

Educational Foundations of the Mighty Acorns Program

The Mighty Acorns environmental educational program is designed to provide students with multiple, meaningful, sustained interactions with the ecosystems on which all life depends. As a school year unfolds—fall to winter to spring—students help restore a natural area to ecological health. Participation in the restorative healing of an ecosystem provides students with rich and empowering experiences. The Mighty Acorns curriculum builds on those experiences. The program is organized into three levels, and each takes a full year to complete. During the fall, winter, and spring of each year students take a field trip to a natural area where they participate in restoration work, spend time exploring, and participate in pre-visit, on-site and post-visit activities focused on achieving educational outcomes.

Basis of the Mighty Acorns Curriculum

The Mighty Acorn curriculum has been guided by the broad objectives of environmental education as articulated in the Tbilisi Declaration of 1978¹. Although more than 20 years have passed since these objectives were put forth, they remain the widely accepted standards of environmental education. These objectives have played a significant role in developing the structure of the Mighty Acorns program. The objectives have been defined by Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke² in the following way:

Awareness	Helping students acquire an awareness and sensitivity to the total environment and its problems
Knowledge	Helping students acquire a basic understanding of how the environment functions
Attitude	Helping students acquire a set of values and a feeling of concern for the environment and the motivation and commitment to participate in environmental maintenance and improvement
Skill	Helping students develop the skills needed to identify, investigate, and contribute to the resolution of environmental problems and issues
Participation	Helping students gain experience in using their acquired skills in taking thoughtful, positive action toward the resolution of environmental problems and issues

A linear approach to achieving the five objectives may seem logical, but studies have shown that students who first *participate* in a project and develop related *skills* are more likely to stay engaged in learning over an extended period of time. Thus, the Mighty Acorns program is designed using an iterative approach, providing students with multiple opportunities to participate in stewardship activities throughout the school year. The stewardship activities address the objectives for skill, attitude, and participation, while strengthening student interest in

¹ (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations, “Framework for Environmental Education,” Final Report, Intergovernmental Conferences on Environmental Education, Paris, France: UNESCO ED/MD/49, 1978, pp. 23–29)

² (Hungerford, Harold R., Ben Peyton, and Richard Wilke, “Goals for Curriculum Development in Environmental Education,” *Journal of Environmental Education* 11:3, Spring 1980, pp. 42–47)

and commitment to understanding and improving the health of a native natural community. These stewardship experiences are enhanced by pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit activities that are specifically designed to provide students with the necessary awareness and knowledge to understand the purpose and rationale of their stewardship activities.

Educational Strategy of the Mighty Acorns Curriculum

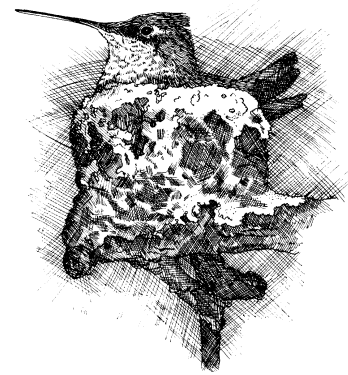
There are multiple educational strategies that could be used to reach the five environmental education objectives. The one that best fits the goals and criteria of the Mighty Acorns program is the theory of experiential education. Three reasons the theory of experiential education fits the Mighty Acorns program so well are:

1. Experiential education is designed around experience (Joplin, 1995).³

One of the unique aspects of the Mighty Acorns program is that urban students who may have never been in a natural area repeatedly spend time participating in stewardship activities in a prairie, woodland, or wetland. The mission of the program is in fact to “introduce young people in the Chicago Metropolitan area to nature through stewardship and exploration in away that fosters a personal connection to our natural areas.”

2. Experiential education is based on the assumption that all knowledge must begin with the individual’s relationship to the topic. (Joplin, 1995)

The Mighty Acorns program is designed to allow students multiple opportunities to develop a relationship with natural environments and the process of restoring them. Furthermore “as seasons and years pass, the Mighty Acorn experience influences the lives of the schools taking part. School gardens have sprung up featuring plants long since extirpated from the neighborhoods. Seeds are collected, planted, nurtured, and cherished as beautiful and meaningful components of the schools’ curriculum.” (From Peter Leki, a Mighty Acorns volunteer)



3. The involved paradigm of experiential education explains that everything is connected to everything else. (Joplin, 1995)

This is paralleled in the study of ecology, which is the overarching content focus of the Mighty Acorns program. The study of ecological principles repeatedly reinforces the theories of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life. Through the Mighty Acorns program, teachers who once taught units focusing only on rainforests can now focus on local ecosystems with actual visits to our globally endangered oak savannas. Endangered species units, once preoccupied with the charismatic orangutans and Siberian tigers, can now be expanded to include our own locally imperiled species, from the Cooper’s Hawk to the prairie white fringed orchid to the river otter.

Gibbons and Hopkins⁴ created a framework of experiential learning that delineates ten distinct levels: simulated, spectator, exploratory, analytical, generative, challenge, competence, mastery,

³ (Joplin, Laura, *On Defining Experiential Education—3rd Edition*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1995)

⁴ (Gibbons, Maurice, and David Hopkins, *On Defining Experiential Education—1st Edition*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1980)