

Reading Stories to Change the World

BY LORENN WALKER



Why didn't Ferdinand want to fight when he went into the bullfight ring?" asks Erin, a tan, athletically fit 16-year-old girl. A room full of eager-looking second graders raise their hands in unison, anxious to give an answer, but one child does not wait for Erin to call on him and instead blurts out excitedly, "Because Ferdinand likes to sit and smell the flowers!" Erin has just finished reading *The Story of Ferdinand the Bull* to this second grade class at Leihoku Elementary School in Waianae on the island of Oahu in Hawaii.

Erin has read *Ferdinand* many times before and has carefully thought out questions to ask about the story, but this is her first time reading it before her intended audience. Erin—a ninth grader at an alternative learning center at Waianae High School for teenagers who are at risk for dropping out of school—is participating in the Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning (VPTCL) project. Like most other teens who are in danger of dropping out, she has academic and social problems. Giving her a positive school experience and putting her in a leadership role is empowering. She has transformed from a marginal student to one who now plans to go to college.

Lorenn Walker (lorenn@lorennwalker.com) is a public health educator working in violence prevention and resiliency development in Oahu, HI.



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This hands-on program gave Erin the opportunity to learn that she can make a difference in her community and that she is a positive role model for younger students in her neighborhood, which has boosted her self-confidence and motivated her to learn: “Being in the program gave me more responsibility, and I learned better speaking skills,” she says with a bright smile.

Program Development

VPTCL was developed in 1999 by the Hawai'i Friends of Civic and Law Related Education (Hawai'i Friends), a 24-year-old nonprofit organization run by volunteers, to support at-risk secondary school students and help them learn problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills. These skills are protective factors for developing resiliency and preventing violence (Werner & Smith, 1992). The program was originally based on an annotated bibliography, “Literature for Children and Young Adults: Examining Issues of Violence and Conflict Resolution” (Letwin, 1996).

PREVIEW

Getting at-risk teens involved in working with and reading to younger students gives them a chance to be leaders in a positive school experience.

Both older and younger students benefit from the interaction and literacy skills that are learned.

The teenage students feel empowered and begin to reassess their futures as their confidence increases.

Letwin designed her bibliography for teachers “to tap the rich resource of children’s literature to stimulate discussion of violence and of alternative, peaceful ways to resolve conflict.” VPTCL shares this intent but does not use teachers to accomplish the goal. Instead, secondary students are recruited to read to elementary classrooms and facilitate discussion with the younger students on the themes of the books.

Program Design

Teachers who have students who are at-risk for dropping out of school are contacted about the program. If they are interested, a Hawai'i Friends coordinator comes to their classrooms and gives a 45-minute presentation about the program. The teens are told that the program is an opportunity for them to influence younger students in their neighborhoods to practice nonviolent conflict resolution and ways to deal with problems in a positive way. The presentation includes an interactive session that models what the teens will do if they enlist in the program.

The program is voluntary, but there are requirements for the self-selected participants. The preparation is extensive but important, especially because some of the teens are at the reading level of the children’s books. The teens must commit to reading selected picture books

aloud for at least 20 hours before going to an elementary classroom in their neighborhood to read to young students. The reading practice is done in a cooperative group setting in the classroom. The teen readers are coached in dramatic storytelling. The teens also tutor one another in word pronunciation and understanding. The teens work in pairs when they go into the elementary classrooms, each taking turns reading a book or two and facilitating the discussion of it with the youngsters. The team approach to reading to the elementary classes was suggested by the first group of teen readers.

During the 20-hour practice period, the teens also learn facilitation skills. They are asked to think about the problems that each book addresses and to prepare questions to ask the elementary students after they read the books. The teens are taught how to develop and use open-ended questions (i.e., what, how, who, and why questions) for generating interactive discussion with the elementary students.

After the teenagers are informed of the program requirements at the introductory presentation, they are told, "We'll check with your teachers next week and see if any of you want to participate." Approximately 90% of all the teens introduced to the program have chosen to participate.

Selection of Picture Books

All of the picture books that the teens read deal with prob-

lems and conflicts. Each story illustrates a different conflict and way of handling a problem and teaches problem-solving skills in subtle ways. In *Ferdinand*, Ferdinand refuses to fight, which ultimately saves him from being slaughtered by a matador. In *Swimmy*, a fish convinces his fellow fish to work together to save the whole group. Although Swimmy and his friends are small fish, they swim together in a group to become what looks like one big fish. This cooperative strategy protects them from the bigger hungry fish. The issues of belonging and how we find support in our relationships with others are also addressed in *Swimmy*.

The Butter Battle Book shows what happens when individuals choose to engage in conflict and how violence can escalate. In Dr. Seuss's mythical world of the Zoots and Yoots, the conflict stems from distrust of others who are different. The Zoots butter their bread on the bottom, but the Yoots butter their bread on the top. A wall divides them because of this difference, and a slingshot starts a war. The story ends with aircraft carrying weapons and all of the Zoots and Yoots retreating to underground bomb shelters for safety.

After the teen reads the story aloud, he or she facilitates a discussion of the theme.

Kekoa, a 10th grader in the program, reads *The Butter Battle Book* with a gravelly voice that sounds like the cartoon character Scooby Doo. Kekoa engages the younger students

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Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning programs are a universal primary prevention strategy for youth violence prevention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Cooperative learning involves student interaction that “is characterized by positive goal interdependence with individual accountability” (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000). At the heart of cooperative learning theory is the assumption that people learn best from direct experience rather than simply being told information. Unfortunately, most school-based violence prevention programs (78 out of 149 studies reviewed) rely on telling students what is right and wrong (an instruction-based method), which has been shown to be one of the least effective ways to change behavior (Gottfredson, 1997).

Cooperative Learning Is Activity Based

Cooperative learning is active learning. Maria Montessori, the first woman medical doctor in Italy and the founder of the Montessori Method of Education, was the first well-known educator to develop and apply an active-based theory of learning to classrooms. Montessori recognized that children crave activity and should not be expected to be passive recipients of information. Montessori students engage in learning experiences. Montessori even used the term director to describe the teacher because she felt so strongly that students learn from their own experiences, not from lecturing or telling them what to learn (Montessori, 1971).

In the Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning program, teenagers participate in learning experiences as they work together in groups. They practice reading aloud and facilitating discussion about each book’s theme before going into the elementary classrooms. When the teens go into the classroom to read, they go in pairs. After reading to the classes the teens discuss their experiences.

Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring Benefits

This program includes both peer and cross-age tutoring. Teens engage in peer and cross-age tutoring in their high school classrooms while they practice and prepare to read to the elementary classes. Research into the effectiveness of peer tutoring programs finds benefits both for those students who are tutored and the students doing the tutoring (Kalkowski, 1995). Research into the effectiveness of at-risk teens tutoring others has likewise shown positive results including reduced disciplinary referrals and increased self-confidence (Supik, as cited in Duckenfield, n.d.).

Benefits to Elementary Students

Although the teens gained valuable experience in the program, it is likely that the younger students learned more about violence prevention from the teens than they would from their teachers. In an experimental study conducted by Northwestern University Medical School, teen mentors were determined to be more effective than adults at educating younger children nonviolent responses to conflict (Sheehan, DiCara, LeBailly, & Christoffel, 1999). In this study, teens living in a notorious Chicago public housing community were paid \$4.50 an hour to design and implement a violence prevention program for younger children. The teens mainly designed activities, including games, to successfully teach the children about violence prevention.

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Books Used in the Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning Program



The Butter Battle Book
Dr. Seuss

The Gold Coin
Alma Flor Ada

Pink and Say
Patricia Polacco

Luka's Quilt
Georgia Guback

A Picture Book of Rosa Parks
David Adler

A Picture Book of Anne Frank
David Adler

Death of the Iron Horse
Paul Goble

The Story of Ferdinand the Bull
Munron Leaf

Grandfather's Journey
Allen Say

Papa Piccolo
Carol Talley

Nettie's Trip South
Ann Turner

The Big Orange Splot
Daniel Pinkwater

Tiki Tiki Tembo
Arlene Mosel

Swimmy
Leo Lionni

The Little Engine that Could
Watty Piper

The Secret of the Peaceful Warrior
Dan Millman

The Sneetches and Other Stories
Dr. Seuss

The Grinch Who Stole Christmas
Dr. Seuss

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel
Virginia Lee Burton

Good-Bye, Daddy
Brigitte Weninger

A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.
David Adler

A Picture Book of Sojourner Truth
David Adler

Maybelle the Cable Car
Virginia Lee Burton

Curious George Goes to the Beach
Margret Rey

Program Application

Between 1999 and 2003, approximately 50 students from four classrooms at three secondary schools on the island of Oahu participated in this program. The teens read in approximately 100 classrooms and to more than 2,000 elementary students. Approximately 200 storybooks were distributed to the elementary classrooms. The five-year program was funded by grants roughly totaling \$10,000 from the State of Hawaii, Public Housing Drug Elimination Program, and the Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii Public Health Fund.

Results of the Program

Although an in-depth evaluation of the outcomes of the VPTCL program was not conducted, qualitative data show positive results. First, a focus group of 17 teens was held at Waianae High School after two semesters of participating in the program. The consensus of the group was that the program was one of their more meaningful school experiences. They all agreed that their self-confidence increased and they gained an appreciation of what it takes to be an effective teacher. "I never knew it could be so hard!" said one girl.

All four secondary teachers whose students participated believe that the program positively influenced their students. Leilehua High School teacher Johanna Matono said that she found her students "were able to do something they thought they could never accomplish—*read* in front of a group. This experience was priceless for all."

Ann Van Etta, whose two classes at Waianae High participated in the program, found that "the Violence Prevention program gives our students a chance to use the reading skills they *do* have in a very positive way. When the students sit at the head of a classroom reading children's stories to elementary school students and interacting with the children as role models, they are given a feeling of success and self-worth. Rather than feeling like poor readers, they discover that they can use reading to bring pleasure and information to others. This gives them a sense of empowerment and perhaps takes away a bit of the negativity they feel toward reading."

The elementary school teachers were also surveyed after each teen reading and almost all thought that the program taught their students valuable lessons about conflict resolution. One teacher reported that an elementary student said, "We should watch what we say so we don't hurt each others' feelings." The elementary school students also indicated that they learned to value reading from the program. "When you read, you get smart at reading, so I will read all the time, and in high school I will be smarter in school," observed a first grader.

Kekoa explains what he thinks the elementary students learned from the program: "I think us doing this is an example of what they can do when they grow up." And what does Kekoa think he got out of the experience? "I learned patience from doing this program," he said. His teacher, Van

in an interactive and animated discussion after reading the book. He asks the second graders a series of open-ended questions: "What is the problem in this story?" "Why don't the Zoots and the Yoots like each other?" "How are people you know different from you?"

After reading and discussing each book, the teens sign their names in the book, sometimes including a personal message, and then give the book to the class. This tradition was also developed by the first group of teens that participated in the program. Teens who complete the program and read to at least two classrooms receive a gift certificate to a local book and music store. The gift certificate amount is usually between \$25 and \$50 for each teenager, depending on the funding for the program and the number of teens participating in it.



After performing at least 20 hours of practice reading in a cooperative group, teen volunteers venture in to elementary classrooms to read to students.

Etta agreed: “Kekoa has blossomed from this program.” A classroom of the students to whom Kekoa read sent him thank-you letters that overwhelmingly recommended that he should become a teacher. “I don’t know about the pay to do that job,” said Kekoa, but at the same time he smiled with a

twinkle in his eyes that tells us that someday he may become a teacher.

Conclusion

Although not rigorously evaluated, this small program had positive results. First, it helped build social capital between the secondary and elementary schools. The elementary schools also obtained some beautiful storybooks for their students.

Second, the secondary students worked on their reading skills, they gained self-confidence, and they benefited from the lessons taught by the books that they read. As one teen said, “Reading to an audience was scary at first, but I gained more confidence after each visit. As I was teaching the kids, I was also teaching myself how to handle my own problems.” This is a simple and inexpensive program that should be replicated and rigorously evaluated to determine its effectiveness for preventing violence. **PL**

References

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