

Does it All Begin at Home? Really?

By Beth Sutton, Director, Enki Education, Inc.



What is it that opens our children to the richness of the diversity around us, birthing a 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 playground 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 who are mostly not living in the U.N. Community, where do we find opportunities to nurture this outlook?

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 struggling big sisters, “perfect” big brothers, or less than perfect parents and grandparents, and even our annoying neighbors! Nothing replaces this first step, this 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 I developed Enki Education.

Many programs offer materials hoping to bring a global perspective, so how does my experience growing up in the UN community make the Enki approach unique? It is true that the U.N. was, historically, far from perfect; it especially neglected African American and American Indian cultures. But it did give me an experience of multicultural life that was neither hierarchical, nor based on an “us and them” outlook. This non-hierarchical multiculturalism became my driving force for developing an education that holds a “family of man” outlook – and a deep sense of what non-hierarchical cultural immersion feels like.

With this as my ground, it became clear that we have a central flaw in the usual way of approaching “cultural studies,” even when done with the best of intentions. Most programs study “other cultures,” trying to look at and appreciate “them” and “their differences” – a bit like visiting a cultural Disneyland: collecting lots of “neat” prizes and never actually connecting with any of them with a heart commitment. A few, such as Waldorf, focus more deeply, but do so with a hierarchical outlook, a belief that older non-western cultures are stepping stones to the all-important, modern west. Not Enki!



We believe these approaches subtly, but strongly, feed the very “us and them” outlook these schools are trying to avoid. Therefore, in the Enki elementary years our focus is on equality based *experience*, not analysis. In Enki, until the children are in High School, **we don’t actually “study” cultures; we experience them.**



What does that mean?

In the Enki grade school program, right up to high school, the children are immersed in a given culture for a period of two to four months at a stretch. During this time, every day, the children work with a “cultural epic” that lasts through the unit. This story brings them the life of a real person in his or her cultural context. And from this come songs, dances, games, crafts, art work, and stories of a given culture and its people. *All the other studies, from language arts, to math, to science, come out of this cultural context* and, whenever possible, directly out of the stories of the people in focus. This does not happen in a “scatter and grab” manner, but it is brought to them as a coherent whole.

For example, they may hear of the “zangala” (women’s quarters) and the boo-boo (grandfather's robe) of Malidoma Some of Burkino Faso, W. Africa. When Malidoma fights his way home, back to mother and grandfather, the study might focus on the great distances he covered and on into all kinds of measurement. Over the months, students might learn the entire 12 verses of the Iroquois Thanksgiving Address *in Mohawk* while hearing the Iroquois stories of the Peacemaker and Aionwahta. From there, they might work with multiplication or fractions beginning with plotting out an Iroquois longhouse according to the matrilineal, extended family system used at the time of Aionwahta. Or they might enter their study of ecosystems and its impact on food, clothing and shelter through the Iroquois or by experimenting with soils to make adobe bricks in a unit on the Southwest U.S. or one on the ancient Middle East. Or they might work with parts of speech by writing grammar poems about the different ecosystems of the continent they are on. The possibilities are endless.

All the while the children are singing and dancing from the culture in focus, and making foods and crafts. The sounds and movement and textures of the culture become part of the children's *daily* experience, and, in turn, it is the richness of *their own expanded* world they are exploring, not treasures of *others* they are collecting, or studying to analyze. In turn, a deep connection to the many expressions of the greatness and the struggles of humanity become part of who the children are.

We work with original stories that are written with a detailed eye to matching, or mirroring, 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. 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, it drives how they meet the other aspects, and it is the center of all we do in Enki.



By way of example of how our focus on the core development and our global cultures curriculum work together – and because it is our newest offering at Enki – I will describe how this works in our innovative **Enki Virtual Community School** for middle schoolers (<http://www.enkieducation.org/html/cyber-school-announcement-2.htm>).

Most of you reading this already know of the jewel that is homeschooling. But looking 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?



Enki Education has developed an approach to bridging this gap. With our **LIVE-online Virtual Community School** programs, the children get the best of both worlds - and more. In these programs, along with all the story, art, music, skills, and so on, students interact with one another directly, in real time, under a teachers' guidance. They learn to be positive, creative, and contributing members of a peer community, WHILE still working from and being anchored at home. And the peer work they do and the originality they bring to it is quite amazing. (<http://www.enkieducation.org/html/cyber-school-project-page.htm>).

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!

- Melanie, Colorado

The content and format of the curriculum must also match this core development. 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 child this age wants to belong and be part of his own community; here the Iroquois story of the ancient Israelites well meets him. Most parents have experienced this phenomenon many times over and know that it would not work to bring “Anne Frank” to a five year old, but a 13 year old is deeply met by this. And one would be unlikely to try to sell a 10 year old on “Where The Wild Things Are,” but we do delight in reading it to the two 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 – not always an easy process, but it is always deeply nourishing.

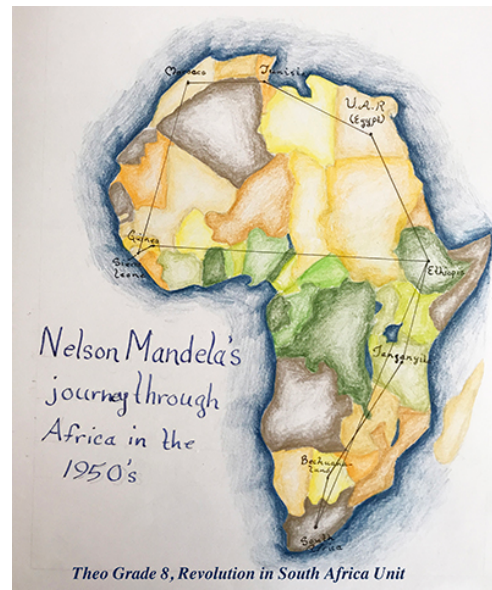


In brief, for the months of each cultural unit, the children are hearing the stories, singing the songs, dancing the dances, making the crafts of the peoples in focus, every single day – **not as meeting “other,” but as experiencing life of which they are a part. It is the water they drink, the air they breathe.** Through this “shared humanity focus,” we strive to work with *cultural education, not cultural appropriation.*

As is true in the family, having a ground in identification is how a real connection is made and compassion born – whether you have the privilege of making direct relationships with people of many cultures or not. And doing it through age-targeted immersion, fosters the children’s wellbeing.

From that base, we bring math and science and language arts in the context of the culture in focus. Whether exploring the clay soils of the American South West as our starting point for looking at food, clothing, and shelter, in Grade 3, or examining the irrigation systems of Ancient Sumer in the Middle East as the doorway to learning about mechanical advantage 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.

In Enki, building on this rich immersion, during High School the students begin on a more conceptual and analytic look at mankind, a more traditional overview. However, on the base of the deep identification built in their elementary years, no one they meet is a “them” who can be enslaved, oppressed, or conquered lightly. The children carry away a depth of connection, and a profound sense of the “everyman” in us all. And in that, we find ourselves back in the original, family commitment of heart-connection to others and a sense of empathy for the human journey in any clothing or presentation.



Enki Education:

www.enkieducation.org.

Enki Cyber Jr High:

www.enkieducation.org/html/cyber-school-notice.htm