

International House NY
Thuy Hang Tran
Cultivating Peace with Youth in Binh Dinh, Vietnam
Vietnam

This proposal seeks to build a youth learning center and implement a summer peace program in Vietnam. Located in a former war site in the province of Binh Dinh which means *to plan peace*, the center seeks to help youth cultivate peace through educational empowerment and consequently indirectly eliminate post-war violence.

Vietnam experienced almost three decades of military struggles, including the Anti-French War from 1946 to 1954 and the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1975. Illiteracy remained high during these times, particularly in the countryside where the majority of fighting took place. Education was disrupted as youth were recruited to fight while others had to stay home to support their families. Particularly during the Vietnam War, Phu My, Binh Dinh was assigned to the American Airborne Combat Brigade. In addition to bombs and explosive devices, the province was heavily sprayed by the Agent Orange operation in which 450,817 gallons of toxic herbicides were released. Post-war, economic instability followed. Many civilians did not resume school and their children received poorly-funded education. Today, Binh Dinh has the third highest poverty rate in the country: 62.2% of the population attended upper secondary school and only 1.6% attended junior and college.

Although Vietnam has made great strides in education reforms, much of the progress reflects improvements in urban cities rather than in rural areas. The WorldBank research shows that rural education in Vietnam remains weak in quality, efficiency, and equity. Although the war has ended, survivors and their families are inter-generationally harmed by cultural and structural violence such as poverty, educational inequities, and discrimination between Vietnamese Southerners and Northerners.

Goal 1: Constructing a youth learning center to promote educational empowerment

Currently there is no community center, library, or bookstore in the town of My Trinh which consists of 8 villages. Motivated by research on the effectiveness of after-school and summer programs, this project proposes a youth learning center to help youth excel in school. The center, the first of its kind in the province, will serve youth during after-school and summer hours. The center will employ a Montessorian child-centered environment. Instructing students, staff and volunteers will direct students towards hands-on activities that meet students' interests and developmental level. Activities include reading, writing, games, arts and crafts. The center will have six rooms including a home room for workshops, a library, a restroom, a kitchen, and a play room. It will open year-round on weekdays.

Because children attend school from 7 am to 12 pm, the center will open from 12 pm to 5 pm, 4-5 days a week. The maximum capacity for the center will be around 50 people. It will run primarily through volunteers who will be recruited from high schools and universities locally and abroad. Incentives for volunteers include opportunities for professional development, situated empowerment, hands on leadership, and community engagement. Caveat: After discussing this with local residents, there was a verbal consensus of support. Before implementing the project, I will conduct a community survey to further investigate local needs and concerns regarding this youth learning center.

Goal 2: Implementing a summer peace program center for youth

The goal of the summer peace program is to eliminate structural and cultural violence by cultivating peace with youth and empowering their educational development. The center will not directly address the war or human rights violations as the current government restricts freedom of speech around these topic. Instead, program will indirectly address peace through lessons and activities centering on building life skills, beliefs, and decisions that will lead to individual and societal peace-making.

At Columbia University, as an Education Policy student, I have designed and received approval for the curriculum through my Peace and Human Rights Education course. My project supervisor is Professor Felisa Tibbitts, a professor in the Comparative and International Education Program at Columbia University and co-founder of the Human Rights Education Associates. The program is divided into four units over seven weeks.

Unit 1: Leading Myself: Cultivating Inner Peace (Values and Awareness Model)

Unit 2: Cultivating Peace Within the Community (Accountability Model)

Unit 3: Cultivating Peace as a Global Citizen (Awareness and Accountability)

Unit 4: Culminating Group Project (Transformative Learning).

The summer program will serve a maximum of 20 participants (ages around 12-15) with priority given to those from lower-income backgrounds. Each peace lesson will take place once a week and will last up to 3 hours per session. Discussions will enhance life experiences and knowledge that already exist in a community and expand on the multiplicity of participants' experiences. Students will rotate leadership tasks which include facilitating discussions and presenting them to the cohort in the following session. In the last week of the program, students will be divided into groups and will work together on a peace project that they will implement sometime during the next 8 months. Staff will check-in with students for further support and each group will receive a stipend of around \$100 to cover the expenses needed for the project. Students will "graduate" from the program once they complete the project and will present their project to the new cohort the following summer.

Both the center and curriculum will be further refined by local Vietnamese leaders and educators. Objectives and plans will be translated for review. Before the peace program takes place, facilitators and volunteers will be intensively trained over one week to review the program's objectives, pedagogical theories, and methods. Program trainers are identified in the Pre-Approved Parties document. Key materials will come from UNESCO materials which are available in Vietnamese.

Funding and Sustainability:

A landlord in the village of My Trinh has generously agreed to donate an uninhibited property to serve as a foundation for the center. A local construction cooperative has given a quote of \$6,000 for the renovation- which the Davis grant will be used for. The rest of the grant will support staff and sustain the program for the first two years. The Vietnamese-American Community of Georgia, a 501(c)3 Non-Profit organization, has agreed to donate \$5,000 to the project. Additionally, I will partner with Room to Read, a leading nonprofit for children's literacy in Vietnam, to start a book fundraising campaign for the center.

After the first two years, the proposed center will be converted into an NGO to amplify its visibility and recruit potential funders. This process will be supported by human rights NGO professionals including project supervisor, Professor Tibbitts. Based on a preliminary cost analysis, the center needs an addition of \$5,000 per year to sustain itself. There are a variety of resources to tap into, including Columbia University, the International House of New York, and the Vietnamese-American communities. However, the center will encourage local support to avoid excessive financial dependence abroad. There will be a suggested donation of at least \$1 per visit/use of the learning center to help pay for center's staff (around \$50 a month part-time).

The program's effectiveness will be measured through students' learning gains and responses on surveys, before and after the program. The center will use validated evaluation surveys from the Colorado Trust's After-School Initiative. Short-term goals and their indicators of success are grade improvement, increased school and community engagement, respect for elders and diversity, and higher self-esteem. The long term goal is to cultivate peace by tackling manifestations of indirect violence prevalent in the area: poverty and education inequity. Success indicators include participants' high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and income. There will be a website to show the center's mission, impact, and students' projects.

This project is feasible because it aligns with international and national principles. The right to an adequate and meaningful education is supported by the UN Human Rights Declaration and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Vietnam has ratified the CRC and served in the UN Human Rights Council where it accepted an obligation to uphold the highest protection of human rights.

Personally, this project stems from my deep involvement with the community prior. I grew up in the village before immigrating to the USA at the age of eight. As an undergraduate student, I returned to Vietnam to research the Vietnam War, where I learned about the atrocities of the war and its legacy on civilians today. While conducting research, a crowd of children often followed me as I navigated the countryside to find people to interview. Although I am grateful for their serendipitous presence, I was concerned about the lack of educational opportunities after-school and during the summer. The experience inspired me to build an educational and peace center for youth. Through this project, I hope to give back to the community that has shaped my past and future.