

Final Report - Summer 2007

Title: Fighting for Our Lives: Creating Schools for Peace

School: Wheaton College, MA

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Project Summary:

The primary goal of this peace initiative was to increase literacy rates of disadvantaged children in rural Jamaica and urban Tanzania. Guided by the belief that education is the most precious, valuable, non-perishable social asset and effective anti-violence resource available to us today, the 'Leaders are Readers' literacy intervention program supported, enriched and empowered youngsters from low income communities by providing engaging educational alternatives to violence. At the on set of the program, participants identified their desired career paths and future leadership roles, and were then motivated to pursue them wholeheartedly. The doctors, lawyers, educators, politicians and artists they wished to be are all leaders *and* readers. To this end, the youngsters were challenged to develop functional literacy skills by reading much and often so that they can be effective leaders in the future.

Over the course of the summer, approximately one hundred primary school students from violence-prone communities in Clarendon, Jamaica, were taken through an intensive, student-centered literacy program, which included reading and story writing competitions in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. They were divided into smaller cohorts based on their reading abilities and were taught and challenged accordingly. At the close of the program students enrolled in a uniform exchange program, thereby ensuring that they would never be denied entry to or suffer embarrassment at school because they did not have the appropriate shoes or clothes. The literacy program was without a doubt, a community-owned project. The success of the program was made possible through the generous support of community volunteers who worked as teaching assistants and mentors.

In an effort to maintain the spirit of the program for years to come, schools in each country were furnished with resource libraries and books. In addition, a stream of resources has been established between my colleagues teaching in US public schools and the resource libraries in Clarendon and Arusha. As a result, these 'reading corners' will continue to be permanent fixtures and community assets. I am pleased to know that all intellectually hungry and curious community members will have access to these learning materials—tools with which they can (re)shape their futures.

Project Results:

There are a host of secondary benefits derived from this peace project. These include increased community pride; a decline in the stigma attached to the youth of these impoverished areas; greater community involvement in the affairs of the schools; and a deeper appreciation for schooling and learning. And because of the fact that political violence was heightened due to Jamaica's recent elections, the program provided a safe haven with constructive, intriguing work for the students. A principal of a local school was

so impressed with the results of the program that she has decided to hire a literacy teacher for the next academic year. I have written to Jamaica's Ministry of Education encouraging them to have literacy teachers in all primary schools.

Perhaps the most rewarding result I had in Clarendon was when one student, Kevin, dragged his crying mother to me. She embraced me and sobbed uncontrollably. "He can read," she muttered. Humbled and elated I replied, "Yes, he can. Now make sure he continues." I had other interactions like this, although not as dramatic. Through this peace project I could help to re-engage disengaged students and their parents. I appreciated the fact I was not the only one who bore witness to the transformation in lives of the students; their parents witnessed and testified to the improvements as well.

All in all, the project accomplished exactly what it was originally intended to: Provide Education And Clothing Essentials.

Implications:

This peace initiative has profound implications for peace and the development of Clarendon and Arusha. Youngsters often described as disobedient, disruptive and in some cases, illiterate, learned to value and pursue education and to eschew violence at all cost. This kind of literacy training (including the regional reading competition) will continue thanks to the support of the community leaders and Jamaica's Ministry of Education. Such activities encourage consistent learning inside and outside the classroom. Because of the 'Leaders are Readers' initiative, children were trained to be peacemakers, leaders, readers and literacy ambassadors. The social, cultural and literacy skills they have acquired and/or sharpened as a result of this initiative will serve them well as they become competent, committed and loyal citizens of their respective countries. The changes they will make in society will be revealed in the years to come. In the upcoming months, I will track the persistence, progression and promise of the participants.

Since completing the project, I've begun to think about the autonomy of the communities of Smithville and Moshono – the primary based of the peace work. Although I am happy to have connected my American friends with my teacher colleagues in Smithville and Moshono, I worry that the community may not see their success independent of foreign aid. Until they are liberated themselves from the clutches of poverty, I suspect they will not have the financial capacity to start and maintain their own community projects.

Irrespective of the challenges I was forced to confront, I am grateful that the peace project exposed me to the shortcomings on the educational systems in Jamaican and Tanzania. In addition, it helped to strengthen my resolve to become an educator and policy maker. It seems to me that current educational policy makers are not familiar with or sensitive to the challenges and politics of the classroom. There is a great need for more comprehensive lifelong and alternative educational services, particularly for those with learning disabilities. To date, there are no special education schools or curricula in Arusha or Clarendon. My life's goal is now to address these problems in Jamaica and other emerging nations. In so doing, peace can be guaranteed for the generations to come.

