils. However, this size has been obtained at a cost to the sustainability of urban life and community. The city has reached a point of intense CO₂ emissions, degradation of water and soil resources, loss of vegetative coverage, generation of tons of nondegrading waste, great socioeconomic inequality and violent resolution of conflicts.

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More recently, there has been a collective awakening prompted by these harmful effects and by the public's growing awareness of climate change. But there is still little recognition of the relationship between these problems and the city's options and decisions, between the situation and possible solutions based on changes in the prevailing ways of life. For citizens to be able to take an active role in bringing about sustainability, they must have opportunities to develop awareness, training to create a critical vision of sustainability and tools for action.

UMAPAZ USES THE EARTH CHARTER AS A GUIDE

In January 2006, the Open University of the Environment and of the Culture of Peace (Universidade Aberta do Meio Ambiente e da Cultura de Paz—UMAPAZ)¹ began operations. UMAPAZ was set up by the Municipal Office of Greening and Environment,² to educate about the environment and the culture of peace and contribute to the sustainability of urban life and community.

UMAPAZ uses the Earth Charter³ as its conceptual guideline, encompassing the relationships and interdependencies of the fabric of life in various dimensions: respecting and caring for the community of life; protecting and promoting ecological integrity; promoting social and economic justice and democracy, along with non-violence and peace. This vision of the future, so different from the catastrophe presaged by climate change and severe social inequalities, is like a new style of music that must be played many times to be understood and enjoyed. Humankind has repeated the music of destruction, irresponsible consumption and disregard for the suffering of others, but it is capable of learning the new music of cooperation, respect and joy, which can lead to a different future.

UMAPAZ holds as its values environmental responsibility, transdisciplinarity, peaceful resolution of conflicts, universal access to information and interculturality. It regards sustainability not as a state, but a process.

UMAPAZ, aware of its limited reach in a population as large as that of the city of São Paulo, has chosen to work with organisations such as teachers, health professionals and members of regional health and environment and culture of peace councils, that directly encounter a large number of people and can offer a multiplier potential.

The best chance to strengthen its relationship with teachers occurred in June 2007, as the result of a joint commitment to intensify the promotion of the Earth Charter in the municipal education system, signed by the mayor of São Paulo, the municipal secretary of education and the municipal secretary of the environment,⁴ with the participation of the leader of the Earth Charter International Initiative, Mirian Vilela. Based on this commitment, a program was designed for an initial period of one year, from September 2007 to October 2008, with UMAPAZ taking the lead to train teachers in how to use the Earth Charter in schools.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'PROMOTE THE EARTH CHARTER PROGRAM'

The program focuses on teachers, trusting in their capacity for self-transformation and in their possibilities for spreading this transformation through sharing of information,

actions, emotions and visions of the future to over one million children and adolescents as well as their parents. The first action was to print 65,000 copies of the Earth Charter to be distributed to all teachers in the 1,200 schools in the municipal system.

In September 2007, UMAPAZ staff held meetings with each of the 13 regional offices of education to provide information on the purpose of the 'Promoting the Earth Charter Program', and to define with them the dynamic of the process and the profiles of participating groups. Out of these meetings came important decisions such as:

- School principals, pedagogical coordinators and teachers from the municipal public schools would be partners who could influence the pedagogical proposal and the activities of the respective schools, together with the school community
- Groups with an average of 25 teachers would be set up in each region
- Ten monthly colloquia, each four hours long, would be held between these groups and UMAPAZ environmental educators to share reflections on the principles of the Earth Charter, experiences carried out and future projects
- The colloquia would be held near the respective regional offices, at sites indicated by the regional education coordination offices.

Based on these decisions, 40 groups of teachers were established with about 800 participants, and a team of 11 UMAPAZ environmental educators⁵ was put together, charged with preparing materials—such as readings from key writers—for group discussions.

The colloquia, which were held from October 2007 to November 2008, were opportunities for both the teachers and the UMAPAZ socio-environmental educators to deepen their knowledge and reflect on the axioms of traditional education practice and their limitations.

A balance was sought between theoretical discussion on the philosophical and paradigmatic foundations that guide the work of teachers, and practical discussions about the current situation in schools and the primary obstacles to implementing the program. At each colloquium a theoretical framework was offered as input for group dynamics and plenary sessions to expand perceptions of (1) the interdependence between human beings and the biosphere; (2) the responsibility of current society to future generations; and (3) the consequences of habits of consumption on the current socio-environmental situation. In the practical sphere, participants were introduced to teaching tools such as the application of carbon footprint methodology which they used to measure the carbon footprints of their schools. Standardised forms were developed to help gather and analyse data. The exercise was intended to stimulate discussion and introduce new practices in schools for separating trash and recyclables and with the support of the UMAPAZ team and the decentralised core groups, starting school gardens.

Noting the wealth of experiences and perspectives brought to the colloquia by the teachers and also the difficulty that teachers faced in sharing their ideas given the distances between regions, their diversity and the intensity of class work, UMAPAZ organised two seminars for sharing their experiences throughout the program in

June and November 2008. At the end of the process, all the material produced was recorded on a CD and made available to all participants and their schools.

CONTENTS OF THE TEN COLLOQUIA

Reflection on the Earth Charter allows for many approaches. To make choices, the team of environmental educators paid special attention to the historical and cultural history and the socio-environmental situation of São Paulo. Over the course of the Colloquia, the contents were assembled based on exchanges with the groups of teachers in the municipal school system.

In weekly meetings, the UMAPAZ team reflected on observations, contributions and questions from educators in their groups. Based on this feedback they further developed or expanded various topics such as consumption and diversity. The 10 colloquiums unfolded as follows:

Colloquium 1 focused on the Earth Charter itself, its formulation and the inter-connection of the community of life. The aim of this colloquium was to reflect on shared responsibility for our common future. Fritjof Capra, author of *The Web of Life* and other works and the physicist Ilya Prigogine were read and discussed. The idea of the Ecological Footprint was introduced, along with its application as a tool for comprehending reality. The participants were encouraged to research what happens with the production and disposal of trash in their schools.

Colloquium 2 was devoted to the principle of Respect and Care for the Community of Life. The issues taken up were biodiversity, the peculiarity of Brazil, which has the greatest biodiversity in the world, and the situation of plant coverage in the city of São Paulo and its impact in relation to the life of animals and people. The aim was to foster observation on the situation of the city in relation to what is happening throughout the planet. The writers for this colloquium were Edward Wilson, *Biophilia*, Arne Naess on Deep Ecology and the Brazilian Leonardo Boff, with his work *Saber Cuidar* [Knowing How to Care]. At this second colloquium, it was proposed that the participants investigate the green areas and gardens in their schools and their surroundings.

Colloquium 3 focused on Ecopedagogy, prompting reflection on the role of the teacher in promoting sustainability. In this colloquium the teachers studied readings and ideas of Moacir Gadotti (ecopedagogy), Edgar Morin (complexity and the seven types of knowledge of the education of the future), Roberto Crema (education and vocation), Krishnamurti (education without discipline), Sai Baba (pedagogy of love), Howard Gardner (multiple intelligences) and Fritjof Capra (web of life and ecological literacy), in order to compare different visions of how to deal with the topic. With the poem 'Inter-Being' by Thich Nhat Hanh, the teachers were asked to work with the school community on the values built into school materials, what there is of nature and human work in each uniform, in each pencil and pen and in the school lunch.

Colloquium 4 dealt with human culture and the throwaway culture. Its purpose was to expand the perception of the origins and consequences of current consumption habits, to work with teachers on how the options chosen by each individual can impact the life of the planet, contribute to social inequality and undermine the values

of solidarity and cooperation. The writers whose ideas served as a support for this reflection were the sociologist Zigmunt Bauman (*Liquid Society*), Gilberto Dupas and Ervin Lazlo. We discussed the relationship between consumption, happiness and sustainability, studying the interfaces between our Western consumer society and its socioeconomic impacts in contrast to more all-encompassing broad-based cultures. We also talked about the influence of advertising in creating 'needs' that perpetuate consumption as an end in itself and how it affects our children's developing personalities.

Colloquium 5 centered on cultural diversity, seeking to expand recognition of the history of human cultures and of their contributions to contemporary world civilization for the appreciation and respect for the wealth that diversity represents. The readings were by Claude Levi Strauss, Lília Moritz, Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, Humberto Maturana, Martin Luther King Jr. and Eduardo Galeano. At this colloquium, in preparation for the next one, genealogical trees were constructed with the origins of the parents, grandparents and great-grandparents of the participating teachers, demonstrating the diversity of origins and the racial mixing of the Brazilian people, a wealth equal to that of our extraordinary biodiversity.

At *Colloquium 6*, the topic of diversity and integration centred on Brazil and the city of São Paulo. The reflections drew on the work of Roberto Gambini, *O Espelho Índio [The Indian Mirror]*. Connecting the ideas of Gambini and Maturana, an analysis was done of our ancestral mothers—the Indian mother, the black mother and the mother of syncretism, represented in Our Lady of Aparecida. The works of Kaká Verá Jecupé, *São Paulo a Terra dos Mil Povos [São Paulo, Land of a Thousand Peoples]*, and Darcy Ribeiro's classic, *The Brazilian People*, were also used. In addition, we began to discuss the seeds of planetary citizenship, with Francisco Gutierrez and Cruz Prado, *Ecopedagogia e cidadania planetária [Ecopedagogy and Planetary Citizenship]*.

Colloquium 7 was devoted to the culture of peace and peaceful conflict resolution. The aim was expanding perception on the meaning of peace as culture and of conflicts as opportunity for personal and group growth, and also to expand techniques for peaceful conflict resolution and mediation. The writers used were Xesus Jarez, author of *Educar para a Paz em Tempos Difíceis [Educating for Peace in Difficult Times]* and *Pedagogia da Convivência [Pedagogy of Shared Life]*; Lia Diskin with her work in the Palas Athena Association, readings (*Jornada de Amor a Terra, [Day of Love for Earth]* co-written with Laura Roizman) and talks; Pierre Weil (*A Arte de Viver em Paz [The Art of living in Peace]*); and Marshall Rosenberg (Non-violent communication).

Colloquium 8 took up the issue of economics. Because the earlier colloquia dealt with knowledge of the 'house' (Eco-logy), this colloquium dealt with caring for the house (Eco-nomy) from a perspective different from that of classical economics. The reflections drew on the work of Rudolf Steiner, the ideas of Ross Jackson and of Ignacy Sachs and the Brazilian writers on the new economy, Marcos Arruda and Euclides Mance. Another aid for the reflection were the photographs from *Hungry Planet*, by Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisio, available on the internet. At the end of this colloquium the participants experienced an 'exchange fair', a cooperative way of consuming.

In *Colloquium 9*, we began to move from becoming aware to being mobilised. We huddled over the meaning of belonging to a territory and the need to expand our perception to activate potentialities latent in our own territory. The work involved the geography of perception, topophilia (love for place) and the paradigm of simplicity. As a dynamic, we used the exercise of interpretive city treks and we studied authors like Edgar Morin, Ruben Alves, Fernando Pessoa and the geographer Milton Santos. The participants did urban treks in their areas, seeking to observe everything that could be transformed to make urban life and community more sustainable.

In *Colloquium 10*, the primary reflection was on the educator as a model for students. We all educate by example, by actions (regardless of our intentions), which expands our responsibility to work on ourselves as we recognise weaknesses and to push our limits as educators and human beings. To support these reflections, we brought in the ideas of Fátima Freire Dowbor and others. The Australian short film 'Children See, Children Do' was used.

On 13 October 2008, the closing event of the Program for Promoting the Earth Charter was held at UMAPAZ headquarters, in Ibirapuera where 250 teachers took part in two experiences: a Cafe of the Future and an Exchange Fair.

The Café of the Future was based on the World Cafe model (Juanita Brown and David Isaacs), with the theme: 'Citizenship of the Future'. The questions for discussion were: (1) What would the 'best' citizen for the future be like? and (2) What do you think you can do to contribute to the formation of this citizen? Discussion groups were held and the ideas of the groups collected. The second experience was holding a solidarity Exchange Fair, using the goods, products and services that the teachers brought to exchange.

POST-COURSE SURVEY

At the end of the 'Promoting the Earth Charter Program', a questionnaire was distributed to the teachers who participated in the program to collect data on the participants, assess their satisfaction with the program and understand possible impacts of it in their own lives.

Three hundred and forty-nine completed questionnaires were received and tabulated, representing a nonintentional sample of the universe of around 800 teachers enrolled in the program, which revealed some things about this population.

Participant Profiles

The survey showed that the vast majority of participants were female (92 per cent) with only 8 per cent male. The age range was from 25 to 67, with most over 30 and a third in the 31-50 age range. Fifty-three per cent had a degree and 5 per cent had taken a course after university. Thirty per cent had more than one job.

The survey asked whether the teacher had changed schools during the program period. After the vacation period, when the program began again with the new school year in February 2008, many groups had lost several participants. The explanation given was that they had been transferred to other schools; 8.5 per cent said that they

changed schools. In the meetings, there were discussions about how the constant moving of teachers weakens relationships with students and parents in the school community and thus hinders the introduction and implementation of innovations. Many projects are interrupted when people are moved.

School relationships are easier when teachers are part of the community that they serve, experiencing the same problems and potentialities as students and parents. When asked whether they live in the same region as the school, 62 per cent of the teachers answered that they did. Two-thirds said that they had attended all 10 colloquia in the program.

Content: Use and Satisfaction

On whether the content of the colloquia was meaningful for their work or for their daily lives, 92 per cent said yes. Program materials were made available on the website www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/umapaz. An effort was made to find out whether the teachers could access the materials and whether they used them. A first finding was that most of the teachers, about 80 per cent, accessed the site at least once, and among those who accessed it, 64 per cent did so more than once. Thirty per cent of those who did not access it said that they did not have easy internet access.

Of the 85 per cent teachers who said that they had used content from the website, it was noted that they did so not only in their professional relations, that is, with teachers (75 per cent), students (42 per cent) and students' parents (25 per cent), but also with relatives and friends (33 per cent) and in their personal life (36 per cent).

According to the teachers, most of the schools (77 per cent), already have activities or projects related to the topics. For 98 per cent, the Colloquia had contributed to these activities and projects.

Perceived Results

When asked whether participation in the Earth Charter Colloquia had influenced them personally and had an influence in the changing of some habit or opinion, 93 per cent answered 'yes'.

In commenting on these impacts the participating teachers presented their perceptions in an open-ended question. We did not quantify the results of this question. However, the changes indicated are related to the issues taken up in the program, such as using natural resources more carefully, planting trees and gardens, reducing consumption and having a broader understanding of biodiversity and of the wealth of cultures. Some commented that the colloquium had changed their vision of the future.

The following comments indicate at least the intention of taking action:

- 'After all, I see myself in a process of reconnecting with nature and with the search for daily acts to preserve'
- 'I better identify the care that I must show for the environment'
- 'I also try to pass this on to those I know'

- 'Stopping just talking, and really acting, creating a sustainable planet'
- 'Causing changes. Mobilizing others'
- 'Changes in me and in everyone in the house'
- 'The focus of our school has changed'
- 'It's a change in how I live'

The projects presented in June and November 2008 by schools in the regional colloquia showed that the participants immediately took on an active role and employed multiple approaches, such as the participatory installation of gardens, tree planting in schools and along streets, butterfly farms, expositions on regional issues, work on the school lunch, theatre production and puppet theatre, poetry and music, and even the arrival of the Earth Fairy, who went on to become a daily figure at one early-childhood school.

Nevertheless, we know that these first beautiful flowers do not represent the impact of the teaching and learning process in the medium and long run. We do not know which or how many ideas will germinate. All initiatives need to be nourished until they are established enough to influence opinion, habits and attitudes, to the point at which active involvement takes sufficient root to weather hard decisions. This responsibility is shared by the institutional agents of the program, the municipal secretariats of Education and of Greening and Environment, and by the UMAPAZ environmental educators and the teachers in the municipal education system.

NOTES

- 1 See Av. IV Centenário, 1268, CEP 04030-000, São Paulo, SP, Brazil. Available at www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/umapaz; www.blogumapaz.blogspot.com (accessed 21 June 2010).
- 2 At the initiative of the Municipal Secretary of Greening and Environment, Eduardo Jorge Martins Alves Sobrinho, with Jose Serra, then mayor, now governor of the state of Sao Paulo.
- 3 Available at www.cartadaterrabrasil.org (accessed 21 June 2010).
- 4 Mayor Gilberto Kassab (2007–2012); Alexandre Schneider, Municipal Secretary of Education; and Eduardo Jorge Martins Alves Sobrinho, Municipal Secretary of Greening and the Environment of São Paulo, SP, Brazil.
- 5 Rose Marie Inojosa, communications specialist, director of UMAPAZ; Diogo Alvim Gonçalves, biologist, who coordinated the program; André Luis Moura de Alcântara, sociologist; Camila Tolosa Bianchi, biologist; Eliana Sapucaia Rizzini, biologist; Georges Fouad Kherkikian, economist; Glacilda Pinheiro Pedroso Correia, education specialist; Márcia Halluli Meneh, architect; Márcia Moura, social worker; Maricy Montenegro, psychologist; Shirley Daisy Pellicari, education specialist; Vitor Octávio Lucato, biologist and ecologist.