

PARTICIPATING AS LITERACY VOLUNTEERS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Sharon Kossack, Florida International University

Ellie Friedland, Wheelock College

Janet C. Richards, University of South Florida

International representatives at the 2000 World Education Forum unanimously acknowledged education as a “fundamental human right....key to sustainable development and peace and stability” (World Education Forum, 2000). They launched the Education For All (EFA) initiative, a collaboration between governments, organizations (e.g., World Bank and UNESCO), civilian groups and associations which dedicates resources to form within- and cross-county projects designed to provide education for “every citizen in every society” (World Education Forum, 2000). Their goal: 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015.

Having worked with developing educational systems for some time, this resolution seems an impossible dream. Social, political, and educational realities in developing nations seem to move at cross purposes to thwart progress. However, we have experienced, dedicated individuals determined to make a difference in literacy within their own sphere of influence. In this article, we share such developing initiatives: They are in Abaco, Bahamas; Guatemala; and northern Thailand. In this article we share our individual and collective volunteer experiences. As outsiders, we try to represent “what is subtle and significant...making public what (we have) seen, enabling others to see this as well” (Pitman & Maxwell, 1992, p. 746).

Our stories should not be viewed as comprehensive, but might best be viewed as cameos of the situations in which we worked. Nor should they be viewed as entirely objective, for we can only offer our perceptions of what we experienced, viewed through the lens of our own culture and experience. By sharing what we experienced, we hope to expand appreciation of the complexities of such initiatives while emphasizing the strong spirit of the in-country participants with whom we worked. In spite of the diversity of the projects, each author came to understand to a deepened understanding of the courage, self-reliance, dignity, and determination of the in-country participants.

Abaco, Bahamas (Stateside Contact: Sharon Kossack, FIU)

Context and Historical Perspective

The schools across the Caribbean still feel the effects of the British Colonial System of education (Perry, de Ferranti, Ferreira, & Walton, 2003). The British who occupied these countries structured colonial society to prevent those at the bottom of the power structure from learning to read and write. Literacy is power. And power is not often freely given over by an occupying force.

Schools in the Bahamas are organized in two tiers, primary (K-5) and secondary (grades 6-12), paralleling the British educational structure. There is no graduation or diploma. Students

build knowledge toward taking tests at the end of their secondary years which qualify them for university and/or certain careers. Because teachers are relatively scarce most begin teaching right out of high school. After teaching begins, there is little opportunity (or desire) to extend knowledge through in-service or educational conferences. Thus many teachers have limited knowledge of literacy process and are less likely to provide the best available instruction. This problem is compounded by the lack of libraries and print materials.



Abaco is a collection of remote out-islands in the Northeast part of the thousands of islands called The Bahamas (see map, above, <http://www.abacolife.com/map.html>). The number of residents limits the gene pool within such small, self-contained communities. Lack of knowledge of the genetic implications of intermarriage results in unusually high incidents of autism, deafness, blindness, elective mutism, mental retardation, behavior disorders, language anomalies. Medical assistance comes in the form of limited, widely-spaced, regional nurse-staffed clinics. This precludes much-needed genetic counseling, prenatal care, emergency assistance or post-partum intervention. Special supportive programs such as pre-school screenings, developmental instruction or early intervention do not exist. This combination of factors contributes to an inordinately high percentage of academically struggling students. Residents of out-island communities struggle with meeting the needs of children who present a staggering variety of learning disabilities. Their learning is made more frustrating by limited instructional resources. Students must share books and must leave them in the classroom. Pencils are broken into two halves so everyone will have something with which to write.

There are limited number of ways to earn money in the Bahamas. There are no income or property taxes. Tourism remains the predominant means of income. The tourist taxes (exit fees), permanent non-Bahamian resident property taxes, and duty applied to all incoming goods constitute the sole tax base. These are insufficient to pay for much needed services. Outside sources of funding are similarly limited. For example, the World Bank no longer classifies the Bahamas as an emerging nation because of its per-capita wealth. But this wealth reflects the wealth of the part-time residents and not the reality of its citizens. Poverty-stricken immigrants compound the problem by absorbing limited available jobs and by draining medical and educational resources.

In addition, educational funding is a low national priority. Larger population centers such as Nassau and Freeport absorb most of the available resources. Even when educational evaluations can be obtained for special needs students in outlying islands, few suggestions can be

used because educators in remote areas lack the knowledge, training, or resources (e.g., medicines, instructional materials or equipment) to implement them.

All of this came painfully to light when an Abaco resident, Mrs. Evelyn Major (M.S. in Counseling, Seaton Hall) adopted twin boys from an orphanage. James and Vincent soon showed severe developmental, emotional, physical difficulties stemming from the living conditions in the orphanage. They were the only two survivors of approximately a hundred children housed in a concrete-floor, barracks-like institution. In 1996, she sought to enroll the twins in school. Their applications were denied. Public (Ministry) schools and private academies had no services that would accommodate special needs children. So Mrs. Major began seeking help, contacting literally hundreds of potential resources.

As parents of special needs youngsters learned of potential assistance via the “coconut telegraph”, more and more began to seek help for their children. Over time, parents of special needs youngsters banded together to pool resources that launched and sustained a grass-roots initiative called Every Child Counts (ECC), a literacy and special education program.

Though various institutional entities supported it (e.g., the local Catholic church and Florida International University), ECC gained its strength from a network of hundreds of community volunteers. An early example of this kind of grassroots volunteering is Eric’s father, a contractor. Eric had Down’s Syndrome. Because ECC’s first classroom was a dilapidated trailer, Eric’s father spent a hot Caribbean summer renovating his son’s first classroom, despite a variety of financial and familial crises. At last, when he offered Mrs. Major money toward an air conditioner for this room, she refused, pointing out all he had already done. He insisted, saying with tears in his eyes, “Don’t you understand, Lyn? For years I have not been able to be a proper dad for my son. I knew of no way to help him but to love him. You have finally given me a way to do this. You will accept this money!” (E. Sawyer, personal communication, 1997) The money was accepted and applied to pay for Eric’s aide.

Over time, and as a result of various appeals in and outside the country, a network of diverse volunteers began to form hoping to address the needs of Mrs. Major’s children and others like them. Among those who came to help were some of the following. Volunteers from Florida International University’s (FIU) College of Education focused on curriculum and intervention related to early childhood and reading. They trained clinical educators to diagnose and provide entry-level instructional suggestions. A private Speech Therapist, Jacqueline Sullivan (Orlando), supplied special education resources and training. Dr. Edwin Demeritt (Director of the Neuro Developmental Clinic in Nassau) brought his intervention team consisting of a speech and language specialist, social worker, nurse, occupational therapist, and physical therapist. Another team from the states provided community and physical therapy equipment and resources.

Project Activities: Every Child Counts Literacy and Special Education Programme;
(http://www.fiu.edu/~kossacks/every_child_counts)

Academic Years 1996-2000 Early Goals.

Every Child Counts was formed to offer assistance, materials, and training to students who struggle academically, some of whom are learning disabled. ECC works to provide 1) direct service to academically struggling youth in the form of diagnosis and, when needed, adapted instruction or suggestions for intervention, 2) training for teachers in reading, writing, special education, and mathematics, 3) resources (books, equipment), and 4) funding to sustain the program. ECC initially provided assessment and recommendations and a FIU professor and graduate students delivered monthly training for all interested teachers, parents, students, and volunteers. The following is a listing of some milestones in ECC's development.

Academic Years 1997-1999.

The first special education teacher to get involved (a volunteer from the US) enabled ECC to provide direct pull-out work with students as well as extend additional assistance to students in the schools. Monthly training was continued and expanded. Because the project needed to be community-owned, volunteers were actively recruited. Abaco has a great number of active educationally-oriented service clubs and this provided the first step toward building local capacity.

September 14, 1999 – Hurricane Floyd.

Hurricane Floyd devastated the island. Two schools were completely flattened and all others sustained such damage that materials and equipment were barely salvageable. Because of its clinical educator training, ECC had an educator network in place that served as a form of "bucket brigade" allowing relatively easy distribution of over 20,000 pounds of books and materials to all schools and settlements. Relief work to the schools raised ECC's profile through a newly launched website (<http://coconuttelegraph.net/forums/>) on which we posted pleas for books and materials. A great number of people from all over the world thus became aware of the project. We received audiovisual equipment from a California media company (overhead projectors, computer projectors), computers, and software. People stopped by the school to leave bags of books. The response continues to build.

2000-2002.

A dilapidated trailer was renovated to become the first ECC classroom. There the more severely disabled children could be given direct instruction. All other services continued, including diagnosis and intervention for children in every settlement on Abaco, monthly training for hundreds of educators, development of well-trained and ECC-certified Clinical Educators (discussed below), and the development of a professional library.

2002-2003.

ECC, gaining new students almost daily, needed more space. An unused convent was converted into a school which serves as the Every Child Counts Learning Centre. Initially thirty learning disabled students from all over Abaco and surrounding islands were given adaptive instruction there.

Hundreds of volunteers worked to teach life skills, assisted in grant writing, provided training, and tutored. A volunteer couple donated all the equipment necessary to set up a dive shop and enabled dozens of Abaco youth to learn how to dive and become dive instructors. One of our ECC students, Souvenir, became a certified dive instructor. Although he reads at a pre-primer level, his motivation was so great that he learned the dive tables and the skills necessary for him to certify!

By this time, over a dozen educators and volunteers in Abaco had worked to attain ECC Clinical Educator Certification. This training verifies their competency to diagnose and suggest or provide remedial intervention for academically struggling students. ECC provides training and materials free of charge. In return, trainees agree to offer assessment and diagnostic reports to anyone who requests. As a result of the quality of the work of these volunteer educators, the Bahama's Education Ministry recognizes ECC Diagnostic/Prescriptive Reports as official reports. This experience appears to have been an incentive for further professional development. Clinical Educators have presented at Florida Reading Association and International Reading Association conferences. One Clinical Educator was recruited to teach for the College of the Bahamas. Others seek to complete undergraduate and masters degrees to further their careers.

2003-2004.

The staff and students continue to grow. By this time five teachers provides their unique contribution to over fifty students. The lead teacher, Mr. Marsden Lawley, (M.S. in Exceptional Education from FIU) provides vocational training and mentored internships that allow the students self-sufficiency upon graduation. Mrs. Pamela Hepburn, (A.A., Barry University) works with the primary (1-4th grade) children. Melanie Masada's (M.S., Early Childhood) provides early intervention with the preschool children and Ellen Hardy (B.A., English) works with the more severe disabilities until they can be merged into regular classrooms. A part-time special educator, Monica Bianci, works with students with hands-on learning. Children have learned all about the plants on the island while they harvested orchids that will be prepared for sale to tourists. They learn about animals via a petting zoo boasting donated rabbits and chickens and an injured dove they rescued after the hurricanes (Frances and Jeanne). All the work with the students at ECC is designed to make them independent and self-sufficient.

Because of the continued growth in numbers of students and the complexity of instructional goals, more space was needed. A Vero Beach based group offered to build a new wing if ECC could provide the materials. They assembled workmen and students on Spring Break. In the two weeks they were there, sidewalks were poured, a basketball court was poured over the foundation of the old burned-down church, and a large, airy classroom was built. This wing now provides a living classroom where the students can learn practical skills which began with apprenticeships with the local plumbers, electricians, and carpenters who finished off the building.

Sept. 2004-5: Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne and Rotary Community Clinic Collaboration.

Once again Abaco was devastated by two hurricanes, Frances and Jeanne, less than a month apart. Two schools were so damaged they were unable to open during the 2004-5 academic year. The ECC facility, however, located high on a ridge, was spared.

Still there was progress. ECC was able to link up with the Abaco Rotary Club to provide community reading clinics in outlying settlements. Clinicians came together from all over the islands to caravan to a location and provide a rapid screening diagnosis. In these situations, a short report is compiled and suggestions for instruction are provided. Follow up training is provided to show teachers how to use these techniques.

Clinical Educator training continued. After two years of study, seven new educators were certified as Clinical Educators, three of which serve secondary students.

2005-2006.

Funded by local philanthropists, a new wing with three classrooms will be built by the same group from Vero Beach that erected the first expansion. Land in the back of the ECC Learning Centre will be bulldozed to create a soccer field and a new home for the Disney-donated playground equipment and a tent-cafeteria. Two new educators will join the staff, one youth minister will teach the older students construction skills as they complete the inside of the new wing and another special educator will work with behaviorally handicapped youngsters.

Ongoing – Transition to the World of Work.

If ECC had not provided training that enabled the students to be self-sustaining after graduation, it would have failed. Initially ECC students were matched to unique jobs in the community. (ECC has placed successful interns at a marine electronics company, a local restaurant, a resort, and in an apprenticeship with a local sculptor, for example.) Volunteers teach students marketable skills such as garment painting and crafts; ECC reproduces students' art work on note and holiday cards, raising money for the purchase of materials. Students raise orchids for sale. They have their own garden and raise chickens which become lunch for the school. There are plans in the works to have a fish farm, to supply fish for the local restaurants. Plans are in the works to build a sheltered home for functionally able students, and to maintain a thrift shop that would provide low-cost food and goods to the community.

Lessons Learned from the Every Child Counts Literacy and Special Education Programme

Community Perceptions.

Because ours was a grassroots project, initiated by a parent, many educators—from local ones all the way up to the Ministry of Education--were suspicious about what we were doing to Abaco children. Educators worried that the significant parental support we received for the project would undermine the authority of the schools, and that testing would reveal program inadequacies, and that results might be published, thus shaming the community. One principal forbade her teachers from attending our trainings and discouraged parents from using Every Child Counts' services.

Initially we were defensive and viewed these community reactions as criticism. We did not realize that these suspicions were useful and could help us reframe our approach in more effective ways. Here are some examples.

There is an understandable concern among many developing countries about outside perceptions of their educational systems and literacy rates. As mentioned above, concern about the ECC project extended up to the Ministry of Education, which carried out an unannounced spot check on an assessment. We were fearful about such a visit, but quickly learned that when our processes are open and shared, much is gained. As a result of our openness and the quality of our work, the Ministry granted official and public endorsement of the project. But we had also feared the consequences of the Ministry endorsement. Contrary to our expectations, this official endorsement enhanced ECC's credibility and opened the doors for broader participation. Though the Ministry has never contributed to the project monetarily, the referrals via Ministry contacts have provided resources we sorely needed.

Nonetheless, schools remained sensitive that reports would shine negative light on their programs. This prompted a revision of the clinical reports. Rather than referring to student *deficits* we began to refer to *growth areas*, and *range of potential* replaced the notion of grade level performance. We embraced the lesson of person-to-person communication as a means of building understanding. Instead of sending a report, we now speak to the parents, administrator, teacher, and student when possible and as soon after the diagnosis as we can, emphasizing the positive performances, complimenting the school, then gently indicating next steps. In addition to attaching descriptions of recommended strategies, we briefly demonstrate them and are developing video/CDs so there is a greater chance there will be effective intervention.

During our work in training clinicians we discovered that there were cultural differences that caused me to modify my customary mode of teaching and sharing. When introducing new techniques I often lent credibility to them by referring to stateside teachers who have used such methods successfully. This was often taken as bragging. In order not to be seen as looking down on local educators, we learned to confirm the methods they employed and then share other approaches that "*might be used.*"

We also learned that although ECC never charged for any of its services (with the exception of tuition at the school), Abaconians could not countenance this. They wished to do their part and we learned to accept the fresh-caught lobster, conch, and fish as payment in full for services.

Professional development.

We quickly learned that there was little incentive for continued professional development among teachers. Attaining a teaching position was viewed as an end point. Because it is so difficult to get teachers in more remote communities, a large percentage of the teachers do not have (or need) terminal degrees. And because there are no pay increases for additional training, there is little incentive to continue professional development. We therefore recognized that

though ECC provides its services at no charge, trained clinicians should be allowed to charge fees, though few did.

Further, due to the lack of books and other materials, we have learned to work with what is at hand, like teaching comparison and contrast or main idea by using objects rather than texts. Bringing the latest teaching tools in for training sessions was not helpful as these would not be locally available.

A goal of our work is to build expertise. We found, however, that although many Certified Clinicians had become skilled with diagnosis and intervention, they were not comfortable providing training to others. They feared making mistakes and being seen by peers as “putting on airs.” As a result we have experimented with creating training modules based around power point and video presentations. Clinicians have been willing to use these to facilitate training sessions.

Self-efficacy, decision making and priorities.

Perhaps the most important thing that we learned was how important it is to assist individuals in making a project such as ours their own. One cannot simply impose a model from outside on another culture. Initially, I tended to imprint my own values and expectations on the project. For example, the development of a centralized professional library was one of my pet projects. I was mystified as to why this not seen as priority in Abaco. Professional library space and bookshelves it turned out was far better used for teaching their children. Once we began working collaboratively to set goals, releasing responsibility and ownership to the community whenever possible, there was no end of volunteer assistance.

Resiliency.

Humans are infinitely resilient (Brooks, 2001). In spite of ridicule, rejection, labeling, and the like, ECC students have willingly taken on the responsibility of being young adult learners and future adults within the Abaco community. More than simply providing important educational services, we were helped to see the importance of finding what the students could do and assisting them to build on those capacities. Our students now are working happily as valued employees in local restaurants, resorts, and other businesses.

Self emergence.

Teaching for me became far less about the materials we rely on here than the human interaction. Materials can get in the way. The eyeball to eyeball teaching allowed me to be much closer to those I taught in a way that is much more real. I learned to have Plan B, C, and D when the electricity went out or the airline left me without handouts.

I came to sense when someone wasn't understanding; I learned to see past the exquisite politeness of the residents (who perceived questioning an instructor as an insult) and found ways to check participant understanding in ways that didn't cause offense. And I came to understand

the value of long-term involvement. The “blow in, blow off, blow out” training that doesn’t work in the states doesn’t work in Abaco either.

The most profound lesson was always what I did, rather than what I said. Some who came to help caused enormous harm by engaging in shocking or offensive behavior on their own time--nothing is private in a small island community—or through arrogant or incompetent teaching. Those who committed to the project and understood the mission of the project and the enormous toll it takes on one emotionally, physically, and spiritually made the most significant contributions.

Guatemala (Stateside Contact: Ellie Friedland, Ph.D.)

Background

Guatemala is a developing country with a recent history of dictatorship, political violence, disappearances, and oppression. The military controlled the government until 1985, and even though civilian leaders were elected after that, the military still exercised ultimate control (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, 2003). Today the government is again in transition, and the future is unclear.

Official figures state the Guatemalan rate of illiteracy for adult males as 25%, and 40% for females (UNESCO, 2001). However, Edgar Contraras, editor of the newspaper La Prensa (one of the two major newspapers in Guatemala City) estimates that the true illiteracy rates are probably more in the range of 50-60% for males, and higher for females (E. Contraras, conversation, August 22, 2002). Almost half the population over 25 years of age has had no schooling at all, and only 8% have completed primary school (Perry, et al., p. 437).

Students can specialize in education in their last two years of secondary school. This is the only education required to teach in the public schools. Teachers may have classes of 60 to 90 children, and the average student: teacher ratio is 40: 1(UNESCO, 2001). Public schools have some textbooks, but not many. Other supplies are also scarce.

Activities: The Guatemala Literacy Project

In 1989 a few educators from Guatemala and the United States began to work together as volunteers to improve literacy education in Guatemala. They were individuals who met each other and decided to work for change. They had no government sponsorship or agency grants, in fact, no funding at all. Early in their partnership they decided not to seek funding, but to remain a grassroots teacher-to-teacher partnership.

The Americans, led by Marcia Mondschein of Long Island, New York, were members of the Nassau NY Reading Council of the International Reading Association. The Guatemalan educators were from various universities and public schools. Together they created an international literacy project that has thrived for fifteen years, and continues to serve hundreds of Guatemalan teachers and children every year.

Here is a chronological overview of the Guatemala Literacy Project from 1989, when the Nassau Reading Council (NRC)/Guatemalan partnership began, to the present.

1989-ongoing.

Groups of educators from the US volunteer to travel to Guatemala twice a year as workshop leaders. During each trip they, along with Guatemalan workshop leaders, provide several days of workshops for educators in Guatemala. The Guatemalan educators are responsible for and arrange all workshops, including volunteer translators. In addition, a different group of Guatemalan educators visit Long Island, NY each year to attend professional conferences, visit local school districts and meet with teachers, students and administrators to exchange educational ideas and practices.

1991-1993.

NRC worked with Guatemalan educators to form the Guatemalan Reading Council, which became the Guatemalan Reading Association, fully affiliated with the International Reading Association.

1991-ongoing.

The GRA holds monthly workshops for educators throughout Guatemala. More than 300 educators voluntarily attend each month. Many Guatemalan educators who have participated in the Partnership have begun or returned to higher education programs and have attained degrees. Some have become teacher trainers throughout Latin America.

The National Reading Conference (NRC) donates mini-libraries (each consists of 150 new, high-quality children's books in Spanish) to Guatemalan public schools. The GRA distributes the libraries to schools whose teachers have consistently attended monthly GRA workshops. As of January 2004, more than 250 mini-libraries have been distributed. NRC raises the funds for mini-libraries by selling Guatemalan handicrafts at IRA national, state and local conferences. All profits are used for the purchase of books. The only expense paid before profit is the cost of the handicrafts.

1993-ongoing.

Every two years the GRA and the NRC have sponsored an international literacy conference in Guatemala City. At each conference, 1500-2000 Guatemalan educators participate in workshops on the latest techniques and strategies in education. Presenters have traveled from Central and South America, Puerto Rico, New Zealand, and nine states in the US. The International Literacy Conference sponsored by the GRA and NRC in 1999 was the Latin American Regional Conference of the International Reading Association.

Lessons Learned- Guatemala Project

Why has this international literacy project continued for fifteen years, while many similar projects (and their positive effects), end after a few years? Why do hundreds of teachers in Guatemala and the United States volunteer their time and spend their own money to teach and attend the Project's professional education workshops, while other professional development programs struggle for teacher attendance? What can other educators who want to create educational change in developing countries learn from the Guatemala Literacy Project? I offer here my answers to these questions, based on my ten years of experience with the Guatemala Literacy Project, and my conversations and interviews with several Guatemalan and American educators who work with the project.

Project Leadership.

One aspect of the project that stands out as unusual and that project leaders view as an important reason for its long-term success, is that all decision making with regard to the project has always been done by the Guatemalan teachers, not by the Americans.

The Guatemalan Reading Association members decide the kinds of workshops that will be offered, when and where they will be offered, who will visit the United States, and which schools will receive mini-libraries. They base these decisions on teachers' attendance at reading council meetings and their willingness to share expertise by organizing or giving workshops themselves. The reading councils organize workshops for teachers throughout the year, and twice a year they organize the workshops by teachers from the United States.

This is clearly an important reason for the longevity of the project. After all, the Guatemalans know much better than we do what they need and what will serve them. But the recognition of this obvious fact is immensely powerful, and surprisingly unusual. Many Guatemalan educators have told me stories of international aide projects that have come, and gone, from their schools, and have left little impact. Some of these projects offered supplies the teachers couldn't use like computers or overhead projectors.

Other programs donated books to schools, but never talked with administrators or teachers about what to do with the books. Those who donated such books probably never found out that the books often stayed in boxes in administrators' offices. Books are often considered so precious that school directors tell teachers that they will have to pay for any books that are damaged by their students. Since a book costs as much as a teacher earns in three or four months, they choose not to risk their livelihood and do not use the books (A. del Cid, conversation, February 23, 2003).

Independence from Funding Sources.

The teachers who began the Guatemala Literacy Project decided not to seek funding or grants that would have time limits. The Guatemalans were familiar with change programs that offer materials and training for a year, or a few years, and then simply stop. The change that begins from such projects also stop when the money does. They wanted to be able to sustain their project, and so decided to raise their own funds.

For example, the mini libraries created in public schools are fully funded by the sale of Guatemalan handicrafts at professional conferences in the United States. Marcia Mondschein buys handicrafts in bulk during her two trips a year to Guatemala. She and the other American volunteers carry them home in their luggage (everyone is told to bring only one suitcase so she/he can carry one full of handicrafts). Volunteers then sell the handicrafts at professional conferences, and all profits are used to buy books for mini-libraries. More than 250 mini-libraries have been created this way.

Independence from Government Sponsorship.

Marcia Mondschein remembers cool receptions from unresponsive teachers when she first offered workshops in Guatemalan public schools as part of the new Guatemala Literacy Project in 1989. At first she and the Guatemalan teachers offering the workshops were puzzled by teachers' reluctance to participate in the interactive, engaging literacy activities they offered. But when they had the opportunity to talk further with teachers, they learned that the teachers assumed they were from the government. They did not trust the government, and so were immediately suspicious of any programs that were brought to the schools.

The project leaders began to tell participants at the beginning of workshops that they were not from the Guatemalan government or the US government and that they were not funded by any agency. They explained that they were teachers from the US and from Guatemala who wanted to share and exchange ideas and learning. From then on teachers received them not only with willingness and enthusiasm but also with musical programs, performances, and special snacks (M. Mondschein, personal interview, August 20, 2000).

Voluntary Participation and Choice.

The Guatemalan government does offer professional development workshops to public school teachers. The content and approaches vary depending on the government in power, but such workshops are almost always mandatory for teachers. Like in the US, this can lead to resentment and resistance from educators. From the beginning, all programs offered by the Guatemalan Literacy Project have been offered by volunteers who make it clear that attendance is voluntary.

In addition, at least four or five different workshops are usually offered, and teachers choose which to attend. I took this kind of thing for granted based on my own experiences until the first International Literacy Conference in Guatemala in 1999. The Guatemalan Reading Association members had written the schedule of workshops for the first day on a huge sign in the entrance area of the conference, in addition to the schedule in the conference program.

When I arrived I noticed large crowd of teachers standing in front of this sign. I wondered why they were milling about and thought maybe they didn't understand how to register or where to go next. I saw a teacher I knew and approached her. I asked her why she was waiting here, and I was surprised to see tears in her eyes when she turned to answer me. "We have never had such choices before. It's overwhelming," she said, choking on the words. "I

can choose what to learn about. It's remarkable" (R.E.G. de Luarda, conversation, February 20, 1999).

Cultural Competence.

Culturally competent educators make the effort to learn the values and views of the culture in which they work. They then "provide professional services in a way that is congruent with behaviors and expectations that are normative for a given community" (Green, 1995, p. 89). It is important that we Americans adjust to the culture and realities of the people with whom we work. We are used to doing things our way, and that is not appropriate when we are guests in someone else's country, school, or home. Here are some important lessons I've learned in Guatemala. Many will apply to other places.

I have learned to always honor the language(s) of those present. If I don't speak the language, I make sure I have a translator. I am careful not to hold conversations in English when people present don't speak English. In fact, I have found that the more I try to speak their language, the more people appreciate my effort and understand that I respect them and their language. They seem to welcome my ideas and opinions even more than they did before I tried (and often, failed) to communicate in their language. Similarly, it is vital to make sure all written information, including visual aides, and workshop handouts are in the language of the people present.

It took me a while to learn that "bilingual" does not always means that people speak their language and English. For example, in Guatemala, "bilingual" usually means that people speak Spanish and a Mayan language. Bilingual people often do not speak English. If people speak English, it is often their third or fourth language.

We are careful to show respect when donating materials and find out ahead of time what the people know they can really use. For example, the Guatemala Literacy Project mini libraries contain only new, high quality books in Spanish. The Project volunteers always find out from the Guatemalans what resource materials people are likely to have and not to have. We offer only ideas and strategies that can be implemented with available materials. For example, we have learned not to bring overhead transparencies to a place unlikely to have overhead projectors; not to talk about use of computers in education to people who don't have access to computers; not to talk about special education services to educators who have none; to bring crayons and paper for our workshops, and to give them to the teachers when we leave. (I brought markers to Guatemala until I learned that crayons are more expensive than markers, more rare, and much more desirable—they last much longer).

One of the biggest adjustments for many of us in Guatemala is to follow the cultural mores in relation to time and not to misinterpret or demean them. For example, in Guatemala time is much more flexible than it is in the US. People are usually late for appointments, and tasks might or might not be completed when they tell you they will be completed. This is frustrating for many Americans who see this as a sign of incompetence or of not caring. We have to recognize that it does not have that meaning in this culture. It is our job to adjust.

We have also had to learn cultural styles of communication that are different than ours. It's difficult for us not to assume that everyone should communicate on the same schedule or in the same manner that we Americans do. For example, when we are planning our trips to Guatemala to lead workshops for the Project, we usually don't find out where we going, who and how many people we are teaching, or what day or time we will be in any particular city. The Guatemalans in the Literacy Project usually give us this information when they pick us up to drive us to a workshop. Until we Americans know better, we are likely to send email after email in the months before we go to Guatemala, asking for this information, and getting anxious and upset when they don't send it. They don't, and they always get us where we need to be when we need to be there.

I have also learned to remember that assumptions about how adults and children relate to each other are different in different cultures. I am careful not to apply American cultural assumptions in other cultures. For example, in Guatemala, children show great respect to teachers. I have often seen a teacher leave a classroom of 50-60 five year olds to come outside to talk with us visitors, and the children sit quietly and wait for her to return. When I first saw this, I assumed that discipline must be harsh and rigid to elicit such quiet passivity. But I have learned that there is no need for harshness or rigidity. Children behave because they respect teachers.

These are just some of the specific ways I have learned to respect the Guatemalan culture and work in partnership with people whose ways of being in the world are very different from mine. There are many other examples, and many more lessons to learn. The teachers who work with the Guatemala Literacy Project are deeply dedicated, and are always enthusiastic participants in learning and teaching.

Many of us Americans keep going back to Guatemala with the Project because the work is so gratifying and exciting. At the end of a workshop, there is often a line of teachers waiting to talk to the presenters. The teachers often want to know how they can learn more, where and how they can get books in Spanish on the topic, or they want to give a specific example in their teaching experience and discuss how to apply what they learned in the workshop to that experience. Often they wait patiently in line to say "Thank you."

Northern Thailand (Stateside Contact: Janet Richards, Ph.D.)
Working with Burmese Refugee Teachers in the
Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project

Please Note: Because of security considerations, the Burmese teacher's name in this manuscript is a pseudonym. Government officials changed the name of Burma to Myanmar in 1986, but the term Burma continues to reflect the broader recognition of Burma throughout the world.

Background

Currently, there are well over 90,000 Burmese ethnic refugees living in Thai government-regulated camps along the Burmese/Thai border. Some have lived in the camps since the early 1980s, and more refugees arrive every day (Sell, 1999). The majority of the

refugees are not allowed to work outside of the camps. Their tribal affiliations include Karen, Karenni, Shan, Kachin, and some Mong and Lahu (see McCaskill & Kampe, 1997, for specific data about these indigenous groups). These groups have sought autonomy from the Burmese government for over 50 years. Because of their continued struggle for a voice in policies that affect human rights, many have been incarcerated, or they have risked persecution from the current Burmese military regime. In order to survive, they have fled their villages, and escaped through the jungle to take refuge in northern Thailand.

Other political refugees come from Burmese mainstream society. These dissidents from larger towns and cities such as Rangoon and Pegu Township have had opportunities to attend universities and to work in Burma. But, they too, have had to leave their country. Political dissent is not allowed in Burma (*Christian Monitor*, Sunday, August 29, 2004).

Because of their political activism, many teachers have had to escape from Burma. They live and teach in the jungle camps near small northern Thai villages such as Mae Hong Son and Mae Sot. Their lives were dramatically changed when they arrived in Thailand, and their predicaments, struggles, and achievements are largely unknown to the western world. They can never return to their country to visit their families and they often use pseudonyms because they fear that if they disclose their real names, they and their families will be captured and persecuted. Most of the teachers are responsible for teaching 50-60 students who speak various dialects. Their classrooms are three--sided bamboo huts on stilts. They have minimal teaching supplies, few books and no electricity or running water. They receive a minimal salary. Some of the teachers are 16 years old with a tenth grade education. Others have degrees in teaching or degrees in other disciplines. All of the teachers teach admirably and skillfully in the camps under adverse conditions. They do not complain or seek pity for their circumstances. Rather, like exemplary teachers everywhere, they are committed to teaching their students.

Serving as an RWCT volunteer scholar in the northern Thai jungle, I asked some of the Burmese RWCT teachers to tell me their stories in an attempt to try to understand their unique experiences from their perspectives. The following story told by Paw Po illuminates one teacher's educational, social, and political struggles. Paw Po has lived in Thailand for 25 years. She holds important positions in the community. For example, she directs an orphanage, and she works with many community organizations. Paw Po is a woman with strong leadership abilities. It is her hope and mine that her story will provoke readers of this manuscript to learn more about the indigenous and mainstream people of Burma and the current Burmese situation.

The Story of Paw Po: A Woman Warrior

Paw Po is not my real name. You might say it is my nickname. Like so many other teachers from Burma, I cannot use my real name because I might be discovered and get arrested, or my family might be sent back to Burma and be persecuted. I have been in Thailand since 1987. I walked through the jungle to get here. I have a husband and five children. The children's ages range from 20 to five.

My father lives in the orphanage with us. He is disabled. During the war, he lost both of his legs from gangrene. He got infections in his legs, and we could not get any medicines to help

treat him, so he has no legs. He was one of the top Karen army opposition leaders. Both my parents were freedom fighters.

The orphanage-school I direct serves about 80 children, although sometimes there are 180. We have five teachers and three volunteers. We receive aid from many non-government groups (NGO's). Just the other day, three young women drove up in an old truck. They had traveled about six hours to deliver food and clothing to the children. One woman was from Great Britain, one was from the United States, and one was from Thailand. They volunteer for a special project called Partners. They gave us lots of raisins and other food and donated clothing that we can put to good use. We also receive funds from an organization called Burmese Refugee Care.

Before I came to Thailand, I was a jungle warrior. I was a guerilla fighter. I fought with the Karen Army for ten years. I narrowly escaped from my village. I did it during a New Year's festival. There had been fighting around my camp so I knew I had to leave. Now, I am acting Chair Person of the Migrant Education Committee, which is a group of classroom teachers and other educators who work for Burmese migrant children in Mae Sot.

Project Activities

Recently, the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Program (RWCT), a well-known, award-winning program connected to the International Reading Association, initiated a three-year project with the Burmese refugee teachers. The project serves Burmese educators in five different camps along the northern Burmese/Thai border that are mainly inhabited by Karen and Karenni people. The project is supported monetarily by United States Aid for International development (USAID) and two programs funded by the philanthropist, George Soros: the Open Society Institute, and the Burma Project based in New York City. RWCT is committed to helping teachers learn how to promote students' active learning and critical thinking abilities –a dramatic change from traditional rote learning associated with Burmese education (Lwin, 2003). When teachers complete the first year of their RWCT training, they become trainers themselves, and they work with new groups of teachers. Thus, the project is self-sustaining because it is structured to continue when RWCT volunteers complete the three-year project. The Burmese Project demonstrates similarities to many other RWCT projects offered in Western Europe. Two volunteer scholars selected from approximately 70 volunteers in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and Canada travel together as partners. After an overnight stay in Bangkok, partners travel on to northern Thailand to meet the in-country Project Director and the Project interpreter.

Following a series of instructional activities in eight RWCT Guidebooks, the volunteer scholars offer three-to-five all day workshops to the Burmese teachers. The Guidebooks ensure continuity of instruction and promote group collaboration, reading comprehension, and critical thinking. When the Burmese teachers demonstrate competency in what has been offered in the Workshops, they become Workshop leaders and share their knowledge with a new group of teachers.

Understandably, The Burmese Project also varies from other RWCT western European Projects. Language difficulties pose problems. The teachers come from various indigenous tribes and therefore, speak different dialects. There are few teaching supplies available, including

books. Consequently, few lessons are text-based. In addition, unlike the teachers in RWCT western European Projects, the Burmese teachers' education differs considerably. Some teachers are teenagers who have not yet completed high school. Others hold a degree in business, or mathematics, but have no teacher training. Some have a teaching degree.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from this project are twofold and can be generalized to other educational contexts. 1) On-going funding is a necessity to ensure that educational projects remain in place, and; 2) Teachers everywhere are resolute, strong, and determined to succeed despite adversity.

Currently, the Burmese RWCT Project is struggling. Funding is limited and precarious. Like so many educational initiatives, a great deal of money was offered at the beginning of the project and once the project experienced some success, budgets tightened. The in-country RWCT leader, Dr. Thein Lwin, and the Burmese teachers are determined to keep the project going by seeking alternative funding. In a poignant e-mail message Dr. Thein Lwin (2003) recently wrote:

I have expected this situation before, now the reality comes. Funding has been withdrawn. However, I could manage to extend the RWCT workshops in the third year within the second year funding, as we have promised to the local community for three years. The RWCT project has been growing its momentum in many different parts of Burma and it should be continued. I would be grateful if you could kindly suggest me to get funding from other sources to continue the project.

There is no doubt that this project will continue at least for another year. Some volunteer scholars have offered to pay their own expenses to travel to Thailand and offer RWCT workshops. The indigenous tribal teachers are also determined to continue the project by teaching other Burmese educators. In all likelihood, the RWCT Burmese Project as we know it today may very well segue into a grassroots movement supported by the Burmese educators who are resolute in their determination to keep the project alive. As one Burmese teacher told me, "We know we have to work together if we are to succeed."

Some Conclusions: What Have We Learned?

Across all of these projects several threads emerge that bind the experiences together and offer lessons to others wishing to assist emerging literacy projects.

Socio-political Realities

It is, on the surface, puzzling why efforts to provide literacy for children--a self-evident good from our point of view--would not be enthusiastically embraced by host societies. Without directly experiencing the complex social, political, and educational contexts within emerging nations one cannot begin to comprehend the viewpoints, interests, and motivations that provide a dynamic force that moves such projects for change. Certainly the life-threatening circumstances in Thailand dramatically accentuate obstacles for educational presence; socio-political forces in more gentle contexts like Guatemala and Abaco are no less compelling. The grassroots nature of the leadership serves as a common bond across each of these projects. These projects eschewed

governmental help, even though the need for funds was crippling. Freedom to move ahead unfettered by governmental restrictions or restraint was a necessary step to success in these contexts.

Resiliency

Robert Brooks' (2001, p. 7) guideposts for raising resilient children provides a unique construct for the effective interactions across these projects and I use it now to frame their commonalities. Brooks states that the "basic foundation of any relationship...is *empathy*...to see the world through (another's) eyes." Each of the authors writes of learning to listen actively, of responding to the educators of the host countries from their perspective. In each case, our hosts rewrote our scripts; and they ultimately reframed the realities in their country, clearly seeing the obstacles but actively seeking ways to circumvent them. Failing to work cooperatively and sensitively with local needs and priorities dooms even the most ambitious and well-funded programs to frustration and failure.

A key need for those participating in international projects is *acceptance* and appreciation (Brooks, 2001, 7). In this article the separate authors illustrate this as they write respectfully about the people and circumstances within these projects, citing the substantial obstacles each faced, while celebrating the special achievements that occurred despite those obstacles. This was an important dimension in the development of these programs. Clear appreciation of participants' concerns, efforts, and successes, and participants' respect for volunteers' expertise and guidance were essential to creating the interpersonal good will that enabled the projects to flourish.

"Identify[ing] and reinforce[ing] *islands of competence*" (Brooks, 2001, p. 7) in the on-going projects also contributed to their success. Each program developed by evolving around the felt needs that it *most effectively* addressed. Though the impact of these projects has been larger than the original needs it set out to meet, each began by helping participants work to their strengths.

Ultimately, the success of these projects hinges on *local ownership and control*. What works at home will not necessarily work abroad. It is by working from the inside, assisting those who know their needs best in attaining their goals and by using the resources at hand that undertakings such as these can take root and grow. Most importantly, we must always remember that we are outsiders and will always have something new to learn about the people with whom we work as well as about ourselves as human beings and as educators.

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