

A Proposal to Stimulate Reading Culture

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Purpose: This project aims to equip high school students in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia with the tools that would enable them to critically read and analyze books. The project will be a ten-week critical reading seminar for fifty students selected from private and governmental schools in Addis Abeba aimed at stimulating a reading culture in students. Through this project, I plan to equip students with the critical reading skills necessary by exposing them to different disciplines, such as Political Science, History, Philosophy, Amharic Literature, and Sociology. By presenting students with the opportunity to read and discuss books, this project hopes to challenge and push students into engaging in intellectual debates in order to improve their inquisitiveness and critical reading.

Summary: Peace & Critical Reading in Ethiopia

Born and raised in the capital city of Ethiopia, I am a witness to the almost non-existent reading culture in Addis Abeba, a consequence of the failure of the education system. Schools in Addis Abeba are primarily focused on getting students to pass exams, usually through memorizing information, leaving out any critical thinking and analysis of subject matter. In our English and Amharic classes, students are taught only grammar and vocabulary. If we are lucky, a teacher might bring a book once or twice a semester to read to us in the classroom, but we were not given space to engage with the text.

On the other hand, attending Amherst College has exposed me to critical reading and analysis. The course *Introduction to Black Studies* taught by Professor John Drabinski has especially taught me how to analyze and think deeply about books. I have learned to raise questions about society, and reflect upon critical issues. I understand that books, when read carefully, help create better citizens. Reading at Amherst College has taught me that disagreeing with an author is justified, and that I do not have to succumb to the pressure of accepting ideas just because they are laid out in a book. Unfortunately, this experience is unavailable to most Ethiopians. For this reason, I would like to take this opportunity back to the society that raised me. This project will thus expose students to new cultures and ways of thinking and help students communicate and interpret thoughts and feelings well.

Normally, over the three-month summer break in Ethiopia, students do not have many options for valuable ways to spend their summers. My summer seminar proposed here will thus, present a useful opportunity for students to spend their time in a productive, valuable way. Moreover, reading books not only allows for better judgment and critical thinking but also provides students a window into other cultures as well as their own. Peace is defined as the absence of violence in any society. Reading books goes a long way in sustaining peace in Ethiopia because it creates people who do not simply reproduce materials taught by others, but who can make evidence-based opinions and assumptions. Critical reading allows for people who are well aware of their surroundings, free from manipulation and fear of violence and free from emotional judgments. They are able to respect differences in ideas, beliefs and thoughts, which is a basis for peace, and is the foundation of understanding the usefulness of dialogue. Books are the basis for a generation of open-minded individuals who can settle disputes and disagreements in an educated manner, without resorting to violence. This project then, will go a long way in promoting peace in my native country of Ethiopia.

Implementation

Participants: 50 students will be selected from 25 high schools in Addis Abeba to attend the seminar. These students will be selected from the 10th, 11th and 12th grade. For the purpose of achieving the continuity of this project, the students will be selected based on their ability and willingness to educate their peers at their schools after the program is over. The Ministry of Education in Addis Abeba has agreed to write a letter to each school that will guarantee the participation of the schools in this project. Advertising of this project will be done through the national radio and through contacting the principals of every high school in Addis Abeba. Students

will be informed that all interested to apply for this project can apply, by filling out the application form. Participants will be given stipends twice during the ten weeks. Because it is summer and it may be difficult to get students motivated to come to a reading course, the stipend will be an incentive for students. The stipend will also help cover the cost of transportation for many of the students, as they have to take public transportation to get to class.

Schedule and Curriculum: I will be leading the discussions from Mondays to Thursday for three hours each day. The students will be divided into two sections, with one group meeting on Mondays and Wednesdays and the other on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This means there will be 25 students meeting each day. Groups will further be divided into 12/13 in the mornings and 12/13 in the afternoons to ensure every student participates during discussion. To obtain active participation in conversations, this project will be carried out in the Amharic language. Because of the income gap within Ethiopia, affluent students can afford to pay for private schools, where English is more commonly used than Amharic. Meaning, that students from private schools will be more likely to feel comfortable using English than students from governmental schools. Therefore, Amharic will be used to create an environment free from intimidation in this regard.

Books and Discussion Aids: Each week, we will read a separate book. The first two weeks will be orientation weeks, where students learn what to expect from the seminar and what is expected of them as well. I will hand out magazines, articles and book chapters that educate students on the purposes of and how to read books critically. In the next eight weeks, the students and I will read a book per week. Students will be given general response questions that have to be answered for every book. Moreover, there will be five more questions handed out to students during discussion, to help them think about peace in regards to that specific book. For example, the first book students will read is *Adefris* by Dagnachew Werku. Some questions directly related to this book will include: How does the author define peace? How does the story's narration of violence relate to the conditions of our country now? How can we avoid such violent occurrences in the future? How does the author advocate for peace in his book? What are similarities to our current state as a nation and how can we achieve peace?

Students will be given books and articles to read, selected from a variety of fields. They will range from historical fiction, to works of poetry and short story collections. The books will be selected in joint cooperation with Bruck Kebede Kiros (Amherst College alumnus '12E) and Professor Yikunnoamlak Mezgebu, who lectures on language and literature at Addis Abeba University. I have narrowed down a list of books to 30 and eight will be selected for inclusion in this program, once the final curriculum is drafted this spring. Lecturer Yikunnoamlak will help me host orientation and educate students on how important it is to read books and how they should read. He will also be a supervisor for the project, watching over the classes to ensure safe discussions happen; and bringing certain questions to class on each book, so the students can experience having learned discussions with an educated Ethiopian. Students will then be able to hold conversations about their society in a scholarly manner. He has a lot of experience in literature, and his guidance will be much appreciated throughout the seminar. I have already contacted two schools, and they have agreed to work together with me on this project. Lecturer Yikunnoamlak will be reaching out to more schools this spring and is fully committed to working on this project with me.

Continuation: My goal is that this program of active and critical reading in the schools, will continue in the schools that the students were selected from. To ensure the effectiveness of this project, each student at the end of the program will be encouraged to form reading groups in their respective schools, to pass on the skills that they have acquired from the seminar. Additionally, this project has the opportunity to reach out to the wider community in Addis, as students will be encouraged to establish book clubs in their respective schools and communities after the program is completed. If at least one of the 50 students shares their experiences with three other people, and those three continue the process, the project would have succeeded in stimulating a critical reading culture within the capital city, and thus promoting peace within my culture.