

**BACK TO SCHOOL, BACK TO PEACE:
A CULTURE OF PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA**



by

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Summer 2008

- Executive Summary -

The situation in Central America today is different in each of the countries but all are of vital importance to the United States. Not many years ago, the region was rife with bloody civil wars. Today, the nations of the region have made significant progress on a set of objectives that serves to connect the people to economic and social integration. During the 1990s, Central America went through an enormous process of profound change on the political scene, with democratic governments being set up. However, the political changes were not accompanied to a sufficient extent by parallel economic and social transformations. At the same time, the armed conflicts of the previous decade led to greater backwardness in the region in terms of social development – education, health and life expectancy of its population. This study examines the accomplishments and shortcomings of civil society and government institutions in creating a *Culture of Peace* in Central America.

On August 7, 2008, I ventured to Central America to begin a six week journey that would take me to Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. The purpose of my trip was to explore what a *Culture of Peace* meant to the people of Central America and how its values and attitudes could contribute to peace and conflict resolution. For years, there has been some indication and much speculation that cultural differences can cause conflict. I on the other hand, believe culture can play a constructive role in resolving conflicts by helping to establish sustainable relationships. In order to understand the insufficient knowledge with the intercultural settings in Central America, I relied on the US Embassies in Managua, Tegucigalpa, San Salvador and Guatemala City. They were instrumental in setting up interviews with administrative staff and teachers from public and private schools, officials within the Ministry of Educations, local host families, staff assistants of NGOs, and many others. In addition, the UNESCO Office in New York, particularly Ms. Rochelle Roca Hachem, programme specialist for culture, was very helpful in shaping my preliminary research before flying into Central America.

Each interview I conducted began with two essential questions: What is your identity to your own country? And how would you define a *culture of peace*? The responses to the first question were similar in all four countries. Families expressed frustration but hope for a better tomorrow. Yet it was the response to my second question that shaped my research in Central America in a different direction. Central Americans refused to believe that a *culture of peace* existed with the current nature of the school systems. “If you wish to examine *culture* and *peace*, look at the schools in the rural villages and you will get your answer,” said my first host family in Managua, Nicaragua. And in each city and village I visited, popular dissatisfaction with the social development in Central America revealed challenges with no ready fixes.

Initially, I had planned to meet with religious leaders to discuss how people in different communities resolve disputes and how societies can establish “cultural competence” – in other words, the ability of Central Americans to communicate, make decisions, agree, reconcile, and solve conflicts with a shared understanding. Citizens with the memory of war, defeat, grief, uncertainty, pain, misery, anguish, and so on – have established a cultural identity of denial.

What I had planned to go forward with were exercises to make church leaders help those families create an identity of acceptance. With exercises in each country, the final objective was to come away with recommendations on how to implement a core concept of ethnorelativism. Ethnorelativism assumes the equality of all groups by informing and maintaining tolerance, openness and dialogue, with the ultimate goal of promoting harmony between peoples. However, I was confounded by the opening statement made by the wife of a church leader in my first set of interviews, who said the following:

Imagine a six-year old girl living in rural Nicaragua. She has four brothers and sisters, and her mother is an illiterate widow who earns about \$120 per month as a subsistence farmer. What are the chances for that six-year old girl of becoming a prominent lawyer or university professor? Not very high.

I became intrigued by her statement, and asked a number of questions to understand the current shape of the school systems in Central America. It became evident that I would need to meet with school officials and families to hear their side of the story and get their thoughts about a cultural identity of acceptance. For the purpose of this report, I refer to Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala as “Central America.” They are the worst affected by poverty and thus have the greatest obstacles and need for a *culture of peace*. Information from Costa Rica and Panama are not included, yet many refer to their school systems as the ideal model for the rest of the region. Throughout my six weeks in the region, the care and education of the growing child population became my research. Overall, I learned that it is the greatest social challenge confronted by the governments and societies of Central America.

The central recommendation of this study is for all actors to seek long-term, multifaceted approaches to adequately address the problems of early childhood development, the poor education infrastructure and the brain drain of school leaders. No simple, straightforward solutions exist. For most of Central America’s inhabitants, the region’s education system have historically inspired distrust, alienation and doubt. In a region characterized by pervasive and untamed inequality of income, and where groups of the population remain excluded from socioeconomic progress, a shift in the debate toward equality of opportunities promises to be a better guide for public policy. Through the work of the UN, NGOs and the United States Embassies, Central America is building on new principles that reveal the imperative stride that is needed for a *Culture of Peace*: “Going back to school.”

A Culture of Peace – What is it?

At the eve of a new millennium, a proliferation of regional, local, ethnic, religious and civil conflicts and terrorism around the world emphasize the need for a global transition from a culture of war to a *culture of peace*. Yet the absence of war does not mean peace. As defined by the United Nations, a *culture of peace* “is a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations.”¹ In order to draw attention to the challenges and issues of the culture of peace, and to encourage international

¹ United Nations Resolution A/RES52/13 and A/RES/53/243.

action, the United Nations General Assembly first proclaimed the year 2000 to be *International Year for the Culture of Peace*, in 1997 and subsequently, in 1998 proclaimed the period of 2001-2010 as the *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World*.

The abundance of knowledge and training that cultural peace specialists have gathered over the years has been slightly ignored. These specialists have attempted to take into account the deep cultures, values, assumptions and fundamental social goals to emphasize a more peaceful community rather than impose methodologies from the outside. Taking those same approaches, I wanted to introduce skills and frameworks to understand the role of culture in conflict and its resolution. By empowering the local leaders with a renewed understanding and appreciation for a *culture of peace*, can Central America take the next step in fulfilling their aspirations for peace and socioeconomic growth.

General Observations

Central America's single most important educational challenge is improving learning at all levels. Improved learning is vital for individual and national growth, competitiveness, quality of life, and the attainment of a *culture of peace*. Today, most children complete their education without gaining sufficient skills to earn a good living. In Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, the Ministries of Education face difficulties in attracting (and retaining) qualified competent teachers to rural areas to improve low efficiency and results among students from poor families. And when qualified teachers are received, all four countries restrict their ability to develop curricula and teaching strategies – they are nationally determined.

A teaching career is not an attractive option in Central America because of low pay, poor working conditions and the low social status of the profession. The *Programa de Promocion de la Reforma Educativa de America Latina y el Caribe* (PREAL) who work for the improvement in quality of education in Latin America and the Caribbean, have revealed startling figures of teacher salaries. In El Salvador, a qualified teacher would make approximately US\$ 690 a month; in Guatemala, a primary school teacher earns an average of US\$ 560 a month; in Honduras, a primary school teacher starts with a salary of US\$ 255 a month; and in Nicaragua, primary school teachers make approximately US\$ 100 a month.² The troubling truth is that teaching in Central America is at a crisis. Those strong individuals who want to teach will need to make an enormous financial sacrifice to even have a classroom conducive for learning. But this is only the beginning of the hardships that Central America faces.

Since so many children work to supplement the family income, the school day for most children is considerably shorter than one would expect. Most public schools give families the choice of sending their children to either the morning, afternoon or evening shift to accommodate not only their needs, but the teacher's as well. And because most public schools lack the adequate facilities, only the basic subjects are delivered to students: English, Math, Reading and Writing. Families are put into the difficult position of deciding whether it is cost-effective to send their children to school. A child sent to public school not only means valuable

² Programa de Promocion de la Reforma Educativa de America Latina y el Caribe (PREAL), *Publicaciones*, <http://www.preal.org/>

income missed from working in the fields or selling items in the street, but it also constitutes an expected financial contribution to the basic needs for that student: pencils, paper, school lunches and transportation to the school.

Even those fortunate enough to fulfill their secondary education, those bright minds have no plans to study at the university level in Central America. At the conclusion of a survey I conducted with juniors and seniors in private schools, I found that 95% of those planning on going to college were applying to the United States or Canada. The other 4% were applying for schools in Costa Rica, Panama or Europe. Only 1% had the intention of studying at home. There are signs that a “brain drain” might occur in these four countries, because those students who go on to major in engineering, medicine and business will most likely not return to their native country. And those who do gain an education at home only want to be lawyers or politicians. Enrollment figures for secondary schools are cause for serious concern, as the ratio drops enormously for those trying to achieve a high school education. For example, 70% of the children aged 16 and 17 do not have access to secondary education in El Salvador.³ Similar figures exist in Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. But the one consistent and promising item that I found in my research is that every child I spoke with wants an education.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua’s economy is the smallest in Central America, and the consequences of that are alarming to the education system. Nicaragua was my first stop to Central America and my



first introduction to the troubling reality of what schools look like in developing countries. The infrastructure of public schools in Managua and Leon (the two towns I visited during my trip) are disturbing. Parents were the first to tell me that it was unfair that their families were responsible for the text books, school paper, printers and pencils, the meals, the custodian supplies, desks and chairs, etc. According to the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), 53% of the total population is under the age of 18. Nicaragua’s main challenge for the large youth population is to overcome inequity and poverty, which affect children and women most severely.

Many school instructors kept referring to Costa Rica’s education curriculum as the model that Nicaragua and all of Central America should adopt. For example, Costa Rica invests more than 28% of its national budget on primary and secondary education.⁴ They have also advocated a computer in each school to advance technological innovation in their country. But perhaps the most astonishing figure that no other Central American country can say is that there are more teachers than policemen in Costa Rica. Despite early childhood and education not being given

³ UNICEF, *At A Glance: El Salvador*, <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/elsalvador.html>

⁴ Escalante, Manuel A., *A History of Education in Costa Rica*, A Paper Submitted for Presentation at the V Congress of the Americas Popular Culture Association Meeting, June 2001.

enough priority on the social agenda, there is no real presence of juvenile gangs in Nicaragua. But there were concerns that might change with no progress made in eradicating poverty.

Political tensions were starting to become high, amidst the upcoming November 2008 municipal elections. Teachers and school administrators were concerned that their students might be persuaded to join gangs and student movements if Nicaragua's ruling Sandinist National Liberation Front (FSNL) would disrupt or steal the elections. The FSNL won the 2006 Presidential elections, bringing back Daniel Ortega as president with the promise of his "zero hunger program." In it, Ortega vowed to reduce poverty in rural areas over a five-year period, but according to families I spoke to, there has been no real progress with eradicating the extreme poverty in rural Nicaragua. On the other hand, enormous billboards with the face of Ortega can be seen on almost every block of Managua – a cost believed to be in the thousands per billboard. The frustration of being lied to and living in poverty have made locals destroy those billboards - only to have thousands of more dollars spent on putting up new billboards the next morning. Recently, the November municipal elections in Nicaragua caught the international community's attention with images of the capital city in flames. Those same teachers and school administrators correctly predicted the events, discovering the root causes lying right in front of their eyes: education.

Honduras



I spent the most time of my trip in Honduras, a striking country with its beautiful mountains and attractive people. Yet it is a country that had experienced not one, but two teacher's strikes that were affecting millions of children. According to public school teachers, they had lost all patience with the government when no paychecks had been issued in well over five months. One teacher explained to me that as a whole, societies with greater inequality of basic opportunities among children are more likely to show inequalities later in the lifecycle. As long as those obstacles exist in basic opportunities, children in Honduras will systematically find their chances of success in life

much more difficult. Life in rural Honduras is complicated for most families. Nearly two-thirds of the population still lives below the poverty line. And those living up in the mountains have seen no progress from the government in rebuilding schools and roads hit hard by tropical storms and hurricanes, such as Hurricane Mitch from 1998 that is still remembered by most citizens.

One family in particular from a small town called Sigualtepeque, in northern Honduras, left me emotionally distressed for the children in this country. The Maduro family had experienced a life-changing decision of whether or not they should make the dangerous journey from Honduras to the United States to seek better opportunities. The husband decided to go alone and take the "train of death" in Mexico, hoping to make it to the US so he could send money back home. Walking through the town one morning, I noticed the wife working in the field with

what appeared to be ten teenagers hired to help her. I approached Ms. Maduro to ask why she hired these young kids to work the fields, when they should be in school. Her response left me in tears – *“Mi esposo se murio el año pasado, tratando de llegar a EE.UU para trabajar y enviarnos dinero. Ahora, necesito que mis hijos trabajen para poder sobrevivir.”* (My husband died last year, trying to make it to the US to send us back money. I now need my children to work with me so we can support ourselves). The ten children in the field were her own, plus two baby daughters watching from the porch of her small farm. This was the common story of families living in rural Honduras.

Upon my departure to El Salvador, I left optimistic that Honduras could find the strength and potential for improving the basic opportunities for children. Two programs in particular caught my attention in the work being done with targeting the youth population. The Cooperative Housing Foundation – now known simply as CHF International – has been a catalyst for achieving long-lasting positive change in low-income communities around the world. In Honduras, CHF International has been working for the past 20 years implementing a wide variety of projects focused on economic and social development. But it was one of their new programs that impressed me: The Youth Engagement for Advancing Hope (YEAH). According to UNICEF, the average number of years of schooling in rural Honduras stands at 4.3 years.⁵ This means a large portion of the youth population are unemployed, uneducated and vulnerable to violence or trafficking. CHF International targets those youth by empowering them with activities that provides them education and income so they can remain immune to gangs and trouble.

The other program that left me very impressed with the direction Honduras was taking was its support of the World Food Programme’s (WFP) global school feeding campaign. WFP encourages governments throughout the world to put into place national school feeding programs that would nurture a brighter future for children.⁶ Honduras was a beneficiary of this program, with the WFP providing school meals in a few towns to help offset the cost of having to feed their children while they go to school. This program has resolved one of the most critical barriers that prevented parents from sending their children to school. With some schools now feeding students as an incentive for their attendance, parents can breathe a sigh of relief knowing that their loved ones will be safe, nurtured and more importantly, given an education.

El Salvador

El Salvador was a culture shock compared to my visits to Nicaragua and Honduras. Unlike most of Nicaragua and Honduras, there were paved roads, skyscrapers, American fast food restaurants, and job opportunities in the capital. It almost felt like being back in the United States, with warm showers and electricity at night. Yet once leaving for the rural towns, reality hit back again. When visiting a school in the Comocaran village (outside of San Miguel), I was shaken by one girl’s response when asked about her thoughts of going to school: *“Me siento preocupada cuando voy al escuela. Una de mis amigas fue secuestrada este año, y escondida en un cuarto hasta que el rescate fue pagado. Yo creo que nuestro país sigue en guerra por la*

⁵ UNICEF, *Honduras Background*, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/honduras_2026.html

⁶ World Food Programme, *School Feeding*, http://www.wfp.org/food_aid/school_feeding/index.asp?section=12&sub_section=3

violencia que hay aquí (I am scared for life when I walk to school. Earlier this year, one of my friends was kidnapped and held in a room for a week until the ransom was paid. I really think my country is still at war with all the violence happening around us).” The truth is that in El Salvador, the government done a good job concentrating more on reducing poverty and promoting family stability in the urban cities but done poorly in spending direct expenditures on children’s programs in rural villages.



The Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA) has taken a proactive approach in addressing youth violence in San Salvador. With the help of the local police, ISNA goes around and picks up students who are unsupervised. They then provide them with psychological counseling on available opportunities besides street violence. But the unfortunate truth is that there is a feature you get from being in El Salvador unlike any other country: that of a *gun culture*. In every commercial area, whether it may be a Pizza Hut or a video game shop, a security guard carrying an automatic

weapon is present at all times. Some argue that it is worth having that kind of culture for security purposes and the removal of temptations and corruption. Yet the majority I spoke to believed it is the wrong message to be sending out, particularly to the youth. Children should be made to believe that there are better job opportunities with an education rather than easily becoming a security guard or a member of Armed Forces.

Exposure to gang violence is more prominent in El Salvador than any other country I visited. I was the unfortunate victim of being robbed on a chicken bus by a teenager upon my return to San Salvador. Thanks to the helpful advice of the US Embassy and local families, I was prepared for such an event, but the daily occurrences of such instances are a sad reality for this tiny Central American country. According to UNICEF, 70% of children indicate they have been abused in their homes.⁷ ISNA reported similar figures, with approximately 1,500 cases of physical mistreatment or abandonment. In no other country did I see such high neglect of children like in El Salvador. Although children beggars were common in Nicaragua and Honduras, it was apparent that children made a living of that in rural El Salvador. I was able to ask one child during a bus ride in El Mozote why children are forced to beg, to which he replied: “*No hay dinero y no tengo nada que hacer*” (There is no money at home and I have nothing better to do). The people of El Salvador are perhaps the hardest working of anyone else, but such rewards have come with a price – the neglect of children and students.

⁷ UNICEF, *At A Glance: El Salvador*, <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/elsalvador.html>.

Guatemala

Guatemala is a unique case study with its indigenous population having maintained a distinct identity. Although I only spent a couple days in this country rich with culture and history, several families in the western highlands have told me that the government at times has tried to suppress the indigenous culture, hoping to make Spanish the universal language. This also translates into the school systems, where the Mayan languages are slowly becoming extinct. Overall, the Guatemalan education system is characterized as poor quality with urban concentration of resources. According to my host family in Guatemala City, 70% of Mayan women cannot read or write. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), fewer than 30% of students in the region complete secondary school, and many of those who do finish lack the skills to compete in the workplace. Guatemala has been known to have the lowest human development indicators in the Latin America and Caribbean region. The poor, particularly girls and rural indigenous children of both genders, have less access to basic education. And those indigenous children who do go to school have teachers that neither understand nor speak the children's maternal languages.



Yet each country had at least one bright story, and for Guatemala it was Camino Seguro (Safe Passage). The highlight of my trip in Guatemala was my visit to one of the programs the First Lady Laura Bush participated in during her Latin America trip in March 2007. Safe Passage is a project that offers hope and educational opportunities for the poorest families living in Guatemala City. Safe Passage today has grown from educating 40 children to over 500. The slums of Guatemala City have been known to make youths vulnerable in joining the drug trafficking entering Mexico. But Safe Passage has

provided families hope that their children can at least have an education and better health care rather than rely on drugs.

Most people I spoke to in Guatemala City remember the First Lady's visit in 2007 and applaud her work with children and education. They appreciate the work done by women leaders such as Mrs. Bush and Wendy Widmann de Berger, wife of Guatemalan President Oscar Berger Perdomo. One such example is the program is Widmann de Berger's work with *Creciendo Bien*. It focuses on educating women and enabling them with the proper tools to survive and be active members of society. Having strong women leaders promote and raise awareness with such needed programs have made Guatemala push stronger for institutional support for children's

rights. The next step for Guatemala is to assist rural areas and indigenous populations with teaching them the values and attitudes needed to rebuild their society.

Concluding Thoughts



An ethnocentric orientation of culture in Central America has long existed since the outbreak of civil war. At certain times, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have attempted to avoid cultural diversity by denying the existence of differences, or by using defenses against difference, or even by minimizing the importance of difference. This in turn has led to the current state of the education system. What is needed more than ever from all relevant players (parents, teachers, school administrators, Ministry of Education officials, and most importantly, the student) – is the understanding of how to apply the ethnocentric perspective in their

everyday activities. Acceptance is the key for a *culture of peace* and in order for education to be turned into a genuine instrument of economic and social development, the children of Central America will need to learn how to get along with their classmates and neighbors.

The situation in Central America has led to an increase awareness of the importance of implementing profound changes in social development, notably the need to establish long-term strategies for early childhood development, educational infrastructure and further incentives and resources for school leaders. Over the years, education has become incrementally more accessible in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. But cultural and economic gaps exist. Children often see no hope for peace due to their surrounding features: poverty, drugs, corruption, and malnutrition. Yet all community, church and political leaders agree that any long-term planning must begin with the youth. Parents have every right to be frustrated with their living conditions and outlook for their children. Nevertheless, the desire to do more and better can be seen in every child's heart. They want what we have here in the United States and are determined to get it - opportunity.

The six weeks spent with students of all ages was without a doubt the most rewarding experience ever. I was able to be a teacher on several occasions, eager to hear me speak on topics such as the UN, U.S. foreign policy, US culture and entertainment, etc. Standing in front of a class of 40 is no easy task, but their enthusiasm to learn made me realize that education is a treasure for most of these children. At the end of the day, we all learned so much from each other. The students of Central America were able to learn something about life in the United States while I learned something about life in Central America. But for the purpose of my study, the best advice I received during my travels came from a young girl from the Escuela Internacional Sampedrana in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. I asked her my usual question: "How would you

define a *culture of peace*?” Her response was the million-dollar answer I was looking for: “You send every child back to school and that means you bring everyone back to peace.” She is absolutely right – back to school, back to peace.