

International relationships develop through Public Achievement

People of all ages doing Public Achievement have a first-hand understanding that public work brings together diverse groups of people to work on common issues. What may not be fully understood is just how geographically diverse Public Achievement has become. Public Achievement (PA) is happening in numerous regions throughout the world. There are ten urban and rural regions in the United States and six countries around the world where citizens are using PA to address important public issues. The initiative takes place in a number of different settings, from elementary and secondary schools to higher education and community sites. In a typical school setting, groups of young people are coached by adults, young and old. The coach may be a teacher, community person or college student. Regardless of the setting and nature of the coach, relationships play a key role in carrying out the work. Recently, an exciting development has occurred which is creating new kinds of relationships. These relationships are creating bridges from the United States to Scotland and Turkey. Because of the relationships, a whole new dimension of learning has taken place in PA and the classrooms.

Technology has played a key role in the new relationships. Teachers from the United States and Scotland and Turkey have gotten to know one another through emails. Since the initial introduction, teachers have taken off and created partnerships that have resulted in new friendships and new ways of teaching. For the students in their class, the impact has been felt in numerous ways. But foremost, the relationships they have made with their new friends have created a window into the world of children, much like themselves, but living on a different continent.

Meet Diane Smith and Meltem Ceylon. Mrs. Smith and Ms. Ceylon are teachers in classrooms that are thousands of miles apart. Mrs. Smith teaches 5th grade at Saint Bernards School in St. Paul Minnesota. Saint Bernards is a Catholic School on the north end of St. Paul, the capitol city of Minnesota. Ms. Ceylon teaches 6th and 7th grade at Darü__afaka in Istanbul, Turkey. Darü__afaka is a charity funded co-educational boarding school for fatherless children who come from economically deprived backgrounds. When the teachers met via email, they decided to create an exchange between their students. Mrs. Smith sent a list of names of students in her class to Ms. Ceylon. The students in Turkey wrote the first set of letters to the U.S. students, sending them individually but around the same time period. Mrs. Smith received the bulk of the letters within several days of one another. When the letters arrived, the U.S. students enthusiastically opened them, read them, and were ready to respond. Yet, there was one letter missing.

It turns out that the enthusiasm for a pen friend exchange with the U.S. was not felt by every member of Ms. Ceylon's class. One boy was not interested in

exchanging letters. Since he was Muslim and “they” were Christian, he did not think anyone would write him back. After several days, he went ahead and wrote the letter. This letter arrived much later than the others. The student in Mrs. Smith’s class wrote to the boy right away. In her letter, she wrote about being Catholic, going to a Catholic school, and playing sports. He responded not with disdain, but with delight and surprise. He was so enthusiastic about the letter that he sent his pen friend a care package with gifts. In addition, he got one of his sisters to write a letter to children in the U.S. It appears that some misconceptions and prejudices may have been broken through this one to one contact. Mrs. Smith said, “It was an instant barrier break. Just because of the connections. All the generalizations were dismissed with a simple letter.”

Ms. Ceylon sees the excitement in her students when they receive the letters from pen friends in U.S. She said, “They are asking me everyday whether the letters arrive or not. When the letters arrive, you should see their face: curiosity, enthusiasm and impatience. They read the letters more than four times during the school time when the letters were delivered. You can see that some of them have a dictionary for unknown words or asking the meaning to the others.” Academically, Ms. Ceylon has used the letter exchange to help her students practice English and learn about U.S. geography and political systems. It has also provided her with a tool to break prejudices. Students get to know someone who has been brought up very differently from themselves and learn about different perspectives.

Mrs. Smith has also used the pen friend exchange as a unique learning experience in her class. Not only do students learn about Turkey – the culture, religion, geography and language, but also, on a more personal note, the children in her class have learned that they are a lot more similar to the children in Turkey than they are different. When asked about the benefits of the international connection, she said, “The connection. The simple connection, to dispel the myths, that we are really more alike than different, the other kids that love rock stars, kids that have single parents, kids that have very similar backgrounds. So really we are so much more alike than we are different. That was a big learning experience. It is simple but it is touching one life at a time.”

Across the river from St. Paul, in the city of Minneapolis, there is another school that has an overseas pen friend exchange that was established through Public Achievement relationships. Santi Bromley, a teacher at Cooper Elementary in Minneapolis, and Zena Richards, a teacher at Yarrow Primary School in Yarrow, Scotland, got to know one another via email and have established a true partnership between themselves and among the students in their class. Though the logistics can be challenging, with different school and holiday schedules, absences, and demands on teacher’s time, Bromley and Richards try to have their students exchange emails every several weeks. Walking into Ms. Bromley’s class, it is very apparent there is a strong connection to the people of Scotland. There are pictures of Scotland, posters with information about Scotland, and

photos of the children in Scotland. Ms. Richards has done the same thing in her classroom, with a large display of pictures of the students from Ms. Bromley's class and artwork featuring the skyline of Minneapolis.

Students in Ms. Bromley and Ms. Richards class feel a strong connection to their pen friends. They are eager to write and receive emails. The learning that takes place in the classroom has real relevance. For example, the students in Ms. Bromley's class have created presentation boards about the land, culture, and geography of Scotland. Ms. Bromley said, "They are motivated to do it because it is not some random country that they feel they do not have any connection to. It has real purpose because they have friends, they consider them friends, that are there in this country. They are talking about things like farms and hills, and all this stuff, and they want to learn and understand. They have learned appreciation and value of another country. We are not the only country that exists in the world, realizing that we are all really connected to each other. That really, we all have more similarities than differences."

There are larger and more far-reaching implications of the exchange between the students in Scotland and the U.S. Of this, Ms. Richards said, "It helps to extend and develop children's understanding of global citizenship. We want the students to recognise how similar they are to other children in the world and, through PA, how children globally are trying to make the world a better place. Students are helped to see that they are part of a global community, not just their local community."

Bromley and Richards are sharing ideas and experiences about Public Achievement with each other. They want the students to share what they are doing and learning in PA as well. Richards said, "When you are working with a project as challenging as Public Achievement, it helps to be in touch with another group of young people doing similar work because they act as motivation."

Here are some examples of what the students in Ms. Richards' and Ms. Bromley's classes have said about what they have learned through the pen friend exchange:

In Scotland, at Yarrow Primary School:

What have you learned about America that you didn't know before?

That America has hills.

That there are many different cultures at Cooper Community School and in America.

That they play softball but I don't know what that is!

I learned the difference between American football and rugby.

That Americans don't play rugby.

What have you learned about yourself?

It's a wee bit easier to make friends with the pals in America than I thought it would be.

The stuff they tell us in e-mails is really interesting.

We should be grateful for all the space we have to run around in in Scotland.

In the U.S., Cooper Elementary School:

What have you learned about Scotland that you didn't know before?

What life is like on a farm including all the different animals and forests.
Different spellings for words - examples - mom or mommy vs. mum or mummy, favorite vs. favourite.
There school has many grades in one class.
They have to wear uniforms.
Really fun to talk to someone that lives someplace else besides Minneapolis.
Learned what fisheries meant since pal lives at one.

What have you learned about yourself?

Even though they can not see each other, they can still learn from each other -- even though they are not close, they can feel like they are close through talking in the email.
It took courage to write back and forth making friends with people they have never met.
It was incredible to talk to other people on the other side of the world.
It was fun to talk to a friend, and ask questions -- it was a more interesting way to learn about Scotland.
It took courage to read letters out loud, worried that people would laugh --- but no one did.
Through the letters we learned more about Scotland, and they learned more about America.
It was fun to talk about our life and their life.
It was nice that through writing we were able to learn about another place that we've never been too.

In the U.S., Saint Bernards Catholic School:

What have you learned about Turkey that you didn't know before?

I learned that it doesn't matter what religion you are because we all have the same abilities.
I learned that my pen friend looks almost the same as me.
I learned that my pen friend prays five times a day, and I learned some of their language!
Even though we have different religions, they are not that different from us; we are all just people!

What have you learned about yourself?

I learned that I feel like I will get farther in the world when I communicate with other countries and/or religions.
I learned that I can be able to have a friend half way across the world.
Before I used to think that Turkey was a poor country, then I saw the picture that my pen friend sent me and it surprised me to see that they are good in the money area.
I learned that it was fun to compare myself with someone else from a different country!
If you have a pen friend you can start a little peace in the world.

By talking to the teachers who have created and maintained these relationships, it is clear that a new and exciting dimension of learning has taken place. Students are excited to meet other students around the globe, to learn from one another and to develop new friendships. When asked about the unexpected benefits of the international exchange, Ms. Richards said, "The amazing ease with which the children accept differences and acknowledge similarities with their e-mail pals." These citizen to citizen connections across the globe offer real opportunities for learning and sharing. We can all learn valuable lessons from these relationships.