

New Hope for Teaching Democratic Values

College of William and Mary finds positive impact from Alive to the World / AW, April 2010

“Strong initial evidence” indicates that the Alive to the World / AW program transmits democratic values to young people: this is the conclusion of graduate students at the College of William and Mary who analyzed data from thousands of children in Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.

The study compared their answers to questionnaires administered before and after they participated in Alive to the World / AW, a comprehensive character development program operating in 12 countries of Latin America and in the United Kingdom. The 8,000 4th, 5th and 6th graders followed the program for one hour per week during the whole school year. In Latin America, 65,000 young people, from grades 1-12, are enrolled in Alive to the World / AW.

With guidance from Professor David Finifter of the Thomas Jefferson Program in Public Policy, the researchers—Erin Wilson and Danielle Peregoy—found statistically significant changes for the better in the young people’s attitudes towards statements such as “Girls and boys have equal rights, “Boys and girls deserve equal respect and treatment,” “It’s OK to disagree with others” and “Rules are always important”.

One of the largest shifts in attitude concerns agreement that “Everyone has a right to their own opinions.” In addition to the program’s building a foundation of values that are necessary for democratic societies, several school principals have recently credited it for dramatic declines in misbehavior and violence in their schools. Alive to the World centers on an ongoing story of a group of friends who grow up as their readers do, and who get in and out of situations that their readers identify with.

The student books, teacher guides, and teacher training courses are secular. Based on a view of human nature as essentially enchanging, they reflect the latest advances in the understanding of child development. In addition to English (U.K.) and Spanish-language versions, the publisher, Alliance for the Family, has adaptations for Africa (in English and French) and Brazil nearing publication. For additional information, see www.allianceforfamily.org.

Alive to the World changes two Venezuelan schools

Uncontrollable violence and inappropriate behavior at Saint Augustine School in La Pastora, a lower middle-income community of Caracas, Venezuela, was undermining scholastic achievement until 2003. In only 5 years of the application of this program, the situation has changed radically.

Today the students of this school are considered a model for other schools. The Directors of the school attribute this change to the one-hour per week program, grades 1-12, of Alive to the World / AW, which was adopted in 2004. Virgilio Cartagena, director of Values Education at this school of 1000 students, explains that prior to 2004 the school was rife with problems; to the extreme that in 2003 one entire level had to be expelled. Since the program was initiated, the level of violence has diminished to the extent that it is no longer a problem in this important city school.

Another very different case involves a new public “Bolivarian school” (part of President Hugo Chavez’ “school revolution”) in a small town of mainly unemployed people, 60 miles west of Caracas.

Martha Angulo, the valiant director of this school, has a similar tale to tell. There she has had to salvage a teacher who was cornered by students wielding sticks and poles. That was before she decided to adopt *Alive to the World / AW (Aprendiendo a Querer / AaQ)* as an experiment in 2005. She beams with pride as she tells us that violence is gone from the school now, as her pupils have identified with the characters in the books, who live normal lives at school, at home and in the community and grow from year to year as the students do. The students say they love the books as they contain the very elements of their lives, and find the solutions to everyday situations in a way that is both positive and logical. “We were looking to improve their Human and Social Capital in order to give these children a chance in life”, says Christine Vollmer, a member of the group which developed this program, “and this improvement in problems of violence is a wonderful bonus.”