

Educating for a Culture of Peace in Refugee Camps

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ar exposes people to situations that no adult, much less a child, should ever have to experience. The chaos and trauma deeply affect children and interfere with their acquisition of healthy intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Some children learn aggressive or violent behaviors, which not only negatively affect their own well-being, but also damage their ability to adapt and contribute to a healthy, productive society. In such areas of the world, education is "one of the principal means available to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression, and war" (Delors, 1996). "Learning to be" and "learning to live together" are essential if we are to open the door to a culture of peace.

In August 1996, a group of 20 educators met at UNICEF Headquarters in New York to discuss the needs of children; this was the inception of "Living Values: An Educational Program" (LVEP). While regular Living Values activities are being conducted at 2,500 sites in 64 countries, a special program was developed for refugees and children affected by war (Tillman, 1997).

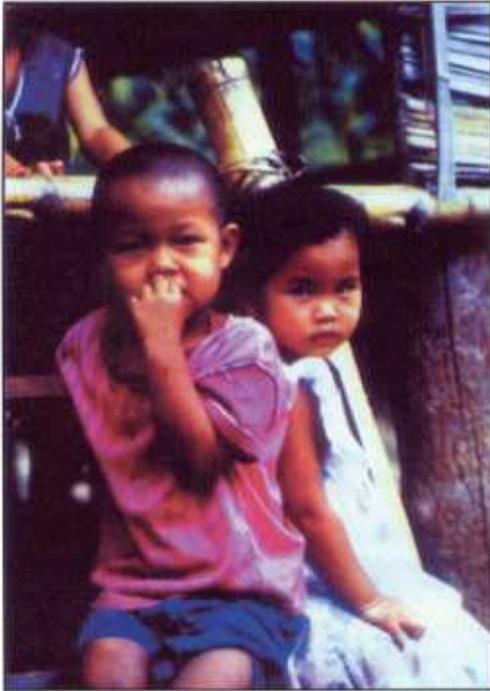
This article describes LVEP's "Living Values Activities for Refugees and Children Affected by War" (LVARCAW) program (Tillman, 2000a) and its use in two Karen tribe refugee camps in the jungles of Thailand. Considering the vast numbers of children affected by war in the world, the program coordinators designed an approach that the refugee teachers themselves could implement in educational settings. Healing from the trauma of war usually takes years, and for many, it never happens completely. Although LVARCAW activities will not erase the effects of war and the painful memories, they do give children an opportunity to relate their experiences in an accepting environment and offer some tools for dealing with their pain, while helping them develop positive social and emotional skills.

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The Program

LVEP is a values-based education program. It uses a variety of experiential activities and practical methodologies through which teachers and facilitators can help children and young adults explore and develop 12 key personal and social values: peace, respect, love, cooperation, freedom,



happiness, honesty, humility, responsibility, simplicity, tolerance, and unity.

The activities offer an opportunity for the children to share their feelings about war—their grief, pain, and anger. Giving voice to the pain is an important step in the healing process and for personal empowerment (Levin, 1999). The LVEP values activities support and validate children during the grieving process. They are designed to rekindle children's ability to experience peace, respect, and love.

The LVARCAW program includes activities for two age groups: children ages 3-7 and children ages 8-14. The program for each age group contains a series of daily lessons. After the children finish these lessons, they continue with the regular "Living Values Activities for Children" program (Tillman, 2000b). Reflective and imagining activities in the regular Living Values program encourage students to find their own creativity and inner gifts. Communication activities teach students to implement peaceful social skills. Students express themselves through art, music, and dance. The activities are thought-provoking and fun; the discussion time that follows helps students explore the effects of adopting different attitudes and behaviors. Other activities stimulate an awareness of personal and social responsibility, and lead to the development of self-esteem and tolerance.

Does Peace Mean Surrender?

The author first visited the Karen tribe refugee camps in May 1998. The authorities from a nearby city who arranged assistance for the camps were interested in

the program, but the refugee teachers in the camp had concerns. The head teacher stated, "But if we learn about peace, we will have to surrender and [then] we will all be killed." The author attempted to differentiate politics from skills for creating a peaceful society. She also asked the head teacher, "Will your society have the skills to create a peaceful society when you do return to your own land? Will people have tolerance, and not create the greed and corruption that set up the economic and social factors that cause war? Will they know how to communicate and resolve their conflicts, and set up conditions of equality and social justice?" After convincing the teachers, planning for a training session began.

The Training

Thirty-five Karen teachers and one camp section leader (all of whom were refugees themselves) underwent LVARCAW training in April 1999. The refugees came from two camps; some had to walk for two and a half hours to make each morning's session.

After the program coordinators welcomed the teachers and explained the purposes of the program, they asked the teachers to share their concerns. After participating in a values awareness session and reflecting on their values, the participants shared their experiences in small groups. They were asked to reflect on the first value they developed and on how it was acquired. Next, they would give advice to adults, taking the perspective of children, about how adults should treat children. Their collective advice was identified as the elements needed to create a "values-based atmosphere." Sessions on active listening began on the first day of the training, and continued almost every subsequent day. On the second and third days, teachers participated in sessions on imagining an optimal educational environment, acknowledgment, encouragement, building positive behaviors, learning about the variety of living values activities, conducting living values activities on peace, learning about the emotional process, and being introduced to values-based discipline in relation to the emotional process. The two trainers shared songs from the LVARCAW program, and the refugees sang some traditional, cultural songs about peace and love.

On the fourth day, the teachers split into two groups to participate in living values lessons on war and loss; they shared their experiences through drawings and words. The trainers acted as the teachers, and the refugees were asked to share their own experiences and take the perspectives of students as they underwent the lessons for children ages 8 to 14. The sessions on war and loss were intense. When a peace puppet was passed around, the few teachers who had initially chosen not to share their experiences began to speak;

through their stories they offered up powerful, yet gentle, voices against war.

It was critical for the teachers to participate in these activities in order to experience their own reactions, and to understand and have faith in the process. The values activities frame experiences and provide an opportunity to strengthen or create additional coping responses. The trainers modeled acknowledgment and active listening attitudes and behaviors.

The teachers who participated in the activities were teaching them by the end of the training. While this model is not meant to replace therapy, it does allow people to express their feelings about war and about those who are missing or who have died. The activities themselves are designed with supportive elements, and participants engage in expressive activities through art, puppet theater, sharing, relaxation/focusing exercises, and traditional songs.

In additional training sessions, participants created a values-based environment by developing conflict resolution and collaborative rule-making skills. The training provided participants the opportunity to rekindle their own values of peace and love, and thereby learn to help children deal with their feelings and resolve conflicts peacefully.

A Multifaceted Approach

The approach taken in LVEP's Living Values Activities for Refugees and Children Affected by War (LVARCAW) is multifaceted. The lessons are designed to take place in a classroom setting with small- to middle-size groups of children.

The children's reactions to war, expressed verbally or through drawings, are accepted as normal reactions to horrible events. The students are not forced to participate, but if they choose to do so, they are in a safe setting with others who have been through similar circumstances. Building positive interpersonal social skills is an important part of the program.

Personal resources are strengthened through creative activities, relaxation exercises, and by learning a variety of ways to experience, and express, peace, love, and respect. A sense of well-being is nurtured through routine.

Children need to make sense of their experiences. Such understanding is achieved in different ways, depending on the child's age. Younger children are offered a simple explanation of war; older children are asked to explain their ideas of

how conflict arises, and are given information about how international conflicts are peacefully resolved. The teacher or another adult talks about death, using age-appropriate terms, in a way that respects the students' religious beliefs.

LVARCAW trains teachers to build children's resiliency and help them recover from traumatic experiences. Key to this process for children is developing emotionally supportive relationships with teachers, who can act as "role models [who] encourage constructive coping" (Tolfree, 1996). These goals underline the importance of teacher training.

It is also important to build "an educational climate [that] is emotionally positive, open, guiding, and norm-oriented" (Tolfree, 1996). LVARCAW does this by providing open, supportive, nurturing, and child-centered activities. The teachers are taught how to establish clear norms collaboratively with the students, and how to help them apply skills to new concerns and conflicts.

The LVARCAW teachers share the students' culture. This local connection has the following benefits: the program conforms to the culture's interpersonal norms; the teachers are themselves familiar with local traditions, songs, games, and dances, and will be able to add them to the program; students' trust and resilience are buoyed by ongoing relationships with supportive teachers; and the program benefits spill over to other areas of the community.

Living Values activities promote the acquisition of social skills, such as conflict resolution and play. Activities also are designed to augment self-confidence and self-control. The LVEP trainers brought balls, badminton sets, games, and toys into the camps, giving the refugee children a "safe and structured space for playing, learning and joyful experience" (Levin, 1999).

Another component of LVEP, the Living Values Parent Groups (Tillman, 2000c), can help parents affected by war to establish safe, supportive networks in which to share their experiences and wisdom, and to recon-



nect with the values of their culture. In turn, they can pass along those rekindled values to their children. The initial training in April 1999 spurred one refugee trainee to begin a parent group. Four members of the first group of teachers were trained to facilitate parent groups during the next year's training session.

Implementation

Rachel Flower, the LVEP trainer who lived in Thailand, visited the Karen tribe camps every two or three months for one year after the initial training. She conducted monitoring and follow-up activities, answered questions, provided a forum for sharing experiences, and held further training sessions as deemed appropriate. Contrary to expectations, most teachers were not able to conduct the Living Values activities two or three times a week; instead, they conducted one session of about two hours in length. While the teachers of children age 8 and above did the LVARCAW lessons, the teachers of 5- through 7-year-olds did the regular Living Values activities. Students up to 20 years of age were engaged in the activities. The most frequent complaint concerned noise from other classrooms during relaxation/focusing time. (The classrooms are constructed of bamboo and leaves only.)

The Outcome

Twenty-four of the original group of teachers were available for interviews during the second year's training, in April 2000. All 24 teachers spoke about changes they saw in their students, and of their interest in the Living Values lessons. Some of their comments follow:

The students now dare to speak.

They share their pictures now; before, they would just be quiet.

Before, when a camp leader would come to the class, they would be quiet. Now, they not only dare to speak, they ask questions.

The teachers noted that the students showed more respect for and friendliness toward their peers and their teachers. Many teachers also said that the students were more "obedient" and tried harder. One teacher noted:

At first, some students were sad, [but] then [they] felt better and their life changed. Sometimes the students said to me, "You don't give us the relaxation exercise." [But there was] no time. Some did not understand visualization at first—so I did [it] very slowly. And they come to school on time because they [feel] happy and comfortable. Some students, when they saw conflict (in other students), . . . said, "Oh, we learned about Living Values—we don't do that," and they taught the other students conflict resolution.

All of the teachers said the students fought much less frequently, and 10 teachers said that their students did not fight at all. One teacher, who had done the most lessons, said of her students, ages 12 to 16:

Before they had this training they used to get angry quickly, not forgive each other quickly, and some were cruel. Now they do not anger easily and [they] forgive each other; they are not cruel; they are patient. Now, there are no fights. They try harder, are friendlier to me, and can solve problems in the classroom.

All of the teachers spoke of being more satisfied with their jobs. One teacher said, "I used to have a hard heart and enjoyed teaching less. Now I have more control, [and I] am more patient. I have a soft heart and enjoy teaching more." Another teacher shared, "Before, when the students were noisy and disobedient, I would speak forcefully. Now, I speak gently and I love them more and more." The teachers used the methods for creating a values-based atmosphere in their other classes. Some teachers noted an increase in attendance.

The camp leader likes the LVEP program very much. He shared with the author his new vision for his people. He, and the refugee teachers doing the LVEP program, feel they are building skills that will bring their society peace in the future.

References and Resources

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