A Global Cultures Program: can it be done online?

By Beth Sutton, Director, Enki Education, Inc.

What is it that opens our children to the richness of the diversity around us, birthing a heart-centered, global perspective? And what simultaneously helps them see the shared humanity within those differences? Where does "it" all begin?

For me, this is an outlook that was bred into my cells; I had the great fortune of growing up in a development built for the United Nations families, and I attended the U.N. School from age 3 to 18. Running to the play-ground meant weaving a line past the homes cooking our favorite African, Indian, or French food. It meant knowing the sound of a mother warning her child to be careful in Chinese or Greek or Russian. It meant wishing you had the kimono or the Senegalese wrap; it meant others eagerly trying on your organdy party dress; it meant learning how to eat with chopsticks at three and sharing in holidays most people never hear of. Most of all, it meant having deep friendships with people of very different worlds – friendships that to this day make me long to visit the Peruvian Andes, the Philippines, and to skate in Copenhagen under the moonlight. And it meant having teachers with widely varying perspectives and gifts. It was the only world I knew.

So the importance of a deep connection to a broader world, one holding a global perspective, is in my blood. And that is a big part of how I know that what we live as children makes all the difference. Yes, "it" starts at home – all of it. But as homeschoolers, most of whom are not living in the U.N. Community, where do we find opportunities to nurture this outlook?

We will do best to start with recognizing where a ground for appreciating differences begins. Whatever our opportunities for cultural diversity may be, it is at home that our children first encounter an attitude of heart-based welcoming of difference, and the ability to empathize with others whatever their differences – whether that applies to challenged big sisters, "perfect" big brothers, or less than perfect parents and grandparents, and even our annoying neighbors! Nothing replaces this first step; it is where we anchor a ground of acceptance and empathy. Still, how can we expand that into a larger more global outlook as we homeschool? This is where an approach to education can support our goals and aspirations. This is, at its core, why Enki Education was developed at all, and it is detailed in a separate article on our global Studies approach throughout the grades; the issue in focus here is how we can bring this experience to middle schoolers in the virtual school environment – and why we would want to!

Why? Most of you reading this already know of the jewel that is homeschooling and all Enki homeschooling programs are designed to bring the global experience into the home. But looking at the child developmentally, we need to ask: what about when the child starts leaping toward independence, i.e. the Middle School years? Now his deep health calls him to *push away* from parents and seek peers and mentors; how can we meet this need without losing the gift of homeschooling? And can it be done in the virtual world?

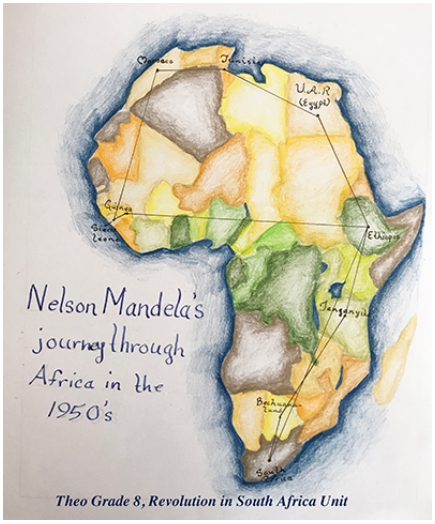
Hannah Grade 8
Revolution in South Africa Unit

Experiencing a non-hierarchical cultural immersion online?!! A tall order, and in all honesty, when we began the Enki Virtual Community School we were not sure it would be possible, but we were up for trying. So in 2013 we jumped in to find out.

We started, as always, with the understanding that a central flaw in the usual way of approaching "cultural studies," even when done with the best of intentions, lies in "studying *other* cultures," trying to look at and appreciate "them" and "their differences." So we started with our core principle: it is only through identification that a real global outlook is fostered and that starts with human stories, and it becomes the child's own experience through the arts. No concept can replace this experience.

We knew we had to research and, likely write, stories that would mirror the child's development. The development I am talking about here is not cognitive or emotional or social or physical, I am referring to a core *inner* development or "impulse towards individuation." It is the unfolding of the impulse towards individuation – the movement from oneness to separateness – that we all must undertake to grow up. Unlike many aspects of development, this happens on a remarkably similar timetable in children, independent of the children's individual experience or nature.

So where the story of great revolutionaries such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi deeply feed the 13 -14 year old with her rebellious, "*I know what is needed here better than anyone else*" attitude, they would not serve the eight and nine year old. The younger child wants to belong to and be part of his own community, so it is here the Iroquois story of the forming of the League of Peace, or the story of the ancient Israelites push for freedom well meet him. Most parents have experienced this phenomenon many times over; they instinctually know that it would be destructive to bring "Anne Frank" to a five year old, but a 13 year old is deeply met by this. And we would be unlikely to try to engage a 10 year old with "Where The Wild Things Are," but we do delight in reading it to the two and three year old. This developmental matching is what awakens the children's natural identification with the human heart, the human journey that is being lived in different clothing and different ways across culture and history, but is always the shared journey of growing up human. This is the center of all we do in Enki.



So the content and format of the curriculum had to mirror this core development, *and* work online. What is there about the core development of the pre-adolescent is critical to this mirroring? Two central things:

1) That the child is mirrored in the content offered;
2) That the child has the opportunity to work with peers in a collaborative manner;

Meeting number one is standard fare in Enki and you can see specifics at virtual school website. In brief, for the two to four months of each cultural unit, the students are hearing an epic story that ties together the entire unit,

and drawing from that they are singing the songs, dancing the dances, making the crafts of the peoples in focus, every single day – ***not*** **as meeting "other," but as experiencing life of which they are a part. It is the water they drink, the air they breathe**.

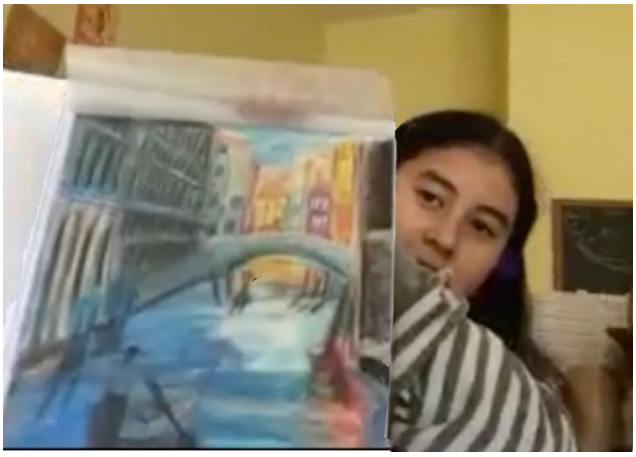
All the other studies, from language arts, to math, to science, can come out of this cultural context. Whether exploring mechanical advantage through the irrigation systems of Ancient Sumer in the Middle East or exploring optics and acoustics through the eyes of Aristotle in Ancient Greece in Grade 6, or tackling ration and proportion through the eyes of Fibonacci in the Italian Renaissance in Grade 7, all studies are part of a coherent, culture-centered whole. So issue number one is covered.

But how, in an online environment, would we meet challenge #2: providing the opportunity to work with peers in a collaborative manner. Here is where our biggest surprise and greatest delight unfolded. We structured our work with the students such that every week they contribution is from the child's own perspective and with their own focus. For example, in studying the early life of Mohammed one child recounts his childhood journey from the perspective of a donkey carrying him home across the sands. Another, chooses to look through the eyes of his mother awaiting his return, and so on.

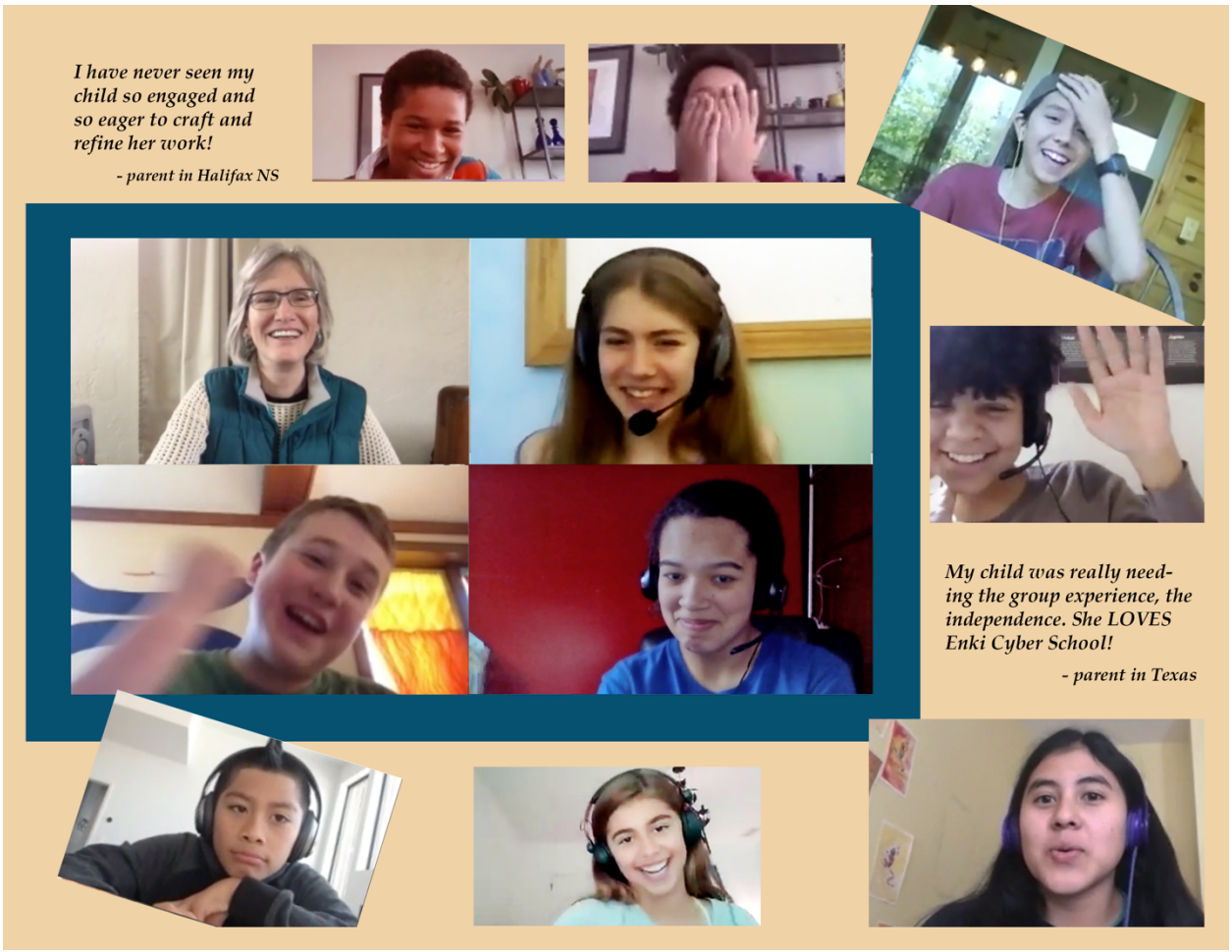
These short pieces the students work with in the Tuesday Writers Workshop. In this part of the program – thanks to the magic of Zoom break out rooms – students work in small groups and, with the teachers guidance, learn to give constructive feedback to one another – and they do so in these very small undertakings so they can exercise this skill without too much pressure. Learning to do this does take time and guidance, but over our years of work with many groups, we have found that the students take up the challenge well and rise to the task. **This ability to develop collaborative relationships is in many ways the most important learning we can offer the preadolescent; it becomes his compass for working with others in adulthood.**

The students then improve their piece and contribute it to the whole. Lastly, the teacher "stitches together" the edited versions of the different writings into a coherent – and colorful – recap of what the students have been reading and they get to see how their individuality can be honored and also become part of a vibrant whole; another important compass setting for growing up! See a 7th Grade example here.

This goes on for eight or nine weeks during which time the students learn a lot about collaborative work – and then this skill is put to the test. Over the remaining four or five weeks, the students work in small groups on peer projects, i.e. projects of their choice and design, focused on some aspect of what they have been learning about. What they have accomplished with these is remarkable and you can view a selection of the many that have been done here.



Yes, the outcomes have been remarkable, but far more stunning to witness has been the process. Again and again we see the students support one another as they work through the inevitable frustrations of bringing grand visions to reality. They lend their particular gifts to one another, and they cheer each other on through challenge. To our amazement, the virtual environment has not impeded this in any way. Matteo, who was with us for all three years, articulates this beautifully through

the eyes of a student. All told, we – who are not of the technology generation or culture – have been surprised at how deeply the children can be nourished in the online environment. Along the way, we discovered another gift we were not even seeking: the students – even those with zero computer experience – become adept at using the computer creatively, and as a way *to connect with others* – not as a means of insulating themselves.
We invite you to look through the website section on the Virtual School and see what you think.

> *My son looks forward to every class. Attending ENKI online has been a wonderful choice for him. We have had some huge transitions this year and a program where he could be at home and still be in peer group was ideal. At his age, having "mother as teacher" was no longer working well for us. With the teacher holding that role, I was able to support him with his homework so that he could attend class prepared. The part-time schedule allows ample space for him to do the things he loves, cooking, jujitsu, music, and just playing!*
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> *- Melanie, Colorado*