

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION:

Working Towards Peace by Designing and Advancing Peer Based Sex-Education to Promote Healthy Choices and Better Understanding for Gao Zhong (High School) Students in China.

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Our project aims to develop peace in three ways: personal peace, peer sex-education as a tool of peace, and the prevention of disease. First, we see the individual as the foundation of society with a fundamental human right to improve his or her standards of living. Our project aims to provide individuals with ways to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy, disease and abuse, all of which are preventable sources of suffering. Greater understandings of and respect for one's own body empowers the individual and encourages compassion both for oneself and for others. Second, the focus on *peer sex* education develops broader communication skills that foster open, honest discussions. The skills of peer sex education can later be applied to even more difficult topics, fostering better communication and understanding. Most importantly, it empowers youths, the future of society, to take control of their own health and well-being while giving them a chance to become leaders who can continue educating and forming the foundations of peace. Raised in an environment where we have had the opportunity to make informed decisions, we feel very strongly that every person should have the same opportunities through safe access of accurate information. Third, disease is a destabilizing element in any society as seen with the Chinese government's failure to deal quickly and openly with the 2003 SARS epidemic. The result was public instability, international humiliation and public distrust in their own government. This spurred the Chinese government to take a proactive stance in pursuing policies to eradicate the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). By helping to raise awareness of this problem in China and combating the cultural and social causes of the spread of STIs, we are helping to form a stronger society in which peace is a more attainable goal.

A generation ago, Chinese sexual norms were conservative by the strictest standards; today Chinese youth are increasingly open to more progressive ideas. Studies show that high school and college students in China are more and more likely to engage in sexual behavior. One study conducted in 1999 showed that 24% of male and 12% of female seniors in a Guangzhou high school reported having had premarital sex. Chinese students are confronted with issues related to contraception, pregnancy, STIs and sexual abuse. Federal birth control policies, which provides contraception without the knowledge of usage, in addition to China being in the early stages of a major HIV/AIDS epidemic, necessitates the improvement of education as both a public health and policy issue. Both education and intervention programs targeting reproductive health is central to the development of a greater quality of life for Chinese citizens.

In response to increased sexual involvement and its related risks, communities and schools have responded by implementing various sex education programs for adolescents. However, the 'sex taboo' still impedes frank discussions about sex. First introduced to China from Australia in 1996, peer education has begun to function as the primary form of sex education in several locations. Eight Beijing universities are already conducting peer education programs on sex and reproductive health issues, and several NGO's are dedicated to duplicating their success in new communities. Most peer-to-peer programs, unfortunately, focus on college age students, while most Chinese experts and policy makers agree that the ideal target age should be high school students.

Most peer sex-education programs are located in Shanghai and Beijing, however, they overlook significantly at-risk segments of the population. According to the U.S. Embassy, Yunnan province in South Western China accounted for 50% of China's HIV infections in 2000. The majority of early transmissions were attributed to intravenous drug users, but it has been reported that sexual transmission has become the primary mode of infection. Located directly north of Yunnan, Sichuan province is considered a high-risk location. Coupled with its relatively progressive views on sex-education (Sichuan's largest city, Chengdu just published a book on sex education written by an 8th grader), Sichuan is an ideal site to target for peer sex-education programs.

With our extensive training in rape crisis, STI prevention, and contraception, we are capable of providing reliable and accurate information. Victoria is a native speaker, which eliminates the language barrier. As members of a similar, slightly older peer group, we are ideally suited to impart information to a student body that is often alienated from sexual information by cultural taboos on child-adult communication about reproduction. Simultaneously, we are providing students with a comfortable atmosphere in which they can freely ask the questions that are pertinent to their health and well being.

We aim to build relationships with three urban/suburban schools and we have already garnered the support of one Chengdu high school principal. The intensity of the Chinese high school program makes it unlikely that administrators will allow us more than one week, thus, we propose a week-long peer-education program on reproductive health. Having completed a curriculum that achieves our short and long term goals for education, we will make certain that administrators and teachers have several months to consider the use of our program. Our curriculum is divided into four parts: reproductive anatomy and physiology (including conception), birth control, disease prevention with a focus on HIV/AIDS, and communication. This clear division will allow administrators to easily select what subjects they are interested in covering and to what extent. The basic structure would consist of a week-long visit to each of the three participating schools. During this week, we will spend two days on our four subjects, leaving the third day to train students as peer educators. During the second half of the week we will accompany students to other classrooms in the school as they give presentations to their classmates on reproductive health or will work with students as they design passive campaigns (posters, pamphlets, etc.) that they feel will be effective and informative. The remaining time will be used to administer surveys to students and faculty on the perceived success and usefulness of the program, as well as to continue conversations regarding maintaining the peer education program into the future.

To advance our education, we have trained with a sex educator from KVCAP in Waterville, Maine, as well as with an education specialist also employed with KVCAP. We have met with Professor Caron, a leading peer sex-educator from University of Maine, and sat in on peer led, sex-education classes in Maine and New York City Schools. We will test our curriculum with native Chinese speakers and at a high school in Maine, receiving feedback from a professional sex educator.

Because of the lateness of Chinese New Year, classes extend into mid-July. We will travel to China in June, spending just over six weeks with the schools selected. We have developed a connection with American University Professor Youli Sun, who runs an internship program for students in China. He has agreed to integrate our program, assuring its sustainability with a guaranteed supply of American students to Chengdu. He has offered to be our on-site supervisor and access to office space and staff at Beijing University. Furthermore, he has established a connection for us with a principal of a Beijing high school who is interested in our project, and will allow us to experience teaching in a Chinese classroom before advancing to Chengdu. Beyond support we have received from Jianmei Guo, the director of the Beijing University Women's Law Studies and Legal-aid Centre, we have also been promised the support and collaboration of Plan International--an international NGO whose mission in China is to help children in poor western areas. We believe in the importance of sustainability. Ultimately, our goal is to leave Chengdu having provided knowledge and information that will continue to perpetuate itself. Students trained as peer educators will not only be more informed than the average student, they will be equipped to inform others. Because of our contacts, American students will have continued opportunities to work in Chinese high schools developing peer educators.

By targeting youths as both students and potential teachers, we are creating accessible and sustainable education. The ability to talk about ones body gives students an ownership over their sexuality and their reproductive health. That ownership fosters respect for oneself, and for others. People should not live with the threat of preventable pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS, that not only threaten their health, but the very social and political infrastructure they inhabit. Empowering people with information that gives them tools to protect themselves from coercion, infection, and unwanted pregnancy creates access to a greater standard of living, health, and well-being; all of which are key components of long-lasting personal and social peace.