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Danger in the Earth: Teaching About Landmines

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By Elisabeth King

"No, no, don't look at the sky, they cannot do you any harm from above anymore. Lower your head because the danger is in your mother earth. If you have survived the war, try to survive the peace!"

This grave warning comes from elementary school student Melisa Dzanovic in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sadly, she's right. Tens of millions of landmines, also known as anti-personnel mines or APMs, lie hidden in the earth, waiting to strike, in over 70 countries around the world. They cannot tell the difference between war and peace — they last long after wars are over — nor can they tell the difference between the footsteps of a soldier and those of a civilian. Eighty percent of victims are innocent civilians.



*A soldier watches an Afghani field being demined.
-photo: AP/Wide World Photos*

Moreover, most landmines are found in the poorest countries, those least capable of coping with the problem. Removing landmines in the ground, banning their future use, and raising mine awareness worldwide are vital to achieving a healthy planet.

The need to address the global landmines crisis resonates particularly strongly with youth. Landmines are a problem that students understand and can genuinely contribute to solving. The benefits to students themselves are tangible, too. Youth involvement in community action campaigns, such as the campaign to ban landmines, can increase their sense of empowerment, confidence, and practical skills.

The Canadian Red Cross advocates a participatory approach to teaching about landmines, encouraging students to ask, "what?" (to learn about landmines), "so what?" (to understand their impact on the earth and its peoples), and finally, "now what?" (to involve students in the search for and implementation of answers to the landmines problem). This approach to landmines is not limited to social studies. It can also be introduced in art, computer, language, geography, and history classes — our imagination is the limit.

WHAT?

An anti-personnel mine is a "mine designed to be exploded by the presence, proximity, or contact of a person and which will incapacitate, injure, or kill one or more persons." Unlike other weapons, it is victim-operated. In practice, a landmine works when a person steps on it, triggering the detonator and igniting a highly explosive charge. Metallic fragments, bacteria, earth, and plastic are driven into the victim's body at a speed of approximately 6,800 meters per second. Landmines, designed to injure, usually claim arms, legs, or their victim's sight. Sometimes people die from their landmine injuries.

Landmines were first used on a massive scale in World War II. They have since been used in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Arab-Israeli wars, the 1991 Gulf War, and in a plethora of civil wars around the world. Despite such widespread use, a 1996 Red Cross study that involved military experts examining 26 wars concluded that landmines have never significantly affected the outcome of a war. What they always significantly affect are the lives of their victims.

SO WHAT?

In many developing countries around the world, landmines have become an obstacle in the path to sustainable development because of their severe economic, social, medical, and environmental consequences. In the economic realm, landmines bar access to infrastructure such as roads and railways and slow post-war reconstruction and the redevelopment of human services. Teachers and healthcare workers, for example, cannot get to work. Students are unable to make their way to school safely and the community's access to natural resources is restricted. At the same time, landmines make fields unsafe for farming, a problem, since many of the most mine-affected countries rely heavily on agriculture. Such countries often become dependent on external aid. The problem is not easy to solve. Landmine clearance is difficult, dangerous, and expensive, especially for a war-torn country.

The medical impact of landmines is also far-reaching. Many landmine survivors are unable to make it to medical facilities, as they are too far away, and die before reaching help. Those that do make it usually require amputations, but many are poorly done, and patients thus require a second amputation. Much blood is needed, and the risk of infections is high. Many materials need to be imported, doctors require special training, and medical infrastructure needs to be improved. The amputations, prosthetics, and other health care required for a landmine survivor are extremely costly, and they are needed for a lifetime.

In addition to the impact on their victims, landmines also have severe environmental consequences. The presence of mines can restrict access to large areas of agricultural land, forcing people to use small tracts of land to earn their livelihoods. The limited productive land that is accessible is over-cultivated, which contributes to long-term underproduction as minerals are depleted from the soil and valuable vegetation is lost. Furthermore, landmines introduce poisonous substances into the environment as their casings erode. In decomposing, these substances can cause many environmental problems because they are often water-soluble, carcinogenic, toxic, and long-lasting.

Up to 30 percent of landmine victims are under the age of 15. Children's small size and natural curiosity make them more likely to explore in mined areas or to pick up unidentified objects. Children are also often charged with tasks such as collecting wood, tending to livestock, or helping with agriculture, all of which are extremely dangerous in a mined country. For children who survive landmine accidents, the physical injury and emotional impact are often more severe than for adults. Because they are still growing, children need costly new prosthetics every six months and, often, multiple amputations. Child survivors sometimes lose opportunities to go to school, to be married, and to bear children. Frequently, they cannot contribute to their families and are forced to beg on the streets.

NOW WHAT?

Most countries in the world have not turned a blind eye to this humanitarian crisis. One hundred twenty-nine countries have joined the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (commonly known as the Ottawa Treaty) since its inception in 1997. This international treaty obligates countries to end immediately the use, development, production, and transfer of anti-personnel mines. It also provides assistance for the care and rehabilitation of mine victims and for mine-awareness campaigns.

There are, however, 65 countries yet to join the Ottawa Treaty, including the United States, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and most countries in the Middle East. Although the United States has not used landmines since the 1991 Gulf War, has not produced them since 1996, and is the largest contributor to mine action worldwide, it has not signed the treaty because it claims to have "unique responsibilities for international security." [Human rights groups have criticized the United States military for its use of cluster bombs in the recent war in Iraq. The unexploded "duds" function like landmines and cause great harm to civilians. — Eds.] Universalization of the treaty is the biggest challenge to supporters of the ban and, as such, the treaty is just the first step on the road to a mine-free world. Much work on de-mining, victim assistance, stockpile destruction, and mine awareness still needs to be done. This work can be started right here at home through teaching about landmines.

Educators who have tackled the issue of landmines in the classroom recommend being well-prepared and ready to answer lots of questions. Rebecca Ho-Foster, elementary-school teacher and former Youth Mine Ambassador for Ottawa, Ontario, tells the story of her all-time favorite discussion about landmines with a fourth-grade class. "I was asked how much weight it takes to set off a landmine, so I said a few pounds. I was then asked if a kitten would set one off ... and the suggestions started flying — a grasshopper? A snowflake? They were really thinking and wondering about the issue."

Experienced landmine educators also recommend being ready for this issue to make an impact on students. Alison Clement, former Youth Mine Ambassador for Winnipeg, Manitoba, recalls a presentation in which she did not think to mention that there are no landmines in Canada. As the students went out for recess, they stood on the side of the pavement and would not venture on the grass, worried about possible landmines lurking in their schoolyard.

Finally, be ready for students to want to take action on the issue. The experiences of global educators show that students' ideas take on a life of their own, from making awareness banners to creating slide shows with music, from lobbying government officials to holding fundraisers to de-mine land or help survivors. I recently received an e-mail from Libia Von Poser, a mother in Brazil whose child was inspired by the landmine cause and whose entire school now clicks on www.clearlandmines.com where, for each click, sponsoring organizations donate money to support landmine clearance. "They're doing this with a lot of pleasure, because ... we know about these mines that cause so many deaths around the world. Here in Brazil, thank God, we don't have mines, but we're all concerned about this. Maybe in the future our children will learn about mines only in old books."

We can all be a part of making landmines history. It is up to us and to our children to make this generation the last in the world to walk with fear.

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