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Learning Global Citizenship: Students and Teachers in Belize and the U.S. Take Action Together

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*Careful the things you say, children will listen.
Careful the things you do, children will see and learn.
Children may not obey, but children will listen.
Children will look to you for which way to turn,
To learn what to be.¹*

Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics from the musical *Into the Woods* remind us that children are influenced by the adult role models in their lives. As elementary teachers we spend 30 or more hours a week with the children in our classes. Being role models for active global citizenship and including students in our efforts is a powerful way to help children develop an understanding of the world and develop the disposition, skills, and desire to take action as global citizens.

We are a group of educators who have taken our passion for literacy and commitment to active citizenship to a global level. As part of a small, teacher-led non-profit organization called the Belize Education Project, we have made a long-term commitment to improve literacy and education in the Cayo District of Belize, Central America. For each of the past five years, we have travelled to Belize for a week in October to work with children and provide professional development for up to 40 teachers at three primary schools in the Cayo District. We also bring Belizean educators to the United States for professional development in our schools. Over the years we have developed close friendships with our colleagues in Belize. We treasure watching the children, who captured our hearts during the first visit, grow up and become readers. Shari (a fourth grade teacher and co-author of this article) put it best when she said, “Half of my heart now lives in Belize. It is wonderful to visit that half of my heart every October.”

Inviting our students to join us in our work to enhance lives through literacy was a natural extension of the Belize Education Project; their participation helps make the initiative sustainable. Two of us (S.G. and J.K.) are elementary teachers in the Douglas County School District in Colorado, and our students live in fairly affluent suburban communities. The opportunity for a



Student council officer works with teachers Shari Griffin and Jean Kirshner to pack school supplies for children in Belize.

high-quality education is a given for our students (approximately 85 percent of students in the schools in which we teach score at or above proficiency levels), as is having enough food to eat every day (only 11 percent of students in our district qualify for free and reduced lunch).² Our Belizean students live in much different circumstances.

Although Belize does not use comparable annual reading tests or have a formal free and reduced lunch program, we know that 43 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, while an additional 14 percent are considered vulnerable to poverty.³ Unemployment rates in Belize are 13.1 percent, and the country faces a shortage of skilled labor and technical personnel. About 77 percent of individuals 15 and older are literate in Belize.⁴

In our interactions with the Belizean students, we have found them eager to learn to read, possessing vivid imaginations and rich funds of knowledge about their own environment.⁵ Young children develop inventive games that require few resources, and one teenager developed a small business so he could afford to pay secondary school fees. Most parents are eager to be involved in their students’ education. Each October, many of them attend family literacy workshops offered by teachers working with Belize Education Project.



Students at Eden Primary School sing the song “I am Belize.”

The Belize Education Project

The Belize Education Project seeks to build on these assets and empower Belizean children and teachers by providing professional development for teachers, and books, school supplies and scholarships for students. Involving our U.S. students not only helps sustain the initiative, it allows our students to make lasting connections with teachers and children in Belize; develop thoughtful, accurate understandings of our diverse world; and learn that they can make a difference. Their positive response has exceeded our expectations and made it clear that children do indeed “look to you for which way to turn, to learn what to be.” In this article we provide an explanation of the Belize Education Project and the vital role our students have assumed in this organization as young global citizens who take action.

The project began in 2007 when Jean (a first grade teacher and co-author of this article) spent a week helping at Eden Primary School in the Cayo District of Belize. She found a school filled with joyful children, eager to learn to read, but struggling to do so. She met teachers with unlimited love in their hearts, but limited resources and pedagogical training. Missing were the tangible resources that helped make Jean’s first-grade classroom in the United States literacy rich: there were no picture books, chapter books, posters, or sight-words on the walls. The teachers engaged in whole-group instruction; however, she observed little differentiated instruction in the classrooms.

Before Jean got on the plane to head home, she knew she would return. Believing that the ability to read contributes to people’s ability to rise out of poverty, Jean asked colleagues in her school district to join her on a trip to Belize during their fall break to bring books and supplies, and provide professional development in literacy instruction. She invited students, families, and community members to support the Belize Education Project by donating supplies and fund-raising. Thanks to ongoing help from children and families in Colorado, Belizean children and schools have received over 20,000 books and over 4,000 pounds of school supplies such as pens, pencils, and markers.



Students enjoy a laugh with Jean Kirshner during a lesson.

Chris Robinson

Five Years and Counting

Five years after Jean’s first visit, and as a result of the hard work of the Belizean teachers and contributions from the United States, a remarkable transformation is visible. Each classroom at Eden Primary has a small library and reading area filled with picture books and chapter books. The classroom walls are adorned with posters reinforcing concepts under study. A pedagogical paradigm shift is underway. Belizean teachers now use small group instruction strategies, and they are eager to learn additional ways to differentiate instruction.

As the scope of the project has widened, the teachers from Colorado now provide professional development for teachers in three schools in the Cayo District, thus affecting approximately 40 teachers, 3 principals, and 800 students. The long-term commitment enabled the Colorado teachers to develop relationships of trust and provide professional development, guided by the Belizean teachers’ requests and students’ needs, rather than by educators thousands of miles away. The Belize Education Project has raised approximately \$7,000 for scholarships to help 14 children attend secondary school.⁶ The best change of all is improvement in children’s reading abilities, as reported by their teachers.

Guiding Young Learners to Action

What began as a teacher-driven request for children and families to help gather materials has developed into a long-term service-learning initiative. Children learn about global issues in age-appropriate ways, develop the skills and dispositions that are the hallmark of active citizenship, and become inspired to initiate action. (This particular project was sparked by teachers, but we believe that student-voice, curriculum, community needs, and/or teacher passion can serve as effective entry points for service-learning projects.)

At the beginning of the school year, Jean’s first grade students at Mammoth Heights Elementary School embark on a journey to global citizenship by studying Belize. They learn about culture, climate, and its place on the globe, thus learning about social studies standard Theme 3 PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS.⁷

Then, in order to personalize their understanding so Belize becomes more than just a place on map, Jean explains, “We write letters to students far away from us in location, but so near us in their passion to become literate.” The exchange helps these youngsters explore Theme 4 **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**. As their study of Belize continues, the first graders address concepts recommended suggested by Theme 9 **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**. They learn about the disparity of resources between their school in Colorado and the school attended by their pen pals in Belize. Concerned about their distant friends’ lack of access to seemingly basic school supplies that children in the United States often take for granted, the first graders decide they need to help collect school supplies for their peers in learning.

Their Needs, Our Needs

Although Jean intentionally guides them to this point, she doesn’t tell them, “You need to collect school supplies.” Instead she helps them identify the need and recognize an action they can take. She emphasizes, “While we may be more resource rich, we are all rich in our ability to learn” – thus avoiding stereotypes about “Americans needing to save people in developing nations through charity.” Instead, she approaches the study of Belize, and efforts to provide support, as acts of solidarity in the quest for literacy. As one first grader explained, it is important to send books so “Children will learn to read. When they grow up and are moms, they can read these books to their kids. Moms should know how to read.”

Our young learners take their experiences with the Belize Education Project with them into their community. For example, Ed, who is still Jean’s first grade teaching partner, had a student transform a trip to the local grocery store into an opportunity to be an active global citizen. The student explained, “All the school supplies were on sale. When I asked my Mom why they were on sale, she said they were trying to get rid of them since school had already started and no one was buying supplies anymore. So, I figured if they wanted to get rid of them, they should give them to you to take to Belize.”

With help from his parents and his teacher, Ed, this seven-year-old global citizen successfully worked with the grocery store manager to obtain a substantial donation of school supplies. This young student observed a surplus of resources in his community, and then took meaningful action to get those resources to an area where demand and need is high. See Theme 7 **PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION**.

Jean, Ed, and the other teachers involved with the Belize Education Project bring the student-collected supplies to the schools in the Cayo District during their October trip to Belize. When they return, their Colorado students are able to look at pictures and read stories written by the children in Belize – created using the supplies that Colorado students helped provide. Colorado students see results of their efforts and learn how their actions make a difference.

Connecting With Students and Schools in Developing Nations

There are many non-profit organizations that provide support to children in developing nations. Some of these organizations have the infrastructure to connect you with students and/or schools and facilitate developing a relationship. Our own Belize Education Project can facilitate sponsorship of individual secondary-level students; school fees in that country cost approximately \$650 a year and are more than many families can afford. Please learn more about us at www.belizeeducationproject.com.

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other non-profits promoting education in developing nations that you can also contact. We have direct knowledge of how two such organizations have helped American educators and/or students have transformative learning experiences while helping youth in developing nations:

- Make a Difference (MAD) supports quality educational opportunities for vulnerable children and youth in Tanzania and India. MAD endeavors to help children rise out of poverty and become leaders within their communities. Donors can sponsor an individual child by helping to pay for their school tuition, boarding, and school uniforms.
Website: www.gomadnow.org/madsite
E-mail: info@MakeADifferenceNOW.org
- Peacework works to alleviate conditions of poverty and promote peace and prosperity through economic development partnerships and service around the world. Peacework has managed programs in over 20 countries. Their staff can set up international service trips for volunteer groups or help develop long-distance relationship with a school.
Website: peacework.org/
E-mail: mail@peacework.org

In addition to these two organizations with which we are familiar, Half the Sky offers information about over 30 non-profits, including organizations like Heifer International that offer curriculum resources for service-learning. Learn more at www.halftheskymovement.org/partners and www.heifer.org.

An Exchange

The study of children in Belize continues in the spring when Belizean teachers come to Colorado for professional development. The first graders interview these visiting teachers about their students and their way of life. The Belizean teachers tell the students about life in Belize, and share stories of their students' dreams and hopes. These conversations help the Colorado students develop an understanding of basic issues and concerns that unite them and learn how children adapt to their environment, despite different life circumstances. For example, Crystal's second grade students at Fox Creek Elementary School were impressed by how in Belize, 'the kids have to be very creative at recess since they don't have any playground equipment.'

Ultimately, first grade students in Jean's class have a yearlong experience in which they learn about Belizean culture and act in solidarity with their long-distance friends and partners in learning, working toward a common goal: literacy. These early experiences help young learners embark on the journey toward active global citizenship and an understanding of how they are interconnected with children in another part of the world.

Self-Directed Global Citizens: Upper Elementary Students Initiate Action

As the opening Sondheim quote relates, children do indeed listen and look to us "to learn what to be." Sixth graders at Fox Creek Elementary School, where Shari teaches, have grown into young global citizens who initiate action. These children have been partners in learning with their Belizean peers since second grade and have been long-distance witnesses and contributors to the change in resources and classroom environments in three schools in the Cayo District. For four years they supported the Belize Education Project's mission through book drives and supply drives. They learned about Belizean culture and geography from slide shows and conversations with the visiting educators from Belize. Two months after seeing a show about Belize, one fourth grader still wondered about a photo showing a classroom with children's shoes lined up on a mat:

All of the kids' shoes were along the mat they were sitting on so they didn't get it dirty. That wasn't what caught my eye. It was a little window. And outside the window was a little broken down shack, and why isn't anyone fixing it?

With lingering questions like this one, it is not surprising that, by sixth grade, students at Fox Creek Elementary were no longer content to react to the need for supplies. They moved from reaction to action, bringing Theme **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS** to life. In the process, they raised \$1,120 through a three-day bake sale for scholarships and school supplies. These global citizens did far more than sell sweets. They worked tirelessly, extending their hours into the evenings to capitalize on the traffic for parent-teacher conferences. They were not just marketing their products; they were promoting the importance of education and literacy for students in Belize.

Far more important than the dollar amount raised, these young

Where is Belize?



Approximately 9,000 square miles, bordered by Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the west and south, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Belize has the second longest barrier reef in the world (165 miles). The land is flat at the coast and rises to 3,600 feet inland at the height of the Maya Mountains. Jungle and rainforest cover the central and southern regions with predominantly dry pine savannah, Caribbean pine forests, and extensive wetlands in the north and west.

Most of the major towns and villages of Belize lie on the coast or along major rivers. In recent times however, new settlements have formed, mostly in the Cayo District of Western Belize and the Toledo District in Southern Belize. The latest census in Belize shows a population of over 300,000 made up of Creole, Garifuna, Mestizo, Maya, and Europeans. Belize in general has a very young population with over 50 percent under 18 years old.

Belize is a member of the British Commonwealth, with a stable democratic government. English is the official language and is widely spoken throughout the country. Other languages spoken: Creole, Spanish, Garifuna, Maya, and German.

citizens see themselves as active participants in the endeavor to lift lives through literacy. Sixth grade students at Fox Creek Elementary have always had a tradition of raising money to support a charitable cause; however, their experiences with the Belize Education Project have helped move them beyond one-time donations to ongoing relationships and bonds of solidarity with their Belizean counterparts, continuing to promote the goal of literacy.

Students made a case for why the Belize Education Project should be the recipient of sixth grade fundraising. A sixth grader explained, "The teachers from Belize came in to talk to us in

fourth grade. They seemed so amazed that we had our own pencils and all the other things we had, like the library.” Influenced by profound memories of the stories of Belizean children and the scarcity of resources, another sixth grade boy explained:

I wanted to do something more personal than donating to a group I did not know. This was something personal. Education is more personal. To actually give school supplies, we know what’s going to them and how it will make a difference. We knew exactly what this was going for.

The students were excited as they brainstormed a list of actions for a successful project: write a letter to persuade the principal to allow a bake sale, set the fund-raising goal, organize the production and marketing of the baked goods, and advertise the importance of using this money to send children to school and provide resources. Despite the fact that a typical Fox Creek Elementary bake sale might be expected to earn \$300, students set their goal at \$1200. “I’d rather have a high goal and not achieve it,” one student declared. “Our goal wasn’t just to send one student to school; it was to send multiple.” They proudly recorded each day’s sales on a thermometer poster and came within \$80 of their fund raising goal, enabling them to provide scholarships for students and purchase much needed learning supplies.

Over the years, our students have become inquisitive global citizens. Instead of making sweeping cultural generalizations, they want to delve deeper and learn more. They ask questions like, “Why is it like that in Belize?” “Are other countries in Central America like Belize?” Although they have not become cultural experts about Belize (nor have we), they have an emerging understanding and interest in learning more. Some of our students have had opportunities to travel to Belize on family trips, and they shared the observation that what they experienced on vacation is not the way of life for local people. Inquisitive, thoughtful, and on the brink of entering middle school, these students are prepared for more sophisticated study of “the consequences of interactions among states, nations, and world regions as they respond to global events and changes.”⁸ These students are also problem solvers: when they see a need, they want to develop ways to help. They possess solid civic ideals and want to take active roles in their school and their local and global communities.

Growing Up as Global Citizens

Our students have had teacher-facilitated opportunities to become global citizens, but, as the sixth graders’ actions make clear, these experiences planted seeds for self-directed active citizenship. The older children have spent four years influencing and being influenced by the Belize Education Project. Global citizenship has a face, and they know it is important to take action.

As our students head to middle school, we are excited to see what next steps these global citizens might take. They have a solid foundation for global citizenship, including a profound understanding of how poverty and low literacy rates are related and how they can be addressed through education. By helping to make change happen in one small part of the world, the

Cayo District of Belize, our U.S. students have lived Margaret Mead’s words,

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.⁹

What Can You Do?

You have the potential to create opportunities for your students to develop an understanding of the world and develop the dispositions, skills, and desire to take action through a long-term Global Citizenship Project (GCP) by partnering with a school or students in a developing nation. There is no set entry point to begin developing your own GCP; we have found the process to be iterative. For example, ever-increasing support made it possible to extend our goal to promote literacy by providing professional development, books, and supplies from one school to multiple schools. As more people in your community take on roles as global citizens, they will help shape your GCP based on their talents and resources. We have found it more effective to have a specific focus: literacy.

Research the place and the issue that you and your class will address. Ask your students what actions they think will be of most value in their Global Citizenship Project. Cultivate a culture where your students view children in another nation as their partners in learning. Whether your class sponsors an individual child or your entire school works together to support a school in another nation, get ready for a meaningful learning adventure as global citizens who take action! 🌐

Notes

1. Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989), p. 136.
2. “Students Qualifying for Free or Reduced Price Lunch by School District” (2011), datacenter.kidscount.org.
3. “Coping With Poverty in Belize,” *The Belize Times* (February 10, 2010), www.belize-times.bz.
4. Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook* (2012), www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html
5. Luis C. Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez, “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms,” *Theory Into Practice* 31, no. 2 (1992): 132.
6. Sara Fry, “From Charity to Solidarity,” *Kappan* 93, no. 8 (2012): 76-77.
7. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
8. NCSS.
9. This quote by Margaret Mead is used by permission of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, www.interculturalstudies.org/faq.html.

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