

## Earth Charter Booklets for Pre-School and Primary School Children

**Enriqueta Medellín and Gina Mireya Ventura<sup>32</sup>  
and Betty McDermott<sup>33</sup>**



### Introduction

For many years NGOs and schools, with the support of specialists, have made the effort to improve environmental education in Aguascalientes, Mexico. In general, the work focused on providing information on environmental issues and on Aguascalientes' ecosystems. This has undoubtedly contributed to environmental awareness among the local society. This work was carried out in classrooms and workshops in state Centres for Environmental Education.

However, sharing information on the environment did not move citizens to curb their region's environmental deterioration. In light of this, and familiar with the Earth Charter, Conciencia Ecológica de Aguascalientes (CEA) an NGO, decided to share the Earth Charter in an aspiration to inspire and encourage citizens to be active on environmental issues.

<sup>32</sup> Conciencia Ecológica de Aguascalientes, Mexico

<sup>33</sup> The Earth Charter Centre for Education for Sustainable Development at UPEACE, Costa Rica

It is through the use of the Earth Charter that CEA introduced a group of teachers to the Earth Charter and took on the task of disseminating it among teachers, parents, and college students. Gradually, the social dimension of the Charter was incorporated into environmental education efforts, offering a more holistic approach. However, the teachers noticed that the Earth Charter was perceived as a traditional part of the school curriculum, it became 'just another textbook.'

In response, in 2002 Escuela Secundaria General N° 15 (No. 15 Secondary School) chose to implement a pilot project to sensitize students about the need for – and the uses of – the Earth Charter. It was also decided that the broader educational community (teachers, principals, administration, students, and parents) would be involved in the project by engaging in the work and reflecting on the principles and values this instrument can provide.

To complete this task, the school board appointed Doctors in Education, Gina Ventura, Ana Lilia Paredes, and Enriqueta Medellín to be in charge of the project. They held workshops with teachers to identify how they could apply the Earth Charter in the classroom. Parents helped to better understand the significance of the Earth Charter in daily life. Students used the Internet to research the World Summit on Sustainable Development (concurrently taking place in Johannesburg), to learn about sustainability. In addition, murals were painted, and stories and poetry were written. At the end of the semester, the project closed



Pilot project with second grade students.

with a moving event where students presented the Earth Charter from their perspective and made personal commitments to the principles.

Despite its many successes, teachers strongly felt that introducing the Charter was a burden. Therefore, to address the teachers' needs, booklets were developed to facilitate the teachers' implementation of the Earth Charter.

### **Description of the Earth Charter booklets for children**

The main objectives were:

- To contribute to the integral education of our students by participating in meaningful, creative, and practical experiences to help them develop skills with which to address intra- and interpersonal challenges.
- For students to understand and engage with the Earth Charter's vision of respect, love, and cooperation.

Using this context and the framework of the 2005–2014 Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, four booklets were designed from pre-school through to sixth grade that highlighted the values and principles of sustainability.

The booklets most outstanding features are:

- a) They encourage the development of students' competence, abilities, skills, and values towards sustainability, as well as individual cognitive and practical development, such as: abstraction, spatial situation, and creativity.
- b) They can be applied to a range of educational settings.
- c) They were designed as self-teaching instruments for children, from the second grade onwards.
- d) Their can be easily incorporated into regular teaching schedules.
- e) The lessons are derived from the Mexican version of the Earth Charter for children.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> In Mexico, several teachers identified the need to develop a children's version of the Earth Charter. They proceeded to design it based on the official international text of the Earth Charter; it was later published by SEMARNAT (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources).

- f) The material contains a chart for teachers, which gives clear examples for applying principles of the Earth Charter to different subject areas.
- g) Each booklet contains a series of activities for students to help them learn about and uphold each principle of the Earth Charter.

*A sample exercise from the Earth Charter booklets:*

**The Earth Charter for Children**

**1. Respect and protect people, animals and plants.**

- a. Always respect the way of life of people, animals and plants, even though they may appear to be strange or different to you.
- b. Provide plants and animals with care and protection.
- c. Fight against the indiscriminate killing of animals.
- d. Help protect endangered plants and animals, and never capture or purchase any of these species.

Look closely at the drawings on the left column and draw a line connecting each with one in the right column which represents what we should do in order to live and respect Principle 1 of the Earth Charter.

<p>A boy with a sling-shot killing a bird.</p> <p>A girl bending a small planted tree.</p> <p>A person smoking in a place where there are children.</p> <p>Some children and their mother buying a parakeet.</p>	<p>Two boys tying a stick to the trunk of the small tree for support and then watering the tree.</p> <p>Some children tell the smoker that the smoke is harmful to them (they cough) and to please smoke outside.</p> <p>Another boy prevents the one with the sling-shot from throwing stones at the birds.</p> <p>The children tell their mother not to buy parakeets.</p>
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### **Implementation and testing**

The booklets were created and implemented in two phases of the pilot project. During the first phase in October 2006, the first edition of the booklets (200 for each grade) were printed with support from the Town Council of Aguascalientes. At this time the Institute for Education of Aguascalientes (IEA) trained teachers, from pre-school and primary classes of CEPIA, an urban, middle-class school, and tested and adjusted the materials to most effectively incorporate the Earth Charter's principles with the school system. In May 2007, the mayor of

Aguascalientes distributed the booklets among the children.

The second phase of the pilot project is being carried out in six schools in a range of urban, sub-urban, and rural settings. With the application of the pilot project and tests of the materials, valuable educational information will be gained and used to enrich them, ensuring that the materials are relevant and pertinent, and also significant to the students attending the IEA. The given questionnaires have been answered and processed. Next, a group of consultants will follow-up on the pilot test.

## **Methodological aspects for the pilot tests of the booklets**

The sample of schools will include six schools (three grade schools and three pre-schools): four schools served by the Institute of Education of Aguascalientes and two private schools. Approximately 600 students from rural, urban and sub-urban areas will be involved, as well as 3 consultants (one for every two schools), 12 teachers (three for pre-school, three for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades; three for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, and three for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades), and three external editors. **The educational staff involved will participate as following:**

### **Teachers**

Teachers will be participating in the training workshops on how to incorporate the Earth Charter in education. This will also include clarifying the content, reviewing the materials, making suggestions, and sharing their findings with the consultants.

### **Consultants**

Pre-school Coordinators, staff from the IEA, and staff from the Secretariat for Human Development in the Municipality of Aguascalientes (who attended the Earth Charter workshop) will support in various ways.

### **External Editors**

The external editors will review the booklets, offering comments for their enrichment and improvement. These comments are expected to be included at the end of the year.

### **Activities**

The activities in the workbook are designed to help children understand, experience and be an inherent part of the ten principles of the Earth Charter (as configured in the children's Mexican version). Working in the classroom with the Earth Charter does not require teachers to change the school schedule because several educational areas of the curricula bear a close resemblance to the Earth Charter's principles. Teachers are encouraged to

adapt the booklets to their needs, taking into account the following **methodological considerations:**

1. Working with each of the Earth Charter principles allows the development of capabilities in different educational areas; prioritizing which one(s) to focus on depends on the purpose of the educational experience. The primary goal is that children enjoy the experience and put the principles into practice in their daily life.
2. The Earth Charter principles do not have a pre-established sequence. They can be explored randomly, according to children's interests and the real problems that exist in the classroom and/or in their social and natural environment.
3. It is important to consider that children need creative and reflexive activities in order to learn, develop their imagination, and enjoy and resolve problems that are important to them; for this reason, the activities presented in the booklets are ideas which require children's inputs to develop the principle and make it resonate.
4. The proposed activities should not be carried out in an isolated manner; they should be part of a plan that seeks the development of the selected competences.
5. That children should learn to respect human beings, animals, and plants; to recognise and value the traditions and customs in their communities; and to resolve problems in a peaceful way, through interaction with nature and with people from different social and cultural environments.
6. Allowing a child to come up with alternatives for problem-solving and to put into practice his/her hypothesis, gives him/her the opportunity to amass more solid knowledge, which can become an integral part of his/her personal values.
7. It is important to tell children there are certain problems to which we do not have answers; by offering alternatives less harmful to people and the environment, we can adopt a positive attitude and work for improvements within our own abilities.

8. Alarmist terms should not be used, as they serve to make children adopt a pessimistic attitude; we must try to seek solutions and alternatives with the firm conviction that any contribution will make a big difference.

9. Follow-up and debrief with children after all activities in order to check for significant changes in their attitudes. Some children will show an initial positive response that fades with time, it may be necessary to encourage them on a daily basis.

### Chart of suggestions on how to use the booklets in the different subjects and programme content

Principle	Grade	Subject	Purpose	Content
<b>2</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	Natural Science	That the students may acquire knowledge, capabilities, attitudes and values reflecting a responsible interaction with their natural surroundings, and understand the operation and transformations of the human body and the development of habits for the preservation of their health and wellbeing.	1 <sup>st</sup> Living things. - Plants and animals
	2 <sup>nd</sup>			2 <sup>nd</sup> Living things. - Care and protection of all living things around us: plants, animals, and human beings.
<b>4</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	Geography	That the students may practice describing sites and landscapes, and begin making symbolic representations of the physical spaces of which they are most familiar.	1 <sup>st</sup> Town and country. - Town and country environmental concerns.
	2 <sup>nd</sup>			2 <sup>nd</sup> Life in the neighbourhood. - Activities which are harmful to the environment in the neighbourhood, and ways to prevent them.
<b>7</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	History	This discipline has a special educative value. Nevertheless, it also works as a contributing factor to acquire personal ethical principles and values for social interaction.	1 <sup>st</sup> Before and after in personal history.
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Civic education	That the students may develop attitudes and values which provide him/her with strong foundations to become a citizen aware of his/her rights, the rights of others, and one who is responsible, free, cooperative and tolerant. The goal is to develop Mexican citizens to be respectful of the cultural diversity, and capable of analysing and understanding the actions and numerous expressions of the human mind.	2 <sup>nd</sup> Time in the personal and family history. - Changes in customs and daily activities of the family during the course of time.

4	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Mathematics	That the students may obtain basic knowledge in mathematics and develop: - Spatial imagination - Abstract thinking through various forms of reasoning, among others, processing and generalizing procedures and strategies.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Handling the information. - How to approach and resolve simple problems in which you wish to gather and record information on a regular basis.
	4 <sup>th</sup>			4 <sup>th</sup> Handling the information. - Gathering and recording data stemming from observation. 4 <sup>th</sup> The wealth of the country.
7	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Civic education	That the students may gain the attitudes and values which will provide him/her with strong foundations to become a citizen aware of his/her rights, the rights of others, and one who is responsible, free, cooperative and tolerant. The goal is to develop Mexican citizens to be respectful of the cultural diversity, and capable of analysing and understanding the actions and numerous expressions of the human mind.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Equal rights of Mexicans.
	4 <sup>th</sup>			4 <sup>th</sup> The rights of Mexicans.
9	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Spanish	That the students learn to seek information, and to value, process and use it both in and out of school, and engage in independent learning processes.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Literary recreation.
	4 <sup>th</sup>			4 <sup>th</sup> Situations in communications. - Writing.
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Artistic education	That the students may develop a taste for artistic expression and the ability to appreciate and distinguish various forms and resources.  To stimulate sensitivity and perception through involvement in activities in which he/she may discover, explore and experiment with expression in materials, movement and sound.  To develop creativity and the capability of personal expression.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Art appreciation and expression. - Handling symmetry.
	4 <sup>th</sup>			4 <sup>th</sup> Art appreciation and expression. - Making banners.

## Lessons learned

One serious challenge we have is trying to adapt our schedule to that of the public administration and services. For example, printing the booklets required

twice as much time as we estimated. This significantly delayed our work.

The task of incorporating the values for sustainability into the teaching practice must be linked to the students' daily reality, so that they will value its application in their

lives. When we tried to work on the Earth Charter without this component, we realized that we were unable to convince students to make changes in their daily behaviour.

There is no doubt that this endeavour has greatly contributed to our outlook and ability to address environmental concerns. However, if we can't appeal to people's conscience, we will never achieve the changes we strive for. It is not enough to promote the values for sustainability and the principles of the Earth Charter with rhetoric only. It is essential to find the right mechanisms

to study these values and principles in class on a daily basis. This is, by far, the biggest challenge. But if the materials are well designed and the teachers are well trained, then the objectives can be achieved.

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**Contact information:**

María Enriqueta Medellín  
Legorreta and Gina Mireya  
Ventura Ramírez  
Conciencia Ecológica de  
Aguascalientes  
Aguascalientes, México

**Email:** [qutamed@gmail.com](mailto:qutamed@gmail.com)