WHY COMMUNITY RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS?

Pedagogical Rationale

Experience-based Learning

It has long been recognized that learning is most effective when children are actively engaged in the creation of knowledge. It is also extremely valuable for children to be able to build their school learning upon the knowledge that they gain in their everyday lives in their community. (See: Many Paths to Learning).

Democratic Learning

All schools require education in civics and/or government. This is often taught through formal texts that introduce citizenship in an entirely abstract manner. More important than the abstract facts of government is that children learn to see themselves as competent and confident members of their community. Children and adolescents appreciate the opportunity to feel that they can play a useful role in community or environmental improvement. The new vision of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child brings this aspect of school education into greater focus for it sees children as citizens with rights to participate (Go to UNICEF's The Children's Wishbook and Why so Child Friendly?).

Environmental Education

Environmental concern and understanding should be based in local knowledge of the environment. If children only know ecology from books, they will find it hard to understand it and will be unlikely to develop a deep concern for environmental issues. All communities need aware and active citizens if the environment is going to be successfully managed following the principles of "sustainable development". This is an extremely important concept for children to understand. Sustainable development has been defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". It recognizes that the future depends upon simultaneous development for the eradication of poverty while also rescuing the earth from a path of degradation.

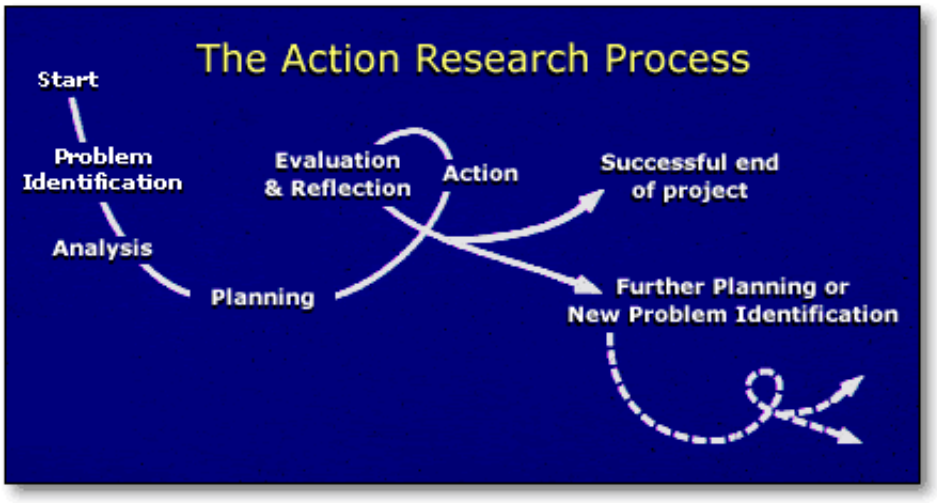
Benefits to the Community

Children's research can be valuable to their community. It can sometimes lead to minor physical improvements by the children themselves. It can also lead to larger changes by stimulating a dialogue on community problems and improvements between parents, planners and public officials.

Participatory Action Research

Action research is a process of looking critically at social and environmental conditions as the basis for improving them. It is important to note that your perspective and the children's perspectives on a research question may change while you are carrying out action research. This change is desirable. But this is a different way of thinking than that of the more traditional experimental research that is traditionally emphasized in school curriculum guides or textbooks. More traditional research, including experimental research, is also important for children to learn. It may, for example, be interesting for children to conduct research on the different crops that they can grow in their school garden by making experimental plots and comparing growth in each of these. But this type of research is not the subject of this series of units. The diagram below describes the complete sequence of an action research cycle.

Figure 1: The action research cycle



As you can see in the diagram, evaluation is not a separate process, carried out by others, but a fundamental part of action-research.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH BY CHILDREN

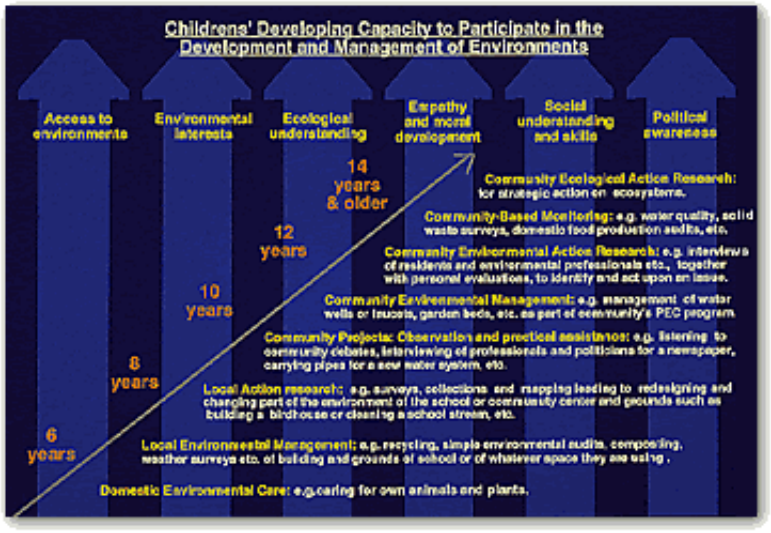
Overview

These units are designed to enhance children's capacities to conduct useful research in their everyday community. Most of the community research carried out by schoolchildren throughout the world is related to the physical environment and is called "environmental education". The subjects of these units include the living environment of the children themselves: housing, resources for earning a living, parks and municipal services.

All children can usefully carry out research from the early elementary school years through the teenage years. In fact mixed age grouping is ideal for research because of the capacity of children with different abilities to learn from one another. Considerable emphasis is given to the use of alternative forms of media to writing. This enables younger children and less literate children to participate. It is also a valuable way of recognizing the different 'learning styles' of children. It is also excellent for enabling children with very different abilities to work together. (Go to Some Alternative Methods.)

Although each unit can be conducted independently of the other, they do proceed with a developmental logic: students investigate the immediate surroundings of the classroom and the school grounds before proceeding to more complex community initiatives. The diagram below suggests very broadly the range of kinds of research activities that children of different ages might be interested in and capable of conducting.

Figure 2: Children's Developing Capacities and Interests in Research.



(Click on the Chart for a larger view.)

Relating Community Research to the Required Curriculum

Community research cuts across the whole curriculum and is valuable to all subjects as a motivational core. It is sometimes necessary for teachers to illustrate to school administrators and others that community research is not another new separate subject of the curriculum but are integrated into all subjects.

The clearest way to do this is by regularly marking up a chart of your total curriculum:

- Prepare a chart showing the outline of your required curriculum.
- Display it in a prominent location near the entrance to your classroom as a way of declaring explicitly the relevance of your community research program.
- Regularly annotate this curriculum chart with notes on the community research activities of the children.
- Consider using this chart for weekly classroom planning and review. In this way, the mandated curriculum can become a valuable check upon the different skills and kinds of knowledge being fostered by the children's community research.

Establishing School-Community Collaborations for Research

Teachers cannot effectively manage programs of community research alone. They need the help of others in their community. In most communities there are talented people who would be involved if they knew that this was of interest to the school. There are a number of things that a school can do to begin to change their relationship to the community and its many resource persons.

Invite the Collaboration of Parents

Parents can play a valuable role in the local research projects of their children. They can be the primary link for children to the collection of community data as homework. In fact, community research can become an effective means of helping parents to discover that learning is not something that just happens schools. They can play an important role even if they are themselves not formally educated.

Establish a Community Directory of willing volunteer consultants for the school:

One way of promoting the idea of community collaboration both within the community and with your teaching colleagues is to create a simple booklet of the names and talents of local persons who are willing to occasionally work with children in some way. These people might include:

Community residents

This is an important group for any school wishing to build its community research capacity. There are valuable teaching resources residing in every community that are never used.

The Special Values of Working with Senior Residents

Community research offers an excellent opportunity to bridge the wisdom of the past with the necessary new understandings demanded by a rapidly changing world. Fostering the relationship between the local knowledge and skills of the older generation and the developing knowledge of the young offers us the best opportunity for maintaining cultural continuity while working for community development. Also, these two groups, which are normally excluded from planning decisions, can develop alternative plans together. By working together they can achieve a great deal. The Neighborhoods 2000 project, in Hawaii, has been a very effective strategy to involve elderly residents in community research and planning. At the same time, seniors and students are able to greatly improve their understanding of each other through comparison of their perceptions of the same neighborhood.

Some environmental educators bring seniors into the classroom and take children to learn from them in forests, fields or urban neighborhoods. A few exceptional programs are even more enriching to a community because they involve a two-way process, and sometimes even a three-way exchange of knowledge between local sages, outside environmental experts and children.

Planners and Research Professionals as Consultants for Children

Children can learn from community residents what many of the primary environmental priorities and problems are. But environmental scientists and professionals still have a central role to play. They are better prepared to identify what parts of the environment are most at risk from human action and also in many cases, what parts of the environment are most seriously affecting the health of a community. Furthermore, many environmental problems cannot be fully addressed by a local community. Partnership is required: an interaction between the identification and diagnosis of local issues by community residents themselves, in dialogue with environmental professionals, and collaboration in the solution to these problems. Schools need to be able to occasionally call on officials to help their children as consultants. Government agencies and university staff are often surprisingly willing to respond to schools in this way (Go to Case Study of the Herbarium Project). Unfortunately, be aware that the typical response of a government agency in working with a school is often to send their staff to give prepared talks to children. To avoid this, quickly establish the desired nature of the two-way relationship.

Preparation for Participation of Non-Teaching Resource Persons

The students may visit resource persons or the latter may be invited into the classroom. You should consider in advance what experience these persons might bring in order to enable them to be the most effective:

- To avoid the tendency to have experts give "potted" or "canned" lectures put them in the position of being a resource from the beginning. Invite them to come and respond to questions that have been prepared by children from their research.
- Arrange for children who have already begun some community research to visit a planner/environmental professional in his or her office to ask questions.
- Ask planners to accompany children on surveys in the community, walking side by side and exchanging their perspectives.

Improving Group Work

Group Size

Because community research has a diversity of tasks and is highly motivating to children it is possible to conduct research even with very large sized classes of children. It is essential however to break children down into small working groups. Groups of four to six children around separate tables are ideal for maximizing children's participation in the research.

Decision-making structures

It is valuable to help your students establish rules and decision-making processes for working in groups. Educators for Social Responsibility in the USA have produced some useful guidance on educating for democratic

participation in elementary schools (http://www.esrnational.org). They suggest that children be introduced to six different models for decision-making:

- Authoritarianism
- Delegation of responsibility
- Random Choice
- Direct Democracy
- Representative democracy
- Consensus

You can have children create skits in which they role-play each of the different decision making models around a common problem. One good method is to have children make decisions regarding participation in organized team games or sports.

Have children try to systematically keep records of how these different models are variously used by their group from day to day (Go to Investigating and Redesigning the Classroom). They will come to learn of course that many of our decisions are made by an informal combination of a number of these models.

Variety of Children's Projects

Do children's projects look the same in the different classrooms you know? If they are all the same then the children could not possibly have been openly identifying the issues in their community. It is not sufficient for children to only investigate problems that have previously been identified by adults. Children themselves should be involved in problem identification. Sometimes a teacher might suggest a subject, but if children are truly to become researchers they need to be fundamentally involved in the diagnosis of the problem. They need to learn how to ask questions as well as to answer them. For these reasons, the following units are based on the investigation of, and action on, issues that are important in children's own lives and in the lives of their communities.

View Alternate Methods for examples of different ways children can demonstrate their learning.

Case Studies and Examples

Review the available Case Studies that detail the kinds of projects children have completed.

Resources

Educators for Social Responsibility (1991). Taking Part: An Elementary Curriculum in the Participation Series. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Educators for Social Responsibility (http://www.esrnational.org).

Fountain, Susan (1997). It's Only Right. New York: UNICEF

Raised Voices (1993). A film documenting children's rights issues around the world. Available from UNICEF (http//wwww.unicef.org.apublic/vidfinal.htm)

Adams, A. and Ingham, S. (1998). Changing Places: Children's Participation in Environmental Planning. The Children's Society, Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street, London WC1X OJL.

National Science Teachers Association. Dragonfly: A Magazine for Young Investigators. NSTA, 1840 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, Virginia, 22201-3000, U.S.A.

Hart, Roger (1997). Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care. New York: UNICEF and London: Earthscan.

A range of resources, including all publications by this author, are available from the Children's Environments Research Group (http://www.cerg1.org).

Explore Ideas · Discuss Issues · Take Action

http://www.unicef.org/teachers/researchers/
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