



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Altan, S. (2012) 'The Global Youth LEAD Club: A study of civics and human rights education in Turkey', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 698 - 705.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

The Global Youth LEAD Club: A study of civics and human rights education in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper focuses on project-based civic and human rights education as tools for engaging primary school learners to think globally and act locally. Forty primary school students and four teachers in Turkey and the United States participated in the study. The criteria for effectiveness was assessed through pre and post surveys, forum discussions led by Idaho Human Rights Education Centre, and the production of Project Citizen e-portfolios.

Keywords: *community, international understanding, cultural awareness, civic education, and human rights education*

Introduction

In the past decade there has been a significant interest in internationalizing curriculum, civics, and human rights education at the primary level. There have been various programmes promoted to enhance the students' knowledge gain as well as their acquisition of skills in order to apply the learning, and take action, as both citizens of a local and global community. As a result, the role of educators has changed too. It is not only important that educators facilitate learning, but also provide a democratic environment that is inquiry-based and action oriented. Students can only begin to think globally when they acquire the self-awareness to interact within the local community.

There are many different types of communities, from the local to the global, from religious to political groups. Global citizens feel a connection to their communities (however they define them) and translate that sense of connection into participation. Participation can take the form of making responsible personal choices (such as limiting fossil fuel consumption), voting, volunteering, advocacy, and political activism. The issues may include the environment, poverty, trade, health, and human rights. Participation is the action dimension of global citizenship. (Available at: <http://www.nafsa.org/about/default.aspx?id=30005>)

Community is more than a sense of geographic location. It has a deeper meaning as a group of people who are interacting with one another, who share common values and form a social coherence. Significantly, students begin to recognize that members of the same community do not have to share the same values, but come together in recognition of sharing resources and meeting the needs of others for the common good.

How to build a democratic community?

In our worlds, wherever we are, the opportunity to build a good community is there. From the classroom to the sports field to the office cubicle, there are people who wait to hear someone say ‘welcome’ (Taulbert, 1997).

A democratic community begins with a democratic classroom. Democratic classrooms are ones in which students are engaged in the learning, in which the curriculum is a collaborative experience and decision making is shared between students and staff. A democratic classroom engages students in taking responsibility for their own learning. In this pilot study, students and teachers addressed local problems or issues of concern. In the process, they created a democratic international community in which they shared their opinions and their actions.

For effective human rights education, it is crucial that the learning community cultivates democratic behaviours. Factors that impact effectiveness are class and school climate, teacher behaviour, the availability of resources, transdisciplinary courses and human rights education courses. (Richardson, 1979; Branson and Purta, 1982; Pettman, 1984; Drubay, 1986; Balton, 1992; Bottery, 1999; Karaman-Kepeneci, 1999b).

The efficiency of human rights education can be increased through providing a class and school atmosphere in which students are allowed to discuss, letting them express their views as well as listen to others’ views, being tolerant, and establishing an atmosphere in which the educator respects the students and students respect one other (UNESCO, 1969; Pettman, 1984; Drubay, 1986; Campos, 1989; Charles, 1991; Karaman-Kepeneci, 2000).

The root of effective human rights education lies in both the structure and modeling of the classroom as a democratic community. Educators should explore the opportunity to build a bridge between that smaller collective and the larger world in which the students live.

Human rights education at national level

Citizenship and human rights education has been integrated in Turkey’s educational system since the foundation of the Republic. Taught as ‘Citizenship Education in Primary Schools’; ‘Social Studies’; and, ‘Citizenship and Human Rights Education’, the focus has been on the cultivation of citizens, rather than on the cultivation of a culture and climate of human rights.

From 1998 to 2007, human rights education was a lesson “Citizenship and Human Rights Education” in the seventh and eighth grades (ages 13 and 14). In 2004, the primary school curriculum was revised and human rights education became a transdisciplinary theme rather than a subject in grades one to six (ages 6 to 12). In 2007, it also became a transdisciplinary theme for seventh and eighth grades.

The national curriculum identifies the human rights themes as the common heritage of humanity, the development of the notion of human rights, ethics and human rights, and basic rights and freedoms (Çayır, Kenan. 2008)

Civic and human rights education requires practical and experiential activities - especially at the primary level. Students should interact with the content in every aspect of their school community. Allocating a limited place in the curriculum and decreasing the number of hours that students are directly taught about the concepts challenges the very effectiveness of the teaching and learning.

How can human rights education be more effective?

Human rights education should be supported by all courses; it should not exist solely as an independent course. Both core and transdisciplinary themes should help to build a community in which learners gain awareness about both their own rights as well as the rights of others.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) identified that:

Human rights education should not only be theoretical but should also provide opportunities for young people to develop and practice the skills to respect human rights and citizenship through 'school life', i.e. all aspects of school as a living, social environment with its collective rules, interpersonal conflicts, time and opportunities for co-operation, and through opportunities for spontaneous initiatives by the pupils outside the actual teaching activities.

Recognizing the importance of human rights education and the fostering of engaged, participatory citizens, how can human rights education provide an opportunity for students in Turkey's primary schools to move beyond the theory of rights and responsibilities? In order to answer this question, the following club was piloted with fifth grade students from Ankara, Turkey and Melba, Idaho, USA.

Methodology

Participants

Twelve fifth grade students and three teachers from Ihsan Dogramacı Foundation, Bilkent Primary School, Turkey and 28 fifth grade students and one teacher from Melba Elementary School in Melba, Idaho took part in the Global Youth LEAD (Leadership, Engagement, Activism and Democratization) programme designed and delivered by the Idaho Human Rights Education Center in Boise, Idaho USA. The student participants were given a pre-survey to document their initial interest in human rights, their understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship, and their willingness to make cultural connections with their peers. While the US participants in the study were all members of the same fifth grade class, the Turkish participants were self-selected for the pilot by virtue of their commitment to participate in an extra-curricular club.

Content

The programme was offered not only to bring the world into the classroom, but also to empower students to exercise their right and obligation to monitor government and influence the implementation of public policy. Over the course of a school year, the students explore online lessons on human rights and how best to be of service to their respective communities. In this regard, the Global Youth LEAD Club serves as an additional activity to the schools' traditional curriculum. The programme integrates a global perspective for cultivating responsibility and respect.

The Youth LEAD online forum was developed by the Idaho Human Rights Education Center in Boise, Idaho to provide content-based e-lessons with video, discussion blog, and a document library to guide students in project creation and completion.

Participation is continuous over a one-year period and will be a guided, step-by-step integration of online collaboration and reflection. (Available at: http://idaho-humanrights.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=29)

The online forum is a tool that encourages students to move from a theoretical understanding of rights and responsibilities to a practical application of the concepts. The Club fosters teamwork, cooperation and collaboration as students work in groups. Each group identifies a local issue or community problem, researches its origins and possible solutions, and makes recommendations for addressing the problem through public policy. The topics identified by Bilkent Primary School students included child labour, unplanned urbanization, stray animals and the effects of global warming in Turkey.

There is a close connection between the schools' curricular policies and the purposes of the Club.

Since 2008, Ihsan Dogramacı Foundation, Bilkent Primary School has implemented the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program for all students up to the end of Grade 5. The IBPYP was chosen as a means of driving learning in light of the school's stated mission to: foster individual difference and individual development; teach children in two languages; cultivate knowledge in a wide sense; and promote academic proficiency and ethical awareness in socially confident, educated young people. (Available at: <http://www.obi.bilkent.edu.tr/~eng/pyp.php>)

Additionally, all Club activities and assignments were delivered and completed in English to provide the Turkish students with an authentic opportunity to converse and write with a class of native English speakers.

Timing

Over the course of a school year, the students will explore twelve online lessons every other week in a technologically enriched classroom - eighty minutes are devoted to teaching Club meetings.

Results

By the end of the Club the student groups will use their research findings to create e-portfolios. The portfolios will identify the problem or issue, present alternative solutions to the problem, include a student-derived public policy to address the problem, and outline an action plan on how the students would influence policymakers to implement their suggested policy. The Turkish and US student groups will share their outcomes electronically. Additionally, the e-portfolios will be printed and distributed to other classrooms to raise awareness about the issues. The e-portfolios, teacher observations and students' responses will be used as assessment tools and data will be gathered through pre-survey and post- survey.

The Global Youth LEAD Club has offered lessons that are project-based. Observation and review of the students' writing has verified that learning through hands-on activities helps to make the concepts more concrete and enjoyable for the students.

Data handled from pre-survey and post- survey

A pre-survey was used to check the students' eagerness and readiness to participate in the Club; the same survey was used to monitor the change in the students' thinking as a check point prior to the completion of the culminating project. While analysis of the data has yielded preliminary quantitative indicators, the qualitative measures captured in the participants' own words have yielded a glimpse into the impact of the Club.

Initially, 95% of the students were well aware of some of the responsibilities of their governments. However, the way they expressed their opinions in the post-survey was very different from the way they did in the pre-survey. From the same student's pre-survey and post-survey:

What are some responsibilities of your government?

- Our government must keep my country clean and in peace. (Pre-survey)
- The responsibilities of our government is to build homes for the people who don't have a home and trying to make our community better.(Post-survey)

Almost all of the students became familiar with the difference between national and international and what a good community consists of. 90 % of the students used these terms in their post-surveys.

Opinions of the teachers and students about the content of the club

The teachers in this study expressed the view that human rights and civics content can be abstract at times for this age group and that students have difficulty in understanding the subjects.

- I believe some of topics are not related directly to students' own communities. Therefore, students have difficulties in relating the subjects to their lives.

Teachers also stated that in addition to transdisciplinary activities, the club has contributed to teamwork, language, thinking and research skills.

Students have pointed out the importance of creating communities and exchanging ideas. This finding was supported by the following remarks:

- We should be aware of issues in our communities and we should try to solve the problems.
- The world is ours and we need to offer help for those in need.
- I felt like touching somebody else's life. It feels so interesting to become a part of somebody's life whom I might never meet.

The responses of the teachers and students suggest that there has been an increase in students' critical thinking skills; students have become more aware of local and global issues; it has provided the Turkish students with a vehicle to improve their English language skills; students have enjoyed the practical tasks offered by the online forum; and students have become a part of an international community whose members are responsibly taking action to address local problems.

The pilot has indicated that the concepts of public policy and the rule of law remain abstract for primary learners. However, the final e-portfolio process and culmination of Club instruction is designed to reinforce those concepts through an experiential learning project. What has been documented though is the e-lesson format and integrated use of video, as well as the assignment of practical tasks, has facilitated overall learning.

Conclusion

The triangulation of Club data (observation, student online forum written responses and discussion, and student / teacher survey responses) has indicated the overall impact of engaging primary age learners in civic and human rights education through project-based learning. Students have shown interest in practical tasks and the online forum has motivated them to exchange opinions with members of a larger community. While aspects of the content has at times challenged the students, some of the difficulty has resulted from the lack of prior learning and/or the need to translate the concepts as issues directly impacting the lives of primary learners.

Main findings of the study

As the school reviews the impact of the Club and the results documented at the conclusion of this study, several preliminary findings will be taken into consideration. When implementing human rights education into the primary school level, the language, content and teaching tools should be able to catch the students' attention. Every element of teaching is of great importance for creating a democratic community. All members of the school community have a responsibility to create a more democratic and peaceful environment. School policy also plays a significant role in developing global-mindedness. Blending national curriculum with an international curriculum, or conscientiously infusing global perspectives encourages students to think more globally and critically.

As a vehicle for instruction, the Global Youth LEAD Club has broken down the traditional way of teaching human rights education in Turkey. It has provided an opportunity for the students to be active and engaged in solving the problems of their communities and utilized technology for practical tasks. Seeing themselves as part of a global community has increased the motivation of the students.

Further Work

In order to keep the lessons appropriate for the targeted age level, additional practical tasks can be included in the syllabus. A close collaboration with grade level teachers on the integration of children's rights education throughout the curriculum and a commitment to the modelling of democratic classrooms will help to improve the effectiveness of human rights education. Though the online forum has been used as an opportunity to enhance English language instruction, lessons that are delivered in a second or a foreign language should closely interact with the culture of the target language.

The pilot also indicates that further planning should be done in implementing human rights education through practical tasks that consider the thinking, social and emotional skills of the students.

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