

Connecting Global Education with Activism: Building A Local and Global Community

Getting children active in international events can be done through effective classroom learning experiences. This educator explains how tragedy can lead to a better understanding of diversity.

By **Marta Colburn, Colburn Consulting International**

Introduction

September 11th and its aftermath have spread a shadow over the world that has had a deep emotional, physical and spiritual impact. This fateful day will be engraved in our memories not only for its tragic events and the heroic actions of many in New York and Washington D.C., but also for its repercussions domestically and internationally. While the tragedy of September 11th and its implications for our world continue to develop, one positive result is that many people in the United States and around the world have realized the extent of interdependence in a changing and often violent world. Another positive result of this tragic day is that a teaching moment was created. The horrible images of that day and the subsequent war in Afghanistan have created a thirst for knowledge to which many are trying to respond. I believe that by educating ourselves and our children about the world and human suffering, we are promoting the understanding of diversity—an essential first step towards building a local and global community and bridging the divides that can consume us.

Coping With A Brutal Reality

One of the challenges of global education for teachers, families and activists

is the reality that much of the information about the world outside our borders is depressing. Even in less turbulent times, a glimpse of the international section in most mainstream newspapers includes few articles that present a positive view of the world. Cooperation, conflict resolution and the daily lives of people around the world are not deemed newsworthy to the American public by most journalists and news organizations. This challenge is particularly relevant when introducing a topic such as landmines in the classroom.

In my work with Portland 4th and 7th graders, I have been impressed with their retention of detailed information on various types of UXO. However, stories of landmine victims and the challenges of mine awareness and demining campaigns around the world can be overwhelming for children (as well as adults). How such topics are presented can influence how much of the hard to handle information can be tolerated. Humor can facilitate the learning process. In relating the 1999 kidnapping experience of my parents and myself by Yemeni tribesmen, I have found that incorporating humorous anecdotes helps listeners to express their empathy and release tension through their laughter. For example, my mother, who is deeply committed to non-violent conflict resolution assaulted the armed kidnappers on the head with the only weapon at hand, a bunch of carrots. I believe that, while not trivializing the experience, the laughter helps us all cope with the vulnerability of life.

Presenting a difficult experience in

an easy-to-digest format helps children make sense of something that is typically beyond the range of their experiences. A simple game such as the Landmine Classroom Activity (see diagram 1) can conclude a content-intensive session on landmines.

Highlighting the Positive

Another important aspect in encouraging literacy about global issues is to not only focus on the negative, but also to seek out and share with children the positive aspects of international issues. This need to highlight positive features of a conflict or issue is also true for adults. For example, reading books such as *A Man To Match His Mountains: Badshah Khan, Non-Violent Soldier of Islam* by Eknath Easwaran (Nilgiri Press; 1999, available at: www.nilgiri.org) helps paint a broader context of conflict in Afghanistan and the region. This book tells the story of Badshah Khan, a Muslim leader who roused a nonviolent army of 100,000 men from among the Pashtun of the Khyber Pass to resist British rule in India. Called "Frontier Gandhi" by his followers, he was regarded by Gandhi as "the real father of nonviolence." This book not only challenges the myth that Islam is a religion of violence, but it also shatters the stereotype that Pashtu tribesmen are, by nature, violent.

Beyond Education to Activism

A final step in educating ourselves and our children about international issues is to seek out opportunities for activism. I believe that one of our primary responsibilities as witnesses of September 11th is to better understand the actors and

forces that led to it. As members in a democratic nation, we have the responsibility to educate ourselves about underlying issues beyond newspaper headlines. Additionally, feelings of disempowerment can contribute to depression, passivity and apathy. By contributing positively to the world we can make a difference in our own well-being and help alleviate the suffering of others. Activism can take many forms from advocacy to fundraising, and young people can participate in designing creative solutions and thus contribute to a better world. Below are a few ideas and projects generated by educators, parents and young people in the Portland community:

- In April of 2001, NIBA (the Northwest International Baccalaureate Association) adopted a mine field in northwest Cambodia in Batambang province. Since that time students in the 22 IB schools in Oregon and Washington have designed a wide range of fundraising activities and have raised thousands of dollars for its demining.

- An example of combining a fundraising and educational event for the IB landmine project described above is

that of a local high school student writing and helping to perform a drama educating about landmines.

- Elementary and middle school students at Winterhaven School (K-12) were taught by local weaver Linda Hendrickson to create friendship bracelets using a weaving technique common in Afghanistan. Students then sold the bracelets and donated the funds to Mercy Corps to assist Afghan children.

Conclusion

By reaching out to others of diverse backgrounds in our local community and forging a myriad of international ties, we build a sense of belonging and actively participate in creating community. Additionally, by becoming active in international issues we learn and take steps to forge a better world. Such activism addresses the needs of a complex and often frightening and depressing world and helps us heal. September 11th, 2001, not only altered the perception of many around the globe but also emphasized the urgency of building a strong local and global community. ■

Biography

Marta Colburn has worked internationally for over 20 years. She is the Director of Colburn Consulting Int'l LLC and is currently serving as an educational consultant to Mercy Corps. Mercy Corps is a Portland-based international humanitarian organization that has programs in 25 countries and attempts to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities. Since 1979 Mercy Corps has worked in over 73 countries providing upwards of \$576 million and in the past year alone has helped over 5 million people with \$122 million in humanitarian aid. For further information on Mercy Corps activities visit their website at: www.mercycorps.org.

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Landmines in Afghanistan: Classroom Activity

Appropriate Level: Grades 4 – 12.

Goals/Focus: To learn about landmines in Afghanistan.

Materials:

- Background information for children on landmines in Afghanistan.
- 200 pieces of 8 ½ x 11 sturdy cardboard, red spray paint and a stencil of an "X." Spray paint the red "X" on 30 percent of the cardboard pieces.
- Additional information on landmines.

Lesson Procedure:

- Part 1: Discuss with students what they know about landmines.
- Part 2: Before the students arrive, lay the landmine cards face down (the red x's should be randomly scattered throughout the pack) in a two-wide path snaking around the room and out into the hallway.
- Part 3: Have students read the background information (summarize for younger children).
- Part 4: Have students make a line at the beginning of the path and explain the rules to them.
- Turn over each card that is stepped on.
 - Players are only allowed to skip one or two cards at a time when walking through the minefield.
 - When a player steps on a red "x" card, they are out of the game.
- Part 5: The first person in line walks through the minefield until they hit a landmine and leave the game. The second person then begins from the beginning of the path and follows the first player's steps (of course avoiding the landmine they stepped on) and continues until they hit a landmine. The next player starts over again, following the previous victim's

(Part 5 continued)

steps and proceeds until they are out of the game. This continues until all players are out. If players have not made it to the end of the path and time allows, they can go through the line again until someone reaches the end.

Part 6: Have students reflect on the lesson through writing or verbally. Remind students that the activity was very serious and designed to help them think about important issues and reflect on the lives of Afghan children. For younger students, reassure them that, fortunately, in this country there are no landmines planted in our streets and homes, and American children do not worry about becoming refugees. While September 11th was a tragic and frightening event, their parents and our leaders are doing their best to protect their security.

Lesson Extensions:

- Have students research various types of landmines and where they are manufactured. Research the U.S. programs for landmine awareness and policy towards signing international treaties banning the manufacturing of landmines.
- Have students research organizations that are working to educate about landmines and working to eradicate their use (e.g. the United Nations Adopt-A-Minefield program).
- Invite to your classroom a speaker that has been active on the educating about landmines.

Developed for Mercy Corps and included in "The Many Faces of Afghanistan: A Curriculum for Educators"