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## Copenhagen Campaigners: an active citizens project

ROHAN KNOX

**ABSTRACT** In the lead-up to the Copenhagen Climate talks in December 2009, Islington Council's Sustainable Schools Officer involved seven local schools in an engaging citizenship project entitled 'Copenhagen Campaigners'. The aim of the project was to raise pupil's awareness of this historic global event and empower them to take action on a local level.

The issue of sustainability has been rising higher on schools' agendas, but educating pupils about climate change and meeting their desire to do something about it has remained frustrating. The topic is complex for young (and many adult) minds and there is always a fine balance to be struck between conveying the severity of our planet's environmental situation without paralysing pupils with fear about what their future may hold.

For the last 3 years I have been delivering outreach environmental education in the inner London borough of Islington. As part of my work I have led 'climate change challenge' workshops in the borough with Key Stage 2 pupils. Within these sessions I have always found pupils very engaged. They have demonstrated an increased awareness of what climate change is and have been very willing to explore what they can do in their everyday lives to reduce their own carbon footprint. Despite these outcomes I felt the impact was limited and it was necessary to go a step further.

I wanted to design a project which would make a meaningful local-to-global link around environmental issues and develop pupils as active citizens; a project that would enable teachers and pupils to take ownership of their learning and move their reactions to global warming beyond their classroom to the wider school and local community. Pupils had often expressed frustration at the lack of action from governments and I wanted to provide them with the platform to voice these concerns. In addition to this I felt there was a lack of awareness about the upcoming climate talks (despite their historical importance) and a gap between pupils' knowledge that they should 'switch off the light' and the emotional connection of why this was necessary. As a result of these issues I designed the Copenhagen Campaigners project.

## **Project Design**

Following preliminary discussions with local teachers, I decided to allocate participant schools a country that would be represented at the Copenhagen Climate talks (COP15). Through the case study of a single country pupils would have a geographical focus in which to explore the complex relationships between the environmental, political, social and economic forces. I wanted them to acknowledge these complexities and recognise that there might not be a 'right answer'. As the outcome of the talks illustrated, COP15 would be a meeting of many countries with many agendas. I wanted pupils to start to understand the complexity and tall order of the world trying to establish a fair global agreement on an issue such as carbon use. In addition I hoped the focus on a case study country would start to raise pupils' awareness of the actual effects of climate change taking place now and the unjust situation whereby poorer countries pay for developed countries' historic emissions.

When designing the logistics of the project I wanted to make sure delivery was relatively short so as not to impose on teachers already crammed timetables but at the same time create a sense of momentum in the lead up to the December talks.

Consequently the project consisted of two preparatory lessons delivered by class teachers, a workshop that I delivered and the creation of a 'mini campaign' from the class at the start of December in the lead up to an Islington 'mini COP15' summit event on December 9th. The summit was designed to be an event for schools to work towards, an opportunity to share perspectives and a focus for local publicity about the issue of climate change.

## **Project Recruitment and Delivery**

Originally the project was designed for ten schools, working with one year 5, 6, 7 or 8 class from each. It was hoped a mix of primary and secondary could be attracted and although this was achieved in the original recruitment, 3 schools had to drop out due to other commitments. Seven primaries remained involved. In the lead up to the start of the project I provided teachers with plans for two researched based preparatory lessons which could be carried out during ICT sessions. The country that each school would represent provided a range of climate change scenarios and were allocated at random. With some schools having to pull out, and some requesting to focus on a country they were already learning about, the final list of countries were India, China, Niger, Tanzania, Spain, Ghana and Indonesia.

In the preparatory lessons pupils had to answer a range of questions relating to COP15, their allocated country and its relationship to climate change issues for example:

1. How does your country contribute to climate change?
2. How is your country affected by climate change?
3. What is the situation likely to be in the future?

Existing teaching resources (such as Oxfam's) were also used to give teachers and overview of COP15 and an idea of their country's 'position' at Copenhagen.

Although support and guidance was given through a preparatory pack, the questions were broad enough to enable teachers to take ownership of the project and engage their pupils as they felt best. On the whole this approach worked well although a teacher commented it had been very challenging to find child-friendly material on the internet relating to their country's environmental situation.

Following these first two lessons I went into each school to deliver a 90 minute 'campaigning workshop'. The workshop had three phases:

1. I initially questioned pupils about their learning and their country. This proved to be an eye opening experience. I had a broad overview of the countries involved but the pupils feedback gave me enlightening insight into the plight of the people of some of these countries. From the severity of the environmentally damaging farming practices in Tanzania to the extent of flood risks in Indonesia, the pupils demonstrated a passion and understanding of their country's situation in their feedback. It was a welcome and refreshing experience to truly step away from the role of 'impartor of knowledge' as the teacher and learn a range of shocking facts and the complex interconnectivity of specific countries' situations from the children. This also provided a springboard for discussion around what their country might hope to get out of the COP15 talks.
  
2. We then moved on to the concept of debate and preparing pupils of the 'mini COP15' Islington summit where schools would debate against each other. Choosing the scenario of a new cinema complex being built on part of their local park, pupils debated the pros and cons of such a move arguing economic, social and environmental reasons for their varying views. Their passion and reasoning was a fascinating insight into their day to day lives with arguments ranging from the necessity of the park as the only space in the local area to have space and relax, to the need for a new complex to provide jobs.
  
3. The final stage of the session introduced the concept of campaigning. The class were required to establish what their message was (to raise awareness of COP15, the global impact of climate change and what can be done at a local level) and then worked in groups to brainstorm campaign ideas. The groups were divided into 'campaign at school' and 'campaign beyond school'. I led the latter and encouraged pupils to think about how they could have their voice heard in Islington and beyond. Having previously thought such an exercise would need a lot of prompting, in the

majority of the schools I was astounded by pupils' independent ideas (many of which are listed below). Following the brainstorm we came back as one class and discussed which three or four ideas would make their 'mini campaign' for the planned campaigning week. This process enabled the teacher to suggest what was achievable, allowed pupils to consider what barriers may influence their choices (such as limited time and money) and which actions would have the highest impact.

Schools were then left to carry out their campaign, allocate eight delegates from the class for the Islington summit event and prepare a presentation about their country and campaign.

### **Pupil's Campaigns**

Below are a sample of pupils campaign activities:

- Assemblies outlining their project and advice on what pupils can do to reduce their carbon footprint.
- Copenhagen marches – pupils made placards, created chants and held marches in their local area.
- Copenhagen rap.
- Letters to their local MPs highlighting their concerns.
- Online petitions to number 10 asking for the government to provide assistance to countries affected by climate change.
- Articles in school newsletters.
- Letters to the chair of the Copenhagen Conference expressing their concerns and desires for a successful deal at COP15.
- School displays.
- Stand against climate change (see below).

### **Stand Against Climate Change Event**

In addition to those involved directly in the campaigners project, I was keen to provide the opportunity for other schools to send their message to Copenhagen. As a result we invited all schools in the borough to take part in a 'Stand Against Climate Change' where pupils would come out into their playground at 2pm on 4 December and send a visual message to the leaders in Copenhagen through a photograph.

How this was done was up to individual schools. This non-prescriptive approach bore imaginative results as pupils created their message through a variety of means such as banners, creation of an unhappy face by pupil's grouping and even the involvement of a whole school who lined up to spell 'LISTEN' with each year group taking a letter in turn. These images were fantastic for local publicity and were consequently shown at the Islington

summit, emailed to Ed Milliband, displayed in Islington's Town Hall and taken to Copenhagen itself.

### **The Summit**

All the campaigning work led up to the summit which was held in the Council Chamber. It was attended by Islington's Mayor and local Councillor Greg Foxsmith. This lent a sense of grandeur to the occasion, with pupils being allowed to use the individual microphones in the chamber. At the event each school presented their learning in turn to share their varying perspectives in preparation of three debates. The questions debated were:

1. 'All countries should reduce their emissions by the same amount and reach the same targets starting 2010.'
2. 'Developing countries should be allowed to produce as much CO<sub>2</sub> as they like for the next 15 years to enable them to catch up with the developed countries.'
3. 'Developed countries should contribute the money needed for developing countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change now and in the future.'

When setting the questions I was keen for there to be a link to the real quandaries that were being faced in Copenhagen as we met and although I was concerned they may be too challenging for year 5 and 6 classes, I was astounded by the debates that unfolded.

Representing their countries, pupils listened, reasoned and illustrated deep understanding of the challenging questions and the complexity of varying countries' agendas. For 45 minutes pupils enthusiastically debated backwards and forwards with adults representing the UK, USA and Australia to balance debates. The highlight of the event was the comment of a 10-year-old boy that 'we needed to start caring about the planet instead of profit', which prompted a spontaneous round of applause from the room.

Ultimately pupils agreed that developing countries should have less stringent targets than the developed but should not be allowed to produce as much as they liked. They also voted for the developed countries to take responsibility for the costs of climate change impacts on the poorer countries, feeling this was the only just route as they had not contributed to their current fate.

### **Passing the Message on to Copenhagen**

Following the summit I went to Copenhagen as a campaigner with Friends of the Earth. I took pupils work with me in the hope that I would be able to get it displayed and/or delivered to decision makers within the conference. Following enquiries into creating a display at the civil conference, Klimaforum this unfortunately was not possible. However, I did manage to hand the pupils work

on to a Friends of the Earth delegate who was a representative in the Bella conference centre and he promised to try and hand the work to Evo De Boer, the COP15 chair when he attended a meeting with him later that week. Unfortunately there were then consequently problems with civil society delegates' access and in the shambles that ensued I fear the work may have been lost.

### **Reflection and Follow up**

Despite the disappointment of the COP15 outcomes I feel the project was incredibly valuable. The teachers and pupils displayed fantastic passion in tackling a complex and challenging subject. I also hope the initiative will have a lasting impact on participant schools.

I had originally hoped to try and link the schools with civil society campaigns and schools in their allocated country and although time limitations prevented this, I hope this is an angle schools will explore independently. Although my work programme for the new term does not allow me the time to provide dedicated follow up support in the schools, I have encouraged their teachers to discuss the COP15 outcome in school and consider further work such as global education exchanges with schools in the country they had researched.

Across the borough I am promoting the 10:10 challenge to reduce carbon emissions by 10% in 2010 which appears to have been received warmly. Having discussed the campaigners project with a couple of participant teachers they have been very positive remarking it was a project pupils could 'really get their teeth into', that it has enthused them for their energy reduction campaigns and that pupils are making links between their learning as 'Copenhagen Campaigners' and subsequent topics covered in class.

On a personal level I felt inspired by the pupil's reactions and plan to do projects in the future that make stronger links between environmental problems and their human implications. An example of this is the link between human rights and environmental degradation and I hope to deliver an initiative addressing this in Amnesty's 'Protect the Human Week' next October.

I hope the project will have a lasting effect on pupils and provide them with the knowledge to link local behaviour to global implications and the confidence to stand up for their beliefs throughout their lifetime.

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