

Davis Projects for Peace: Lekol Dete for Restavek and Free Children in Les Cayes, Haiti  
Haiti  
Clark University  
Amanda Mundt, USA, Clark University

Project Goals. Lekol Dete 2011 was established to bring together Restavek and free children in Les Cayes, Haiti in order to break down the cultural barriers between these children and begin to develop mutual respect. By creating an environment where children can learn side-by-side through educational games, they may forget their prejudices and work together to grow and develop as the future leaders.

Other fund-raising. In addition to Davis Projects for Peace, Lekol Dete 2011 was supported by the Restavek Freedom Foundation (RFF) in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Opportunities for Communities, Inc. (OfC) in Amherst, Massachusetts. Headmaster Amos Filius donated nine bags of rice, one bag of dried beans and seven cases of sunflower oil left over from the regular school year and originally provided by the French World Food Program - Programme Alimentaire Mondial. The Haitian people are generous and kind, and many (including the local youth soccer coach) donated their time, enthusiasm, and energies.

Project details. Lekol Dete spanned eight weeks and served 200 children. Week one of the program brought together four teachers hired from Bon Samaritain (the Baptist mission school attended exclusively by free children) and four teachers hired from Institution Miscte Maranatha (established to serve children living in Restavek), plus the Headmaster from each school. The week was devoted to developing and piloting the curriculum, and to teacher training on the various educational games, crafts and activities that I introduced. Headmaster Amos had requested an emphasis on practical skills such as making measurements; critical, analytical, and strategic thinking; and fine motor (hand-eye coordination) skills, which are stifled as a result of the traditional rote memorization and recitation approach used in Haitian schools. Lekol Dete focused on these skills through the use of educational games such as Jenga (fine motor skills; appreciation of balance and structural stability; strategic move making), Triaminoes (matching numbers; spatial thinking), Suduko (logic), Blokus (abstract reasoning; spatial imaging; strategic move making), Uno! (matching numbers and colors; following instruction cards), and Tangrams (puzzle-making; abstract thinking). These games were new to the teachers, who initially struggled with the necessary concepts and skills, but soon appreciated their value. Team-building activities were also an important aspect of the curriculum, with dances like the Macarena and "Cotton-Eyed-Joe" becoming popular recess activities as did recreational activities such as Frisbee, four-squares, ball toss, and soccer.

Lekol Dete was in session five days per week for the next six weeks. Among the 200 children was a combination of Restavek (roughly 35%) and free children (roughly 65%). Although some of the children and teachers knew who the Restavek children were, the teachers maintained an environment in which all children were treated identically. Lekol Dete provided each child and teacher with a t-shirt uniform, further reinforcing their unity. The t-shirt carried an image drawn by one of the students and the school's slogan: "Nou tout se youn," which is Haitian Creole for "We all are one." Each day, the children were served a nutritious meal. On the last day, all of the students, teachers and staff were taken in three huge busses to the beach. For some, it was their first time on a bus, and for most it was their first time on the beach! The eighth and final week of the program was a paid vacation for the teachers and staff – the first time any had been offered such a benefit. Teachers were interviewed in week one and again after the end of the program. During the final interview, all – without hesitation or exception – indicated their interest in participating in future Lekol Dete opportunities.

There were few unanticipated difficulties, but as one of the participating teachers noted in an interview, "in everything you do you should expect something negative to happen." One problem that emerged was that lunch was delayed. Originally, Lekol Dete was held in two sessions, one ending with and the other starting with lunch. The delayed lunch meant that the first session was unusually long and the second unusually short. To fix this, the teachers agreed to teach one combined session ending with lunch, even though this resulted in very large classes.

Through the minor difficulties faced, I developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for the cultural differences between the American and Haitian education systems. For example, I realized that the students had no experience with the "hands-on" activities being introduced. However, I naively assumed that the teachers would have these skills. I quickly discovered that this was not the case, as they not only were taught in the traditional old French manner, but had also been teaching in the same style for years. Luckily, we hired diligent and motivated individuals who were eager to learn the new skills and embraced the materials thoroughly.

Thanks to the RFF and OfC, Lekol Dete 2011 faced no serious financial constraints. The only real limit imposed by the budget was the number of children that could participate. The teachers were happy to

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have larger classes, but in order to be able to provide the promised nutritional daily meal and enough materials for six weeks, 200 participants was the upper limit. I have been working in the same area and same school in Les Cayes for many years, so it was not difficult to predict the language and cultural barriers. Because I am in the process of learning Haitian Creole, I hired a translator and with time and improved communication, I started to understand the cultural barriers and began to appreciate and work with our differences. Several of the teachers commented in their exit interviews that they appreciated the opportunity to get to know me better. It felt more and more like we were a team with the same objectives – serving the children and helping them overcome some of the cultural and societal barriers placed between them.

It is important to have provided this learning experience for any child in Haiti, as poverty afflicts nearly everybody. However, my intention was to connect the Restavek and free children in order to promote peace. Ideally, I would have an equal ratio of Restavek to free children. This turned out to be unrealistic because it was easier for the free children to get permission to attend Lekol Dete. Because Restavek children are expected to do chores, they often are discouraged – or even prohibited – from having fun. Therefore, the very goal of bringing the children together was limited right at the start by the system I have been working to change. Fortunately, many Restavek children did participate.

Lekol Dete directly served 200 children, both Restavek and free. Indirectly, the staff, assistants and families of the participating students all benefited as well. Not only did this project teach new skills, but it created a peaceful and non-judgmental environment where social norms were challenged and a new acceptance encouraged. At the end of Lekol Dete, some members of the community (unrelated to the program) observed how excited the children were about the program and said they hoped that Lekol Dete would continue.

Peace does not develop overnight, nor does a significant change in society. It takes dedication and motivation to alter the views of a community. My hope is to see the Restavek children gain more confidence and self-esteem, as the free children gain respect and realize that their peers are humans as well. Lekol Dete 2011 was a huge success, according to the teachers and students both. During the interviews I conducted the first week of Lekol Dete, one teacher stated that she already was “excited for next summer.” The staff, children, and community all expect and hope that Lekol Dete will continue for many summers to come. By conducting interviews with the teachers both before and after the six-week session, I learned what went well with Lekol Dete 2011 and what could be improved. I have also seen and documented changes in the teacher’s views and ideals on the topic of Restaveks.

Defining Peace. There is no suitable single definition of peace. I approach the term in relation to the need of uniting and harmonizing a group – in this case bringing together socially separated children in order to have them realize they are all children, with the same needs, desires, and rights.

Project contribution to peace. Short term, Lekol Dete 2011 hopefully has opened the eyes of 200 children from strikingly different backgrounds to the culturally engrained but false idea that Restaveks are worthless and inferior. These children will hopefully formulate their own views and recognize that the prevalent societal stereotypes have no real basis. I hope that in the future, these children will grow up to establish families that do not perpetuate the Restavek system, and will contribute to the dismantling of this horrific yet culturally accepted child abuse.

By establishing Lekol Dete 2011, I have realized that many cultural differences that an outsider views as wrong are not necessarily the product of people with bad intentions. I have also been influenced in a way that I had not expected: I have realized that I should not be discouraged by the magnitude of a problem or situation, but recognize and appreciate the value of the small changes I can initiate. Single handedly, I will make no significant societal change, yet I believe that I have positively influenced the lives of the 200 children which Lekol Dete served. These children have the ability, at least in theory, to internalize and spread this positive influence to their families, their host families, and their community.

Personal statement. As the Lekol Dete (“summer school”) was about to start, I panicked: how could I have thought that 10 teachers and 200 children – free and in Restavek – would want to spend their summer in school? Now I know: they all hunger to learn, to escape their poverty, and to improve their lives. *Amanda K. Mundt, '13*

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**Amanda Mundt with Lekol Dete students**



**Lekol Dete Teachers**



**Amanda Mundt and students playing Uno**