“Miss, miss,” two breathless girls panted in the playground in London, “can we do global/local today? PLEEAAASE....”

“Yes...” I laughed, wondering what the catch was–

“Oh great! We LOVE it!”

“Really? Why do you love it?” I asked, interested, although harbouring suspicion typical of any teacher whose students demonstrate exuberantly flagrant enthusiasm about “school work.”

“Cuz it’s fun. You know, putting the world together to make that thing...”

“The world map?”

“Yeah, that. And writing letters to children in Sweden and walking to the park and looking at the streets, ‘n everythink.”
Research Project

I recently spent three months overseas investigating the practicalities of implementing a global education initiative, the Youth Millennium Project (YMP), in international classrooms and curricula. I am interested in the potentiality of YMP’s role in two key areas:

• developing a sense of both local and global “community” in participants

• promoting the rights and responsibilities which accompany belonging to local and global communities.

The research methodology involved questionnaires, surveys, videotaped interviews and observations. My two research questions are:

i) Is the Youth Millennium Project a viable global educational program which can be realistically implemented in international schools and curricula?

ii) Does participation in the Youth Millennium Project foster, enhance or assist in developing a sense of “global citizenship”? 

The Youth Millennium Project: What is it?
The Youth Millennium Project (YMP) is a global education non-profit organization based at the University of British Columbia (UBC), housed in the Faculty of Education. It works in partnership with UBC, UNICEF and a number of other major organizations worldwide. YMP’s philosophical structure is based on three guiding themes: The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child; the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and contemporary theory and practice in the area of child participation.

Two UBC graduate students, Rebecca Slater and Justine Wiltshire, founded YMP in 1999. They were motivated by the results of a survey conducted in Vancouver schools which indicated that 70% of youth felt overwhelmed by world problems; and that young people believed they couldn’t make a difference because i) they felt that adults didn’t listen to them/take them seriously, and ii) they felt alone and isolated.

YMP was created to help youth realize that they could make a difference through taking action in their local communities, and by understanding how local action, by extension, helps to make the world a better place. A global youth network has been set up to facilitate communication among youth in YMP projects thereby providing participants with a “global community.” The key purpose of the network is to demonstrate to youth that they are not working in isolation, but with others, world-wide, who share their hopes for positive change in the world.

YMP was intended to be a one-year project to help youth celebrate the advent of the new millennium. But the eager and enormous impetus of youth and facilitators from all over the world made it impossible to close down the project! Now, four years later, YMP has over 20,000 youth in 80 different countries doing their own community projects and communicating with each other via YMP’s worldwide youth network.

How YMP works

YMP provides youth and teachers (and other adult facilitators) with ideas and curriculum materials to help them plan their projects for change. Youth are asked to identify major world problems (e.g. war, poverty, environmental degradation) and local problems (e.g. pollution, homelessness, bullying) and to conceptually connect them (e.g. war with bullying) to demonstrate how projects which address local concerns also address global concerns. The scope for projects and participation is infinite. A project can last for an afternoon or continue for years. Once a group has decided on a project and registered it with YMP, participants are put in touch with companion groups around the world with whom to communicate.
Armed with questionnaires, worksheets, a tidy timetable and ambitious expectations, I returned to the school where I had taught three years earlier. Many faces were familiar, if slightly older. I knew the staff, the children, the resources available, many of the parents, and my way around the school.

I erroneously believed that this research project would be a breeze. In fact, it was a rocky road along which, through mistakes, I learned many things about being a researcher, a teacher and, simply, a human being. In essence, I learned the necessity of unraveling one’s own motivations and expectations to free oneself to REALLY see, REALLY hear, and REALLY learn.

I became discouraged during our first class together, when I realized that the children didn’t know what “global” meant. They didn’t know what the word “issues” meant. The morphological unity of “global issues” seemed an impossibly abstract and ambitious concept in which to engage. Where does one begin talking about global issues without the language or the fundamental knowledge of the world needed to do so? I felt defeated already.

Whilst submerged in this distressed state, I learned to my horror that the following week was mid-term break. I would lose a week of research! I should have remembered the school break, having taught in the UK system for two and a half years, but in the midst of the unrelenting cascade of last-minute minutiae (and not so minute minutiae) before leaving Vancouver, I had completely overlooked it.

**Reconfiguration**

Deflated, I went to visit a friend in Ireland during the mid-term break. The distance (psychologically as well as geographically), combined with our conversations (she, too, is a teacher), helped me realize that I was attempting—under the guise of “child participation”—to develop decision-making, participatory, democratic practices through a top-down “petty tyrant” style of educational
instruction. My anxieties about completing the research on schedule and wanting a “product” to show at the end of it had become the driving force in my psyche as a facilitator/teacher.

I had arrived in London envisioning a successful global education project which could be conceived, planned, executed and completed in five weeks. Considering this ambitious plan from the green-grey distance of Dublin, it began to look absurdly akin to one of those frenetic and culturally bereft ten-day world tours. I had fallen into the trap of “results-oriented” teaching—the antithesis of what I believe education is all about.

This “epiphany” did not provide a panacea for my research, but it did instill within me a more developed sense of “respectful” pedagogy; a pedagogy which enabled me to value the under-valued knowledge of children, and to learn from them how a global education program might best be designed and implemented.

I tried to imagine how “global education” might actually appear to the students, and how it might become meaningful to them. I thought about them, their situations (collectively and individually), and how that might affect the way they perceived “the world.” What is the (human) world, after all, but a conglomeration of individuals (just like you and me) and personal experiences in varying circumstances and environments?

This new approach shifted the balance of power between myself and the students. It was no longer MY research project; it was OUR (actually, THEIR) YMP project. The children decided on a name for their group—SO SOLID KIDZ, and we rolled up our sleeves for action.

**Interweaving diversity**

The vast majority of children in the London school where I conducted my research speak English as an additional language (74%). Many have emigrated from poor and/or war-torn countries. Many of their parents possess extremely limited English; some parents are illiterate in any language. There is a high percentage (about 34%) of children with “special needs” challenges. They live in a socioeconomically-compromised area of inner-city London, rife with gangs and “estate problems” around racism, violence and crime. This is the children’s point of entry.
My country is so hot and has around 50 beaches. And did you know chocolate came from Ghana? –Adu

Despite their disadvantages, however, there is rich ethnic diversity and a powerful undercurrent of transcultural interaction in the school. The children know each other by name, hobbies, siblings, homes, families, rather than by colour, ethnicity and citizenship status. Many of the children speak two, three or four languages. Most have highly developed survival skills (e.g. coping with severe family trauma, caring for siblings, negotiating for parents who don’t speak English, sharing their radically different cultures with each other). These experiences and situations bring with them a wealth of knowledge, skills and abilities that are, in general, sadly, under-recognized and under-valued in the educational system.

Local Issues

One day we discussed local problems. The children cited rubbish in the streets, violence, drinking, gangs, smashed cars, drugs. Then one boy from Ghana said, “Racism.” I had suspected that this topic might come up. I asked him what he meant by racism and he told me, “People not liking other people because of their colour.” Then I asked him for an example of a racist incident that he knew of. He didn’t have an answer. Then another boy from Somalia said, “Yeah, well there was this black guy, yeah, killed, yeah, in AmBjorna in the 1960s, innit?” And then a boy from India said, “Yeah, and my dad read in the newspaper, yeah, that they beat up some guy in Camden [another part of London], yeah, because he was black.” There were a few additional recounts of racist violence, somewhat removed from their locale. I was immensely interested, as I had assumed they would have recounted local, or even personal, experiences of racism.

I knew (from conversations with parents, community leaders, school administration) that there were, or at least had been up until recently, gangs—quite often racist and violent—on the estates where these children lived, but this fact didn’t enter into their discussion. I wondered if perhaps racism was more acutely perceived and identified at a later age? I wondered if the local community had become more cohesive and that the local racist violence had subsided? Was there hope for intercultural understanding and friendship in vibrant communities such as this one?
Bangladesh is a very good place and I like it.

It is my house. —Karim

Within the school community, there is a culture of children protecting the “weaker” or “meeker” children and caring about each other in a deep, familial way (despite the bickering typical of any groups of individuals). To work with a classroom of children of African-, Asian-, Anglo-, and Eastern European- heritage, and to witness their consideration for each other, their united denouncement of racism and prejudice, was an immensely instructive opportunity. Instead of having its students humiliated for achieving low marks on standardized national exams (results are published in the newspapers to compare schools with each other), the school should be showcased and celebrated for its ethos of cooperation and equality.

The sea in Nigeria is nice and I like it very much.

—Mohammed

Given the difficult circumstances of life many of these children contend with on a daily basis, I assumed that they would feel powerless, hopeless. However, when I asked the class if they thought they “could make a difference,” if they could “make the world a better place,” I was surprised to see that seventeen out of twenty children said ‘Yes.” It seemed to me that what was lacking was the means by which they could feel that they could make a difference.
Is it possible for children to make the world a better place: "Yeah...we could tell the school council, so they go to parliament and so they could talk to the mayor then the mayor could think about what she wants to do and then tell other people..." –Kalpana

Creating the World from the Inside Out

The children I worked with were of the world–Somalia, Bangladesh, Poland, Turkey, Ghana, Zaire, Bosnia, Vietnam, Kenya, India, Romania, China. I asked the children to educate me and each other by sharing their stories, and to create the “world” from the inside out. They revealed some impressive knowledge–poverty and floods in Bangladesh, war in Somalia, war in Bosnia, poverty in Ghana and Zaire, drugs, crime, AIDS, environmental destruction. They did, in fact, understand global issues; their knowledge had not surfaced earlier because I had not invited their personal experiences and understandings into the discussion.

“What’s the point of having war? People just gonna die.” –Scott

Once the children began to contribute whole-heartedly to our conversations, I gained a deeper understanding of the background experiences these children were working from, and a better idea of how they perceived the world. How they located themselves in it. How it affected them. Many children identified closely with countries of their heritages, labeled by others as “developing countries.” The children found beauty in the world, everywhere. Although they were aware of the hardships–war, poverty, natural disasters–they chose to express their general summations of the places in which they had lived with pictures of smiling children eating sweets and ice cream in Bangladesh, swimming in a river in India, a pretty house in Zaire, rivers in Poland, beach huts in Normandy.
We had red ice cream and chewing gum. –Kavita

I realized that these children were not oblivious to the horrors that exist in the world, rather they chose to enjoy the beauty. They have the gift of being able to see hope and possibility in spite of the horror for which we adults are responsible. And is it not through our children that we must invest our faith for a better world?

Taking a Look at the Local

When I asked the London children questions about their local community—what they liked and didn’t like about it—their answers were immediate and several. They did not like the rubbish on the streets, the gangs fighting on the estates, the crime, the drugs, the prostitutes working outside their buildings, all the traffic. But they did like the people in their community, the shops, the park, the school, the teachers. In an initial questionnaire, the children were asked to discuss things they would like to see improved around their community, their school and the world. Two popular answers were “cleaner streets” and “a better playground.” Thus, the children’s YMP project formed around these two objectives.

We spent an afternoon surveying the playground. The children made sketches of what the playground was like and what it could be like. We walked to the local park, observing things in the community along the way. We saw a smashed car, “loads of rubbish” on the ground, “dog mess” all over the sidewalk, needles and cars parked where they shouldn’t be—all within two
We discussed our observations the next day, and the children decided that spending a morning or an afternoon cleaning up the streets and making posters to tell people not to throw their garbage on the ground and to clean up after their dogs would be a good project for the community.

“We’ve learned] that we should keep our community tidy and treat our community nice.”

–Scott

“If we clean our streets and make our playground better, the community will like it and they’ll be happy.”

–Navin

“What We’re Gonna Do About the Playground?”

The children and I then discussed ideas for improving the playground. They were at first skeptical that they could do anything to bring about change; they didn’t believe “kids” could undertake projects and make decisions that adults would take seriously.

However, with my encouragement and assurance that the headteacher, their class teacher and others were prepared to listen and consider their ideas, the children became hopeful. They became animated when they talked about the possibilities. Many wanted a “grass football pitch,” others wanted swings, more grass and flowers, more activities, better toys and equipment for the younger children, and basketball
Best things about YMP project?

“[The best thing was] when Mr. M [the headteacher] came and we told him what we’re gonna do because we get to do some of things we want to do” – Ama

As the children had never actually created, executed and owned their own project before, the process of putting together a project became the next focus of our work together. We identified the necessary steps that would be required for a successful project: The children had to convince the headteacher that improving the playground was a good idea; conduct surveys to determine what other children would like in the playground; plan fundraising events; present their ideas to the school council (which is comprised of parents and administrators); and organize and put on fundraising events. Thus, SO SOLID KIDZ formed groups–Presentation, Fundraising, Marketing and Promotion, and Research–and began to develop, in earnest, their “Project Playground.”

Is this playground improvement project good for the community?

“My cousin, Ammacie, she’s been comin’ up to me and sayin’, well, ‘C, because you’re in Year 6 why can’t you build some new equipment[for the playground]?’ and I say ‘K, I can’t because it’s not my job...’ She’s been moaning at me all the time.’”

So, will this project please your cousin?

“Yeah, she’ll say, ‘Well done, Jodi!’”

–Jodi

At this juncture, it was time for me to leave.

SO SOLID KIDZ’s “Project Playground” enterprise, however, continues. They won the support of teachers who had been interested in improving the playground, and they won the backing of the school's administrators, who were extremely supportive of the children’s initiative. My research in London was, for me, an illuminating experience of the educational process. I learned the value of deconstructing prescribed learning, letting go of my expectations and established
timetables to watch children’s learning take shape honestly and naturally within a curriculum of shared interest and purpose.

“If [other children around the world] do it like us, then other communities in other countries would like it, too” –Scott

“[I learned] how to help” –Husam

“I’ve learned that if I go to college or university I can learn about more things like this.” –Kavita

Can children make the world better?
“Yeah...it’s a good thing to do. [It will make] people in the world happy.” –Jamila

In the end, I left with a project just beginning.

YMP SWEDEN

Sweden was a different experience altogether.

The Year 6 class I worked with was located in one of the schools in Ystad, a picturesque small town on the southern coast of Sweden. The students were well-prepared. Their classroom teacher and arts teacher had been working with them on global and local issues, discussing possible projects and participation in YMP.

When I arrived, the students (who had decided on Y-Town PowerKidz for their name) were eager to tell me what they had learned and discussed, and what they had decided to do. They wanted to take up the YMP Challenge 2003: Education in Afghanistan. For their YMP project, they excitedly told me, they would write and perform a play about global and local issues that were important to them.
Are youth changing the world through projects like YMP?

“Well, maybe not all the problems can be solved, but a lot of the problems, I think.”

—Vivienne

The Swedish school system has a tradition of facilitating youth empowerment by encouraging children to participate openly and freely in their education. Children learn from a young age that their ideas are valued, and that their questions and thoughts will be taken seriously by teachers and other adults. Democratic mechanisms are set in place for children to provide input on their school lives; and an ideology of cooperation and strong ties to the community is strongly reinforced. Consequently, the children in this Year 6 class possessed an academic, personal and social capacity within which they were fully competent to take on a global education project that looked outwards, into the world.

“We learned about the world and how it is in other countries.

You have to take care of the world” —Michael

The Y-Town PowerKidz conceived, wrote and performed a play, “Change the World.” Their play incorporated themes of racism, environmental degradation, the plight of children in Afghanistan, bullying and war. Many of the roles in the play were adult characters, and it was interesting to discover how these children perceived adults (often parents) in a variety of situations. Interesting also, was witnessing how the children drew on their own experiences in the writing of their play. One boy, who had arrived a year before from Bosnia, acted in a scene on war in which he and his neighbour argue over the boundaries of their farms. On the verge of becoming violent, they are stopped by their daughters. In a scene about
The children were adept at portraying problems amongst youth, and in offering solutions, as evidenced in the bullying scene. The scene imagines different outcomes in a situation where the main character, a girl, is being bullied by two other girls. Part way through the scene, a magician leaps on stage and freezes the action, enabling the victim to change the outcome. The bullied character chooses to speak out against bullies and to share her feelings about being bullied. It was a moving and provocative experience for both the actors and the audience.

The girl who played the main character being bullied had only recently arrived at the school. She had struggled, like any child does (especially a child uprooted from a place with a different culture, language, and understanding of the world), to make the adjustment to her new school environment. Her role gave her a chance to speak in front of her peers, and to be assertive; and she seemed to grow personally through this experience. She was the first student to learn all of her lines. Although initially in rehearsals she was shy and quiet, her confidence and projection increased dramatically by the day of the actual performances.

Do you think it's a good idea to write letters to the students in Sweden?

“If we don’t write them letters, they won’t know about us, but if we write them we can learn things” –Kalpana

Do you think the mayor would listen to kids?

“No, but they could look at the advertisements on [our]
A. had emigrated from X. and joined the class in Sweden at the beginning of the school year. When the class was reading through the letters from the London group, she noticed that there was a girl from X. “Look!” she exclaimed. “We’re from the same country!” I said, “Yes, W is from X, just like you.” Although W. was articulate and vibrant in both spoken English and her first language, she was functionally illiterate when it came to reading or writing in either language. I suggested to A. that she record a cassette tape in their shared first language, as an alternative to communicating in English. She was thrilled and eager, asking me at every opportunity over the next day or two when she could record it, as she was ready with some notes she had made. It was a serendipitous opportunity for two girls, sharing a language and heritage, to communicate across countries via classroom exchanges. So many possibilities arise when the world is opened for children...

“I learned to think more of children around the world, not just me and my friends.” –Stella

In addition to the play, the children recorded, pressed and sold 250 CD copies of a song, raising money for education for children in Afghanistan. The song was written by two girls in the class with their music teacher. The music tracks were written by an internationally renowned songwriter, musician and producer, who also recorded and produced the CD. The girls sang the lead vocals and then the entire class squashed themselves into the studio to sing background vocals. The song, “Show Me The Happiness,” contemplates harsh conditions in the world, and invites people to work together so that “maybe the world can be what we want it to be.”
Show Me the Happiness

So many people all around me lost in war and poverty.
So many children going hungry without a home or family.

SHOW ME THE HAPPINESS, JUST LET ME SEE,
WHY CAN’T THE WORLD, BE LIKE IT SHOULD BE,
IF WE BELIEVE, MAYBE THE WORLD CAN BE,
LIKE WE WANT IT TO BE.

I look around me and I wonder does it have to be this way?
People fighting, people dying, longing for a brighter day.

SHOW ME THE HAPPINESS....

We can love and help each other, we can make it day by day,
if we only get together, listen to me when I say:

SHOW ME THE HAPPINESS....

Music Video (3 minutes)

music video - sound only -
use with fast internet (8MB download)

use with slow internet (modem)

The local radio station interviewed the two girls who co-wrote the song. A newspaper reporter came to the classroom to interview the children and take their picture. News of their accomplishments appeared in the paper the following day in a feature article. The adults in the community were genuinely impressed with what Y-Town PowerKidz had done. Everyone, of course, loved the song and the CD. However, perhaps it was the fact that the children had initiated and accomplished their YMP projects out of a spirit of generosity and compassion that touched everyone the most.

“I’m so happy – it’s [making the CD for the YMP project] the greatest thing I’ve ever done!"

What do you think about writing to other students around the world?

 “[We can] see how they live and what they think about YMP and faults of the world, like war.”

 “[The YMP project is] the most wonderful thing I ever did in my
The children did not simply learn about the lives of children in war-ravaged Afghanistan; nor did they simply study about the many problems in the world. They learned about trying to understand from a different perspective; they learned about critical and creative thinking to solve problems; and they learned about reaching out to help instead of snapping shut a text book. The Y-Town PowerKidz kids know that the few hundred dollars they raised is not going to solve the problems in Afghanistan. But they also know that “making a difference” is not about money: it is about compassion and participation.

“[Now] everybody thinks more about other children in the world.”

Is writing to other children in the world helpful?

“You can see if they [other youth around the world] also want to make the world better.”

–Pernilla

The mandate of Youth Millennium Project is to encourage, support and build upon children’s ideas, experiences and decisions. As educators, we need to ask ourselves: “How can we involve our students in co-creating a curriculum that includes their wisdom and engages their capacity for action?”

In the end, this research journey surpassed anything I had imagined. I learned how social justice, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking about local and global issues can become the curriculum. I learned that by letting go of my expectations, both as a teacher and a researcher, and allowing children’s knowledge, experiences, and passions to shape our shared projects, a new approach to teaching arises. I learned, through SO SOLID KIDZ and Y-Town PowerKidz that children possess the raw, strong energy and hope needed to effect positive change in the world. And thousands of youth—in India, in Tanzania, in Sri Lanka, Argentina, Germany, Taiwan, Malawi, and about 70 other countries—are demonstrating that they can “make a difference” through their YMP projects. Youth, indeed, embody the vision and potential to bring about a future world we often dare not even dream possible in these troubled times.
“It can change the world, if everybody helps.” – Bjorn

POSTCARD FROM LONDON

For information on the Youth Millennium Project, please visit the websites:

www.ympworld.org / www.peacechalleng.org

About the author

Shelley Jones is currently a Master’s student at the University of British Columbia at the Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction. Her interests are in the areas of global literacy and power in multi-lingual communities, the implementation and evaluation of family literacy programs worldwide, and peace-building and intercultural understanding through transnational communication among youth. Shelley will begin her doctoral program in the Department of Language and Literacy Education in September, 2003; her research will build upon the work she is currently doing for her Master’s thesis, “Global Eyes: A Different Spin of the World”.
Shelley is also the Director of Research and Education for the Youth Millennium Project (YMP). She will be working with children, teachers and faculty in South African schools and universities that are partnering institutions for YMP’s PEACE CHALLENGE 2003/2004 project.

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