

Chapter 8

Actions speak louder than words

Simon Davidson

After I drafted out an outline for this book, I passed it round a few colleagues for feedback. After some early positive comments, I started to feel a little too self-satisfied. Then Paul Morris¹ pointed out that many schools find the Action component of the PYP difficult. I had to agree. I had come across good examples of action in many PYP schools, but it didn't appear to be done well with any consistency.

I resolved to find an expert to write a chapter on Action in the PYP, someone who had perfected it. I did some research, and found many great examples of action in PYP schools throughout the world. There were plenty of grandiose events we could be proud of. I had seen many examples of small actions in a classroom, when children made good choices about how to behave with each other. Often they didn't realise they were naturally carrying out the action component.

Unfortunately, I didn't find an expert with all the answers – perhaps I didn't look hard enough. However, as I looked, and thought through what I was looking for, I came to the conclusion that the most important part of PYP action is daily classroom practice, although this is perhaps not always made explicit enough.

Therefore I introduce the terms *big actions* and *everyday actions*. Big actions are large-scale projects that can be impressive, and can leave a deep impression on children. However, in schools which are already busy, it is unrealistic to add them very regularly. Therefore considerable power also comes in encouraging good daily choices to turn into age-appropriate daily actions. Smaller *everyday actions* can provide ongoing reflection and develop deeply-embedded pattern of thought and action.

We have to be realistic about young children's necessarily restricted spheres of influence. However we can tap into their passionate sense of fairness to develop responsibility within these spheres, with the habit of acting on thoughtful choices. Then they will be well on their way to becoming global citizens who live out the learner profile as adults.

Action: global citizens living out their learning

To understand the action component, we need to consider two aspects: socially responsible attitudes and ways of thinking, and the ability to act these out in their own lives.²

The former is central to all IB programmes, which seek to develop global citizens who will play their part in society. This is summarised in two lists of attributes:

The learner profile: inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, reflective;³

and PYP attitudes: appreciation, commitment, confidence, cooperation, creativity, curiosity, empathy, enthusiasm, independence, integrity, respect, and tolerance.⁴

Scanning these attributes gives a clear idea of the morally articulate and ethical people who should arise from IB schools: they are knowledgeable and thoughtful about the world. They are caring and principled, and become adults with commitment, empathy, and integrity. They develop a service orientation to enrich their communities, in their school community, and the local or global community they live in as an adult.

These attributes are developed with a connected approach that is one of the key strengths, and also main challenges, of the PYP. As with the transdisciplinary approach to learning, values and attitudes are not separated into distinct lessons, but taught with a coherent and integrated approach.

Rather than learning consisting of isolated 'book exercises', children learn to apply their learning to their lives as a matter of course. They connect their thinking by applying skills, concepts and insights from many areas to complex situations. We want them to develop both as enduring understandings and enduring patterns of life. Thus action is not an extra or separate element after normal learning, but its integral conclusion.

Overcome one's limitations

Education has a central role in helping students overcome the limitations of their life circumstances. When children come from underprivileged backgrounds, they need to be presented with rich examples of human potential to which they can aspire. They need to experience taking action which shows that they can make a difference.

Those who worked in privileged schools in rich parts of the world have a different problem. Students may be internationally very diverse, but are often from a narrow socioeconomic range, also providing a limited view of the world. Such students have to understand and appreciate their privileged nature, and have responsibility without paternalistic attitudes, so that they can play a responsible role with more socio-economically diverse communities throughout the globe. Their awareness can be developed through suitable Who We Are and Sharing The Planet units.

Appropriate attitudes and a sense of responsibility can be a challenge in such schools. One occasionally comes across children who have learnt that someone else will care for them, so they are not very concerned about leaving homework or musical instruments at home, or who pay no regard to picking up after themselves. This isn't a cognitive difficulty, but embedded non-PYP attitudes. One can't overcome this by having a bake sale, but by daily acceptance of personal

responsibility that creates suitable attitudes. In other words, by paying serious attention to everyday actions with appropriate reflection, until students develop self-awareness and take responsibility.

Choose, act, reflect components

PYP action has three components: choose, act, reflect.⁵ Students choose an appropriate action, actually do it, and reflect on its efficacy. These are often referred to as a cycle: this reflection may lead to new choices and the cycle begins again. This can be misleading, as it implies that reflection is a separate stage that only happens after action. However, it is also a process that happens continually during *choice* and *action* stages.

Making meaningful choices

It is important that children learn to make good choices, to think for themselves and take responsibility in an age-appropriate and realistic way. Actions only have an enduring impact when they affect a student's inner conviction, which requires genuine choice and genuine responsibility. Remember that our students are generally great at telling us what we want to hear. They easily pick up teachers' choices and say them back to them, without really passing it through their brain. Passive choices are unlikely to be sustained in school or beyond it.

Meaningful choices imply meaningful responsibility, without coercion. This doesn't leave us powerless. We can frame the choice and make sure that students make it carefully. Before students can make a choice, they have to think it through. (Perhaps reflection should actually be the first element.)

We identify situations requiring choice and action. These may be social issues which may arise in the class, such as some children being left out in the playground, or bullying. Children may face choices about healthy eating. Perhaps they don't put their books away or pick up after themselves.

Then we help children identify the issues involved and reach a conclusion. This may take time, as children have to think through the issue themselves before making their choice. Education takes time to have profound and lasting results. Students may learn more from making a bad choice and reflecting, than from having a good choice imposed upon them. Two possible choices are often overlooked:

- No action – as a positive choice, not a default.
- The action of learning more, to understand what the situation is all about. It is often appropriate to concentrate on becoming *thinkers*, *inquirers*, and *knowledgeable*. Then students have something to say when an issue comes up, and a basis for intelligent action.

Often children and adults are not conscious of their choices. One approach to changing is to make choices explicit, and think them through, and hope that this affects the implicit choices. Sometimes, however, it is better to start with trying

other patterns of behaviour, developing an implicit 'feel' for this other behaviour, and then talking through when students already have a 'feel' for both types of behaviour. Even the most dedicated teacher can't do this all the time. We'd love it if all students chose to tidy the room and carry out end-of-day jobs perfectly. Some actions may not always be student-initiated – but they just need to be done anyway.

Acting – make it a habit

Do student choices automatically lead to *student-initiated action*? Not necessarily. It is important not to gloss over the second element, act. This is anything but trivial. Personally, I have to admit to regular problems turning good choices into actions. I decide to clean the car, but put it off. I resolve to exercise more, but don't get round to it. I choose to write more regularly, to eat less junk food, and to do more household chores, but I don't always actually do so. This is a profound aspect of action that many of us do badly in our own lives. As the saying goes: 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

The more students develop the habit of carrying through on their good choices the better. We want students to develop the habit of actually acting on their choices. They can become the people who subconsciously tidy the room without thinking, who help friends automatically.

One of the difficulties of concentrating on inspiring one-off actions is that students don't learn to carry through their choices long-term. It can be easier to carry through something unusual and novel than to carry through something easier when the novelty factor wears off.

Facilitating reflection

We often set up a formal process where children fill in reflection forms. These can be useful occasionally to highlight particular aspects of the reflection process, but quickly become artificial and tiresome if they are overused. This becomes counter-productive for students, who learn how to fill in formulaic responses that teachers will accept. Remember that reflection is a habit of mind. Hopefully, as adults we reflect on what we are doing throughout the day, even if we rarely write it out. Occasionally even writing reflections at the end of units of inquiry can become disconnected from daily professional reflection, and thus becomes an additional chore, rather than a tool for improving teaching and learning.

Rather than focusing on a paper product, it may be better to concentrate on developing a disposition of reflection, and making it progressively deeper and more embedded in students' thinking. This requires consistently talking through students' actions. The actual effect isn't the criteria for success. Rather students can develop a greater awareness of cause and effect, and a set of values that get embedded in their peer culture.

Reflection also needs to be future-oriented, focused on guiding future action rather than placing blame for past actions. We are developing students who help

each other improve, rather than moaning about difficulties or revelling in blaming others. It can be more effective to have many short discussions very regularly, focusing on whatever choices and actions children are currently involved in. The teacher can be a catalyst to student talk, a *provocateur* for the students' own thoughts in quick reflections: Is the room clear? How do you feel about what you did? How do you think (name) feels?

Alternatively, reflections may be a series of longer discussions about actions in a particular unit of inquiry, or about a major class issue that has caught the students' attention. As with many other aspects of learning, the teacher's role is to become unnecessary over time. Students develop the habit of thinking through implications. Reflection becomes internalised. Children ask themselves 'was that a good choice?' This is an excellent investment of teacher time, which will be regained later on if children self-regulate their actions. We hope that they will continue to reflect and discuss amongst themselves as children get older and they become less willing to talk through significant issues with adults.

Everyday actions and big actions

Because the power of actions can involve developing a service disposition on a daily basis, I introduce the following terms:

- **Big actions:** the occasional grandiose acts that can make a substantial impact. By their nature they are exceptional, and challenging. These tend to be group actions, often initiated by a sub-group of students. It is wonderful when students spontaneously initiate them, but don't worry when they don't.
- **Everyday actions:** these should be an ongoing part of classroom life for all students, and will include individual, as well as group and class, actions.

Compare this with reading. An author's visit can have a big impact on students. It is a wonderful bonus, but you don't abandon your reading programme. Students need daily interaction with texts to become fluent readers. Similarly, they need daily choices, actions and reflection to become fluent in global citizenship. However, occasional special action events can be highly significant for students.

Everyday actions

Everyday action should be a key part of school life. Primary children may not be able to 'save the world'. That's quite hard when you are eight. It's not easy as an adult, either. The more we focus on issues outside children's spheres of influence, the more we highlight their powerlessness. If we develop their character dispositions and ability to carry through on their choices, they can have a significant impact on the world later in life.

It is better to consider what children experience directly and what they can affect directly. This is mainly within their families and classrooms, and around the school and playgrounds – their 'spheres of influence'. Such areas are often

profoundly significant to young children, and draw on their feelings about fairness and justice. As students mature their sphere of influence will expand. The more they have reflected, the more they will be aware of what they can affect and how, so they are empowered to make good choices.

Similarly, our students don't leave the PYP able to solve differential equations, but we have done the groundwork for them to do so later. No Nobel Prizes have yet been awarded to primary science projects but PYP students do, we hope, develop the fundamental scientific ways of thinking and some will become great scientists in the future. We have a great formative period for habits of mind and attitudes, and initiating global awareness, which become an enduring part of their lives.

Big actions

At their best, big actions can be life-defining events for students, as they set out on their earnest missions to save humanity. Children will have many strong emotions, usually individual age-appropriate and circumstance-appropriate responses. Students of all ages have taken their first steps to help a community by raising funds in very traditional ways, including bake sales. If we help them develop commitment and carry-through, this can sow the seeds for much great global citizenship in adulthood.

Sometimes it is hard to channel children's passionate reaction to major events and natural disasters. Perhaps the readers will recognise this situation. A student mentions a problem they have seen on television, or talked about at home. "Isn't x a problem?" Everyone agrees. They feel bad about it and they have well-developed empathy. Someone says: "We need to do something!" They all think about recent models. Perhaps bake sales, raffles, and sponsored events.

The class gets in a frenzy of poster making. They put up posters everywhere that fire regulations forbid, and conveniently forget to reflect on their environmental impact. They pester parents to spend money on ingredients, and then bake with them. Everyone gives up healthy eating to have the tasty cakes (I like that part).

The timetable is disrupted once more, crumbs line the corridor, but children are proud that they have collected nearly as much as parents spent on ingredients. Many children learned how to organise an event and make great brownies. Some got better at pestering parents, although most were already experts. This is all good learning, but it has little connection to the underlying disaster. It takes more time, and a more reflective approach, to really investigate complex problems and try to work through the proposed solutions, none of which are normally perfect or straightforward.

Challenges of big actions

This exemplifies some of the challenges of big actions. PYP schools can be full of wonderful activities. So wonderfully full, it's hard to allocate time for reflection, yet we would like to add more activities. Perhaps you've just had a classical guitarist performing; you've spend hours writing long parent reports; you feel you

have to perform a Broadway-quality production because it will be compared to the amazing performance from grade 4 last year; the librarian has booked a great children's writer; you need to keep your unit going. Choosing to add a big action implies dropping something else. So what do you leave out?

In a reflective classroom, where discourse regularly relates learning to the outside world, students will bring up global problems with no easy solution, such as dramatic natural disasters and the results of warfare. Students with a healthy sense of empathy often have an emotional response to them, but what can they do about it?

Often the event is far outside their experience, and it would take several weeks of class research to really understand the situation. Without understanding, it is difficult to have thoughtful action, and one risks encouraging thoughtless action, when actions are determined by simplistic emotional reactions. Children could do something based on their normal repertoire of action events, but we don't want to create 'busy work for the soul', without understanding. That wouldn't develop educated global citizens, but may lead to shallow adults who might not live ethically, but give a little money to charity on the side.

If there isn't time to understand the problem, no action may be the best choice. In this situation, a good choice is to learn more, considering learner profile words like *knowledgeable* and *thinkers*.

Big actions can provide excellent authentic contexts for big learning

Having said that, a little youthful naivety is healthy in energising students' commitments to tasks in which they can learn other skills. As students undertake *big actions* they often have to develop and apply a wide range of skills. They are often very enthusiastic about using mathematics to calculate funds raised. They have to use all their transdisciplinary skills as they think through the action, plan and organise themselves, and then communicate the action to the rest of the school. They need to work together, and solve all the practical problems that arise. Their learning often extends to the home when families support their student's action. They can also learn about the importance of partnership, particularly when they have to cooperate with external agencies as well as others in the school.

Often similar learning can be embedded in strong units of inquiry, but the authenticity of a significant action is great for giving students' learning a sense of purpose.

Development trips

Similar issues arise with older students. A Third World action project may be only an exotic adventure for well-travelled students who have already been round the globe several times. However it may be a chance to engage with other parts of the planet. It can be a life-changing experience for some students.

The cost is high, with as much spent on travel as on development. Rationally it is more effective to just send money to responsible agencies in the area. It is

dangerous to second-guess the motives of the students, which can be very personal. It is important, however, to foster genuine and sincere motivation behind them when possible. For this a sympathetic peer or colleague needs to facilitate reflection to internalise the learning and deepen the understanding of the complexity involved in real situations.

Conclusions

Action has a central role in the PYP for making real global citizens; not those with head knowledge only, but also in developing students' personalities.

Big actions can be time-consuming and risk dealing with issues beyond students' spheres of influence and understanding. However they can also be rich learning experiences for many children. Therefore they should be included occasionally within a balanced programme.

Everyday actions can be carried out regularly. Even the smallest of choices, providing it is significant to students, can be powerful in developing habits of making thoughtful choices, and carrying them out over sustained periods of time.

When these are combined with a programme of inquiry that develops thoughtful and knowledgeable students who are empathetic to global problems, students will truly become global citizens who act on their knowledge with sensitivity and follow-through. We may not be able to measure the effect within a school year, but action-oriented students make the world a much better place, which is the true final and summative assessment of the Primary Years Programme.

References

1. Paul Morris is currently Primary Principal of the International School of Stuttgart.
2. International Baccalaureate Organization, (2007): *Making the PYP happen*. Cardiff: IBO, p25.
3. *ibid*, p4.
4. *ibid*, p24.
5. *ibid*, p24.