

Final Report: Fostering Ethnic and Ethical Relationships (FREE) program

FINAL REPORT

Project Title: Fostering Ethnic and Ethical Relationships (FREE) program

Location: Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA

Sponsoring Institution: Middlebury Institute of International Studies (MIIS)

Designated Project Leader: Femi Higgins (United States/MIIS)

Section 1: Narrative

This program collaboratively addresses ethnic violence in Minneapolis schools with organizers from the Education for Liberation Minnesota chapter who are fighting against racial/ethnic violence that disproportionately affects Black, indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and teachers. This program also elevates teachers' knowledge of peace and human rights, and interculturality theory and praxis to help them create safe and equitable schools that recognize the dignity and humanity of all learners and workers.

The idea for this program started in Costa Rica when I was organizing with Afro-Costa Ricans who were resisting their colonial education system in Limón, Costa Rica. A big component of this experience was how schools re-inscribe Eurocentric values and beliefs through curriculum and professional learning, which exacerbates ethnic tensions and maintains a socially stratified society. I developed my thoughts further during my graduate program when I took an education and development course. During this course, I explored how schools experiment with peacebuilding and human rights concepts around the world to improve racial/ethnic relationships. The program resulted from my educational and professional experiences, where my ideas formed into a program that helps educators foster peaceful relationships with each other through vigorous training.

The cornerstone of the program addresses polarizing differences in schools that are a product of geographical isolation, lack of resources (workers, money, and programs), and a curriculum that promotes European/Anglo-American values, beliefs, and cultural practices. These schooling practices pre-dates Jim Crow schools, which was an effort to civilize and erase the cultural legacy of indigenous and enslaved people. Despite the changes in the educational landscape post-civil rights era, schools have done a horrible job of honoring differences, which ultimately led to racial/ethnic conflict in many cities across the United States.

I chose the host site for this project—Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA— because of my teaching experiences in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). I taught English as a Second Language in middle school, high schools, and adult education programs. As a former teacher in the school district, I developed a professional network with other educators through my work and organized through the Social Justice Education Movement (SJEM) who launched a series of campaigns around the twin cities to highlight educational injustices that affected vulnerable communities. My years of organizing and building trusting relationships allowed me to establish the pilot program here with a community who was familiar with my work ethic and recognized my passion for system change.

Two barriers to this project were: misconception of peace work and the teacher protest in Minneapolis. The first challenge was getting key stakeholders to understand why peacebuilding was imperative to restoring relationships between polarizing communities. For many, the word “peacebuilding” spoke to problems that were endemic to global south countries. Their understanding of peacebuilding or peace work was limited and caused stakeholders to not buy into the project. To address this barrier, I spent the first two months having lunch-ins with key stakeholders about why Minneapolis-Saint Paul was considered a post-conflict city after George Floyd murder, and how education can restore relationships between cultural groups if proper training and resources were in place.

The second barrier to this project was the three-week teacher strike in Minneapolis. Tensions between educators and the school district were at their all-time high. Educators and students burned out after two

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years of teaching during the pandemic, including low pay for teachers and paraprofessionals, large classroom sizes, and under-resourced schools; to name a few. These issues highlighted the stark differences in resources and influence between resource-rich schools and low-income schools. As a result, teachers went on strike to challenge district policies, pay grades, and deteriorating conditions of schools. The teacher strike lasted for three weeks. At the end of the strike, the school district and state required teachers to make up the instructional time that students lost, pushing the school calendar to June 27th. Because of the added school calendar days and teacher burnout, this affected our labor, time, and management systems, creating a domino effect.

Teachers were not interested in participating in a summer camp because of the extreme burnout they experienced and wanted to spend their time doing non-school-related activities with families, affecting our recruitment efforts. Similarly, since we had fewer people involved, the labor tripled for the small group of educators who were attending. This stretched the capacity of many of the camp organizers and made things harder to manage. We had to change the structure of the camp to accommodate the different needs of the camp participants. Likewise, because of the changes in the staffing and lower turnout, we were able to work within the budget that we had, so we didn't need to any fundraiser.

This project defines peace as what educators in Minneapolis are fighting for: A fair and safe school that celebrates and honors cultural diversity and respects and recognizes the humanity and dignity of all learners and educators. Our framing of peace became the foundation for the FREE summer camp and set the tone for our work this summer. This project is contributing to the ongoing struggle for liberatory schools that redistribute resources fairly and create dignified and humanized spaces free of discrimination and demoralization because of one's racial/ethnic or religious background. The project fosters ethical relationships between different cultural groups and educates all participants on restorative practices, human rights principles, and intercultural competence.

To advance these goals, we have created a curriculum educating teachers on how schooling perpetuates ethnic violence in the United States and worked on identifying successive oppression that was maintained. We did a lot of community building as a group to strengthen our relationship with each other and re-centering on our vision as educators. Then, we launched into planning big and small projects such as Saturday Unschooling sessions, Community and Network gathering activities, and local activities to support larger organizing efforts to dismantle oppressive education in the twin cities.

To the program success, we established a network of peace educators who can share resources with new educators who are interested in learning peacebuilding skills to foster ethical relationships between various cultural groups at their schools. Long-term, we are hoping to continue the conversation about peacebuilding and anti-racist work at schools and develop a curriculum that can educate students and peers about the root causes of racism and conflict at schools.

I've learned a lot through this project. It has given me a new perspective about peacebuilding work through an educational lens and I learned tons of history about ethnic conflict and racism in schooling. The minor hiccups were a reminder that stakeholder management, labor, and time are crucial elements of peacebuilding work. I also realized peacebuilding can be seriously affected by unprecedented events or strikes, which put a strain on resources, people, and organizations who are working towards building inclusive and peaceful communities.

QUOTE

"This project was so meaningful to me because I was able to work with community activist and educators who are interested to building a culture of peace and human rights." I will continue to host the program and offer it to other communities to promote intercultural dialogue, justice, and peace."

- Femi Higgins (info@tangibleculture.co)