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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 shaken 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 domestic and international. While the tragedy of September 11th and its implications for our world continue to develop, one 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, we can help children understand that it is not right to harm themselves and others.

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 last but not least times, a glimpse of the international scene 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 for America's 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 work 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 provided a framework for how I viewed this experience and how to help others process such traumatic experiences. It also allowed them to see how taking care of their own families was important.

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 March His Mountains: Badshah Khan, Non-Violent Soldier of Islam by Eknath Easwaran (Nghiri 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 resuced a nonviolent army of 100,000 men from among the Pathan 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 shows how a nonviolent approach can lead to peace and prosperity.

An example of combining a fundraising and educational event for the landmine project described above is the work 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 lawyer 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 affect a better world. Such activism addresses the need of a complex and often frightening and depressing world and helps us heal. September 11th, 2001, not only altered the perception of the world around the globe but also emphasized the urgency of building a strong local and global community.

Landmines in Afghanistan: Classroom Activity

Appropriate Level: Grades 4 - 12
Goal: Focus to learn about landmines in Afghanistan.

Materials:
- Background information for children on landmines in Afghanistan
- 100 pieces of 8½ x 11 cardboard, red spray paint and a stencil of an x
- A couple of 30 x 11 sturdy cardboard, red spray paint and 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 cardboard cards on the floor so that the red x's should be randomly scattered throughout the area. Place a path across the path, allowing the students to pass safely over the x's. In this part, students will follow the path and time how long it takes.

Part 3: Have students read the background information.

Part 4: Have students make a line at the beginning of the path and time how long it takes them to complete the path.

Part 5: The first person in line walks through the minefield until the path is complete; the second person then begins from the previous point of the path and follows the first caller's path. The second person is reminded that if any of the landmines (the x's) are stepped on and continues until they hit a landmine. The next player starts over again, following the previous victim's path.

(Contd.)

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