

The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair on Education
for Sustainable Development
and the Earth Charter



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Australia's Green Lane Diary initiative reinforces the Earth Charter

Louise Erbacher

“Don't let environmental problems get you down. Kids have the power to make a difference:

Think + Act + Share = Change”

Introduction

This is the mantra of Green Cross Australia's environmental education programme, the Green Lane Diary and it reflects the Chinese proverb, “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” Every individual student who is empowered to take action as a result of her or his participation in the Green Lane Diary programme acts as another light in the darkness, a positive step forward along the journey towards a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world. The Green Lane Diary is therefore a shining example of the principles of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) because it maintains a strong focus on positive, transformative action.

At the 2006 International Earth Dialogues Forum in Brisbane, a joint agreement was signed between former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, former Australian Premier Peter Beattie, and former Lord Mayor Campbell Newman to firstly incorporate the values of the Earth Charter into education and secondly to establish an Australian chapter of the not-for-profit organization, Green Cross International. Hailed as the ‘red cross for the environment’ Green Cross Australia was later launched in 2007 as a result of the hard work of a number of committed volunteers from across the corporate, government and community sectors. One of the first projects to emerge from Green Cross Australia was the children's poster version of the Earth Charter.

In partnership with the Queensland Education Department, the Environmental Protection Authority and Origin Energy, Green Cross Australia supported schools across Australia to develop their own version of the principles of the Earth Charter, which were then published in 2007 and distributed to schools nation-wide as a visual representation of the Earth Charter values.

Inspired by Green Cross Japan's ‘Green Lane Environmental Diary’, Green Cross Australia's Green Lane Diary has impacted more than 115,000 Australian students since the launch of the programme in 2010. The online sustainability education initiative provides young people with accurate information and practical solutions to a range of environmental issues via an interactive website and magazine. Linked to the General Capabilities, Cross-Curriculum priorities and key learning areas of the Australian Curriculum, the Green Lane Diary also reflects a number of the principles of the Earth Charter, namely interconnectedness, intergenerational equity, and the responsibility of human beings to protect Earth and all its systems. Rather than teaching about the values and principles of the Earth Charter, the Green Lane Diary provides a platform for reinforcing the Earth Charter through transformative learning. The goal of the programme is to educate, inform, and empower students to connect with the world around them and to take action on a range of environmental issues in their local community and beyond. Students who have made a significant effort to create a more peaceful, just and sustainable world are then acknowledged for their achievements at the annual Green Lane Hero Awards ceremony, held in November each year.



Implementation

In 2010, after securing sponsorship agreements with governments, business, and not-for-profit organizations, Green Cross Australia released the Green Lane Diary environmental education programme. Coinciding with the Queensland Education Department's Year of Environmental Sustainability in 2010, the Green Lane Diary reached over 14,000 students from across Australia in its inaugural year. The weekly topics in the Green Lane Diary magazine were carefully selected to not only reflect the values of the Earth Charter and the [Melbourne Declaration's Educational Goals for Young Australians](#), but also to align with the key learning areas of the Australian Curriculum – namely Geography, Science, English, and Civics and Citizenship.



OLR Kenmore Green Thumbs

Through engaging with the Green Lane Diary educational materials, students were provided with an opportunity to develop the skills of active citizenship, ethical understanding, and critical and creative thinking. They developed the knowledge, values and skills necessary to protect the common good and to sustain and improve natural and social environments for present and future generations. From an ecological perspective, students learned about the impacts of production and consumption on biodiversity and Earth's systems and they explored alternative solutions including renewable energy, recycling, and sustainable design. They investigated the effects of rising sea levels and extreme weather events on Pacific Island nations and communities in regional and coastal areas of Australia and developed their own fundraising projects to install water filtration systems in communities around the world. In terms of the principles of the Earth Charter, students transformed the following values into action through their engagement in the Green Lane Diary programme:

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.
5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.
6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.
7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.
8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.
9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.
10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life

15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

The focused attention on alignment between education at the national level through the Australian Curriculum and the Melbourne Declaration and at the international level through the values of the Earth Charter and the principles of education for sustainable development (ESD) enabled teachers to embed sustainability into the curriculum rather than teaching the concepts as part of an 'added extra'. Sustainability topics including conservation of resources, indigenous histories and cultures, active citizenship, lifelong learning, future perspectives, biodiversity, and sustainable design principles were well-researched and teachers were provided with [comprehensive educational materials](#) to support the delivery of the Green Lane Diary in the classroom context. In this manner, the Green Lane Diary was innovative in its approach because it supported the incorporation of ESD principles into classroom pedagogy. At the same time, the programme was open-ended to allow for different school communities to create their own responses to environmental issues.

Regardless of their regional location or socio-economic status, schools all over the country could take ownership of the Green Lane Diary programme and use it as a vehicle to enact change in their own communities. While there are a number of statistics available in terms of how many students engaged with the Green Lane Diary programme over the past few years, it is very difficult to gather data on the depth of community empowerment that occurred in each context. Teachers, parents and the students themselves provided anecdotal evidence of the transformational effects of the Green Lane Diary and the way their values were changed as a result of participating in the programme but measuring the changes to behavior is not something that can be easily achieved. The Diary itself did attempt to measure the number of actions adopted through the "Action Tracker" mechanism on the website and via the Eco-Monitor element contained in students' Green Lane Diary scrapbooks but the long-term effects of these actions remains unknown.

The problem of the overcrowded curriculum has long plagued environmental educators who have worked tirelessly to embed sustainability into the curriculum. The Green Lane Diary is a welcome addition to the field of education for sustainability because it manages to simultaneously align with existing curriculum frameworks whilst providing opportunities for transformative and experiential learning. This is a significant achievement when considering the fact that the Green Lane Diary is not managed by a government body, but rather it has been almost entirely coordinated and distributed by a not-for-profit organization. Over the years, the Green Lane Diary has triggered the establishment of a network of educators whose connections have led to the development of a comprehensive body of best practice case studies in education for sustainable development. Through its practical, innovative, and collaborative approach, the Green Lane Diary programme has instilled a sense of confidence in many educators who would otherwise have remained on the edge of ESD. Essentially, the programme has supported educators to transform the values of the Earth Charter into action as students learn how to develop sustainable solutions to environmental issues.



OLR Kenmore Green Lane Diary Winners

Lessons learned

In spite of these considerable achievements, the Green Lane Diary programme must now forge a new path as it navigates its way through an environment with significantly diminished levels of sponsorship and financial support. The downturn of the international economy and changes to the political climate have meant that for the first time since its launch in 2010, schools must now pay a fee to receive printed copies of the Green Lane Diary magazine. The current lack of financial support seems disproportionate to the uptake of the programme in schools across Australia, especially considering the instrumental role of the Green Lane Diary in not only raising the profile of the goals of the UNDESSED but also in terms of demonstrating practical ways for transforming the values of the Earth Charter into action.

Perhaps the solution lies not so much in securing financial support, but rather in terms of securing support at the policy level for ESD and the values of the Earth Charter. With the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and the subsequent prioritization of sustainability, indigenous histories, and cultures and engagement with Asia, it seems that the government is finally beginning to recognize the importance of sustainability principles and it is very easy to see the similarities between the Melbourne Declaration's Educational Goals for Young Australians and the principles of the Earth Charter. As a result, ESD is no longer on the fringes of pedagogy and is now becoming much more mainstream with some state governments mandating policies on sustainable management of resources in schools. The focus should therefore be on how much has been achieved over the course of the UNDESSED as a result of practical, inspiring examples of the Earth Charter in action, such as the Green Lane Diary programme. Strategic partnerships between government organizations, corporations, and curriculum agencies at the national level and between UNESCO and Earth Charter International at the global level could prove to be a positive step in the right direction for the Green Lane Diary. Above all, the most important goal is to maintain the momentum that has already been achieved, thereby keeping all the candles burning brightly.

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Brisbane Catholic Education Sustainability Framework: www.bne.catholic.edu.au/creationwecare/

Links:

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