

**The Conflict Transformation & Tolerance
Education Project in the Kyrgyz Republic**

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& Counterpart International**

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Historical Background

During the late 1980's the Osh and Jalal-Abad Oblasts (regions) of the Kyrgyz Republic, which surround the historically volatile Fergana valley, experienced severe ethnic tension and in some cases this resulted in extreme violence. The fighting and the resulting crackdown by the government of the day left many problems unresolved. Tensions still remain at a high level, especially now when economic tensions are great. As such these Oblasts are the target for any conflict resolution or tolerance and human rights education programmes.

Although, many teachers are motivated and are taking highly creative initiatives, they are greatly lacking in materials and a method to share and exchange lessons materials, experiences and ideas, due to isolation and poor quality and comparatively expensive communications. In the former Soviet system of education, where teachers obtained most of their lessons from the textbooks sent from Moscow, they had no need to either make or share new lessons. Teachers also had little access to materials created outside the Soviet Union.

A Description of the Project to Date

The Conflict Transformation and Tolerance Education (CT&TE) project has now been operating in the Kyrgyz Republic for over 18 months with funding from UNHCR. Since May 1997 the project has been implemented through the local office of Counterpart International. This organization would like to remain involved with the project and remain the implementing partner.

The Project Rationale

The initial strategy behind this project was to supply schools in the Republic with attractively illustrated realistic picture story books in five separate language editions, dealing with the themes of prejudice and non-violent conflict resolution, and support these with a teachers' guide book and workshops.

It was expected that students will easily identify with the characters in the stories despite their fictional nature as they are set in their school, family or community environment. Through the discussions that follow hearing these stories the intention was that young people will begin to question some of the traditionally negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups and the authoritarian approach to conflict resolution. With the development of these types of skills it was hoped that, in the long term, violent conflict can be prevented or minimized.

Accordingly, the methodology chosen to present these materials was highly participatory. This is in contrast to the traditional Soviet teaching style where the classroom is dominated by the teacher and students' opinions are, on the unusual occasion when they were expressed, only critically examined by the teacher and not by other students.

It is also hoped that through exposure, particularly to discussion and group work, teachers will see that such participatory methods have application in other subject areas. This would enhance the opportunities for tolerance generally as well as allowing the teaching of tolerance through the form of the lesson and not necessarily just the content. This is especially important where the issues may be too sensitive to tackle directly.

To further enhance the project's sustainability and to increase the cost effectiveness, the teaching model proposed requires only the teacher to have a copy of the storybook. (The teacher reads the book to the class.) This was a radical departure from the textbook dominated system where each student had a copy. The major implication of this methodology is that the teachers can realistically make their own teaching materials or better still, have the students do this. To encourage this, the project runs a nation-wide competition for students to make their own storybooks for use in schools, about tolerance and conflict transformation. The project chooses and prints some, and distribute these to all schools. However, the principal aim is to get schools to see the books the students make, as potential curriculum material. This kind of strategy not only has obvious economic benefits for future tolerance education, but in all subject areas.

As a result the books, the project produced, are only the vehicle through which sustainable "in-school production" of teaching materials and participatory methodology is promoted. This is often mis-understood (even by donors) as the books are sometimes seen as the final product. It is only necessary to keep on printing books and to run competitions, so as to provide teachers with the needed additional incentives to use our methodology and to make their own materials. For Kyrgyzstan this publishing phase of the project is mostly finished. Although the basic strategies remain very similar, the emphasis of project activities has now shifted to training.

Conflict Transformation & Tolerance Education

As the project has progressed it has become evident that the problems for schools are not so much to do with ethnicity and prejudice as the lack of non-violent conflict resolution skills on the part of both teachers and students. Furthermore, the former teaching style did not give opportunities for those skills already acquired, to be practised. The project has therefore now focused more on the teaching of conflict resolution skills and showing teachers how to provide opportunities for these skills to be practised in everyday classroom situations.

Principally, this has been done, by linking conflict theory more closely with tolerance. Many teachers believe that they should completely prevent all forms of conflict in the school environment as they believe that all conflict is negative and results in violence. They see their role as arbitrator, judge or policeman, but rarely as the teacher of the skills of peaceful conflict resolution and transformation.

Students and teachers often see tolerance as the same as being respectful or passive. Teachers frequently comment that their students are not prepared to accept passivity and that by the students' existing definition, tolerance is not necessarily a trait to be admired. Tolerance is defined this way, as it is not understood that it cannot occur without there being at least some difference of ideas or cultural tradition beforehand. It is crucial that tolerance be seen as a more active process involving the resolution of a conflict of ideas or culture, and as a set of skills requiring practice.

Tolerance is defined in the project materials as a process of increasing the understanding of all parties and one where negotiated compromise is often required. In promoting tolerance, one of the teachers' key roles is therefore to teach conflict resolution skills and to give their students the opportunity to practise these skills, so differing opinions can be expressed, understood and challenged in a manageable environment. Through this process students will then have the skills to resolve, in non-violent ways and without an unnecessary loss of rights, the problems that they face, as well as developing tolerance of the different ethnic groups in their community.

The project primarily seeks to increase the opportunity for this to occur by promoting participatory methodological forms like discussion and group work, that optimize student interaction.

Training: The New Focus

The initial strategy presumed that with some examples to follow, teachers would be able to produce their own lessons. However, the Soviet curriculum gives little latitude to teachers for innovation, who have any way, little experience in curriculum design. Furthermore, teachers have never before used student work as potential teaching material and thus placed little value on its content. Therefore more emphasis has needed to be placed on teacher training in relation to lesson design and participatory methodology.

It is also increasingly evident that both teacher and student Russian language skills are limited in the South and so now workshops and all teaching materials are delivered in Kyrgyz as well as Russian. Uzbek speakers have said that they are happy with this arrangement although of course they would prefer to have the materials in Uzbek.

Workshops are conducted on participatory methodology, conflict resolution, the usage of our own materials, and the materials of teachers and other agencies. The topics are mostly determined by the requests of teachers (who always request more workshops on the same topics). The project is unable to meet the demand, especially as we are being requested to hold workshops for communities as well as teachers. (Schools have even offered to pay for materials and salaries.) In the last four months the projects four trainers have delivered 2035 days of teacher training.

To facilitate this training process, and to assist in the sharing of information and resources, the project staff are also encouraging and giving support to teachers, who wish to form non-governmental teacher associations and who wish to be trained as trainers.

Working Directly with Youth

In late 1997 the project held its first camp for youth. The objectives of this camp, and others which we are planning to run, are to:

- a) give youth conflict resolution skills;
- b) give project staff the opportunity to test new lessons with students;
- c) provide the trainers we have identified the opportunity to test their new skills in a supportive environment;
- d) give young people the opportunity to meet members of the refugee community and discuss issues relating to refugees;
- e) give young people the opportunities to discuss and promote issues of tolerance in their communities;
- f) give youth the opportunity to write about issues and conflict in their communities.

Increasing Access: The Teacher Resource Centres

Until now the project has largely been “supply” rather than “demand” driven. The project staff (5) felt this was necessary at first but should now change.

To this end the project has supported the establishment of Tolerance Education Teacher Resource Centers, in Osh and Jalal Abad Oblasts, through the Oblast teacher retraining institutes. A further one has been set up in our Bishkek office. These centers contain imported teaching materials dealing with conflict resolution and tolerance education translated into Kyrgyz and Russian. More importantly they contain locally produced lessons and materials.

The project staff propose to set up a another resource centre in the far western extremity of Osh Oblast in the town of Batken. This rayon has a high proportion of Tajik refugees, has experienced considerable fighting between Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek communities, and is in an isolated area, cut off from the Oblast centre.

To further increase access, the project has set up a mobile resource center which is shared between the two oblasts. It travels around the oblast's rayon (district) education offices and schools. In all the centres, teachers are able to photocopy the materials they believe are relevant and contribute their own ideas and the work of their students. It is hoped that the preference will soon be for locally adapted and created materials. The project is also supporting the centers, through provision of video equipment. This enables local teachers to view videos of each other's work. UNESCO is assisting us in this regard by giving us free access to their video editing equipment and technicians.

Co-ordination

As might be expected, many other local and international agencies are interested and active in the overlapping areas encompassing human rights, tolerance, conflict transformation, and civic education and youth leadership. One of the latest project initiatives is to promote co-ordination efforts. So as to avoid duplication and to achieve the greatest coverage and access, the project has offered its material and logistical resources to all other groups. This has resulted in the resource centers becoming "clearing houses" and we are now working on having a shared newsletter to be produced by one of the local NGOs. The function of the newsletter will primarily be to provide an ongoing and two-way interface between schools, implementing agencies, donors and the Ministry of Education. Another key area where effectiveness has been increased is in the sharing of trainers particularly with the SOROS foundation.

Results

Two storybooks, and one teachers' book were produced and distributed last year. Introductory workshops have been run for representatives of most schools in all of the Oblasts in the Republic. The project has just published and distributed a further three titles and a new teachers' guide in Kyrgyz and Russian. (Total distribution: 7 titles, 25 editions, 93,000 books)

The success with which the programme has been implemented varies greatly. Some schools have achieved excellent results while others little. This stems mainly from, teachers mis-understanding the meaning of some of the concepts involved and undervaluing the importance of participatory methodology, and the rigidities of the existing system. (One well meaning teacher proposed to introduce tolerance by presenting a one hour monologue to his students.) The new training focus is assisting greatly with these problems.

Project staff have seen about four hundred books and stories so far, and have observed some highly creative lessons. Almost every day project staff hear about schools', or teachers' new achievements in supporting the project and receive requests. The Osh

resource center, particularly, is being heavily used. They have a backlog of requests for material, including many from schools offering to buy materials, and pay for workshops.

The reactions to the latest workshops has been particularly favorable. Other agencies have reported that they found it difficult to get teachers discussing ideas. We have found that by emphasizing their needs, teachers have become very involved and comment that the workshops are useful, interesting and quite unlike what they have had before. One teacher commented that "I brought a book, thinking that it would be like all the others but I haven't opened it yet as the workshop content has been so interesting." Another commented that although they had to work very hard at the workshops, they left feeling refreshed and professionally reinvigorated. Teachers almost always stated that they needed more workshops and more practice sessions. We have tried to have practice sessions in schools but these are often difficult to organize for logistic reasons.

Although attitudinal changes are hard to measure the project staff are hearing from schools where relationships between students (and between staff) have greatly improved as a result of the implementation of the program. One of the foremost problems in evaluation is communication with schools. Both the Oblast educational authorities and the Ministry of Education share this problem but remain highly enthusiastic about the project.

Furthermore the experimental nature of this project, in the rapidly changing post FSU environment, is providing valuable knowledge for similar and related projects through the CIS. The project staff have been requested to do a needs assessment in Tajikistan in early 1998 and it is hoped that activities will begin their shortly afterwards.

Rationale for Continued Funding for the Project

So far the project, along with others working in the field has no more than "scratched the surface". This is to be expected considering; the limited resources it has had (\$200,000 and only recently 5 staff), the relatively short time it has been running, the size of the community (1.5 million plus), the large geographical area, the changing situation, and the level of economic and political stress.

Despite having problems, the project has achieved much and has been well received. However, much remains to be done as many teachers still have not begun or have not understood what is required. Changing educational technology and societal attitudes is a long term process. To build upon the successes so far, the project will need to be funded for at least a further year. This additional time will mean that the project staff will be able to reinforce what has already been delivered and extend and increase the depth of the coverage so far.

In addition it is believed that considerable experience has been gained in delivery of the existing services. With further funding the project staff will be able to implement new and increasingly cost effective innovations.

Proposed Project Activities 1998-1999

1. The continued deployment of a mobile Teacher Resource Centre in Osh and Jalal-Abad Oblasts
2. The continued support to the Oblast Teacher Training Institute Resource Centres.
3. The support of two conferences to be run by the Oblasts Training Centres on Tolerance Education and Conflict Management. [Autumn 1998]
4. The delivery of 5400 teacher days of teacher training [180 days x 30 teachers] (through resource centres) on conflict and tolerance education.
5. Support for best teacher of tolerance competitions. [These normally occur in Autumn]
6. The delivery of 14 days of young writers workshops. [We plan to hold these in the Summer vacation and they will provide an opportunity for new teacher trainers to run workshops on conflict resolution with students.]
7. The delivery of 10 days of "Train the Trainers" workshops for 30 students to work with other youth.
8. The setting up of teacher associations involving at least 200 teachers in the South of the Republic and the setting up of a links between teacher associations in an outside the republic.
9. The reproduction and distribution of locally produced and imported teacher materials through the teacher association magazine.
10. The production and distribution of a compilation of students writing (in book form or through the local media.)
11. The continued support for co-ordination between local and international agencies and NGOs in regard to the delivery of conflict and tolerance education. (This element is an initiative of our project and as yet not formalised. The teachers' newsletter project is the first concrete activity, although we are co-operating closely with SOROS and others on the sharing of resources, trainers and schedules.)
12. Needs assessment in Tajikistan. followed by the introduction of workshops and training of trainers for a similar programme for Tajikistan. (to be funded separately).

Objectives

An extension to the project will result in:

- teachers gaining access to the materials produced by other teachers in the country
- the provision of a non-governmental forum for teachers to discuss and evaluate ideas
- the consolidation and provision of follow up for previous teacher training
- the provision of a forum for teacher associations
- in the improved co-ordination the efforts of providers (schedules of workshops etc..)

this will lead to:

- an increase in the effectiveness of all the related projects and reduced wastage
- an increase in the ability of schools to deliver civic, tolerance, and human rights education
- an increase in the skills of communities to deal with conflict and intolerance
- an increased stability and respect for human rights, democracy and ethnic diversity.
- reduced social tension.

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