

From thy teacher's mouth

By Stanford Jarvis, Quaker Peace Centre, Cape Town

The Quaker Peace Centre works in schools on the Cape Flats in Cape Town, where learning and teaching are overshadowed by constant threats of violence, which spill into the schools. Factors contributing to a volatile and unsafe school environment include unemployment, poor housing, domestic abuse, violence against women and children, criminal gangs dealing in alcohol and drugs, and ongoing racism and xenophobia. Part of the Centre's work focuses on developing Alternatives to Violence Projects (AVP) in schools.

Martin Struthmann, manager of the Quaker Peace Centre in Cape Town, interviewed three teachers who practise as AVP facilitators in their schools: Charles Naidoo of Maitland High School, and Elvida Smith and Lee-Anne Florence of Oude Molen Academy of Science and Technology. The interview took place at the Oude Molen Academy of Science and Technology on 2 September 2015.

Maitland High is a school with few resources. It is situated close to a suburban railway station where there is a lot of economic activity – especially people commuting from outlying areas of Cape Town to try and find work. Their children attend Maitland High. A large proportion of the children are from immigrant communities from all over Africa: people who were displaced from their country of birth, mostly through violence. However, many people who live in the area choose to send their children to other nearby schools, precisely because of the growing numbers of foreign nationals attending Maitland High. Problems in the school mostly concern integration, diversity, acceptance, and language barriers. Charles Naidoo is the Head of the Department of Languages, and is in charge of discipline at the school.

Oude Molen Academy of Science and Technology is one of only a handful of technical high schools in Cape Town. The school draws its learners from all over the Cape Flats, mostly from impoverished areas. Problems of integration, diversity and racism are often experienced by learners in the school. Elvida Smith heads the English Department, is head of the Grade 9 group, is the coach and umpire for the netball team and is also the coordinator of the Peace Club. Lee-Anne Florence teaches Mathematics.

Martin Struthmann: Could you please tell us what the AVP has done for you?

Charles Naidoo: I learned valuable coping skills. Interaction with my students is more pleasant as a result. I think I am a more competent teacher now. I ask things differently than I used to. I became a lifelong learner myself, as one learns all the time from participants in all the workshops. I deal with problems differently, for example by using time out. Dealing with today's students requires a lot of patience and tact.

Elvida Smith: The people I usually interact with, I deal with very differently now since starting my AVP journey. In my professional life, my romantic life, and with my son things have generally changed for the better. I am no longer shouting at people, like I used to do before. As a child I grew up being shouted at all the time. This may be why I as an adult was shouting at people to get my way, and to get things done. I have found that since I stopped shouting at people, I get a better response from them. Other people's attitude towards me has changed, primarily because my attitude towards them has changed. The more I treat people with respect, the more I am respected.

My kids at school tell me 'Miss, we respect you, because you respect us – we do not like to be shouted at'. I don't always get it right, but I am now much more aware of my language use. Moreover, [if I do shout] I am always reminded by my students and family that I should not behave like this, as I am an AVP practitioner, and that I should practise what I preach. This helps to keep me in check and aware. I keep on trying, always.

Lee-Anne Florence: AVP has changed my life completely. Before doing AVP I was another person - very self-centred, didn't value other people much, always in a defensive mode, and always picking a fight with others, even if they were not in a fighting mode. I now have a much-improved relationship with my family, especially my husband. I now see children as persons (who need to be heard). I also deal more calmly with any conflict situation, as opposed to previously, when my actions were usually the petrol on the fire! My response nowadays usually calms the situation. I tend to speak more softly now, which usually calms everyone down. My learners simply love me for it! I usually was considered to be the difficult teacher. I am no longer that, I can happily and proudly say. My life has certainly changed for the better, because of my involvement with AVP!

Martin Struthmann: Does AVP make a difference in your relationships with learners?

Charles Naidoo: AVP preaches respect – for self, and for others. This is powerful, as learners are often not heard or seen by adults. They then feel ignored, or insignificant. In AVP workshops they are shown that they are valued, and they are affirmed.

It is stressed throughout the workshops that everyone is the same, and everyone is equal, no matter what hat you are wearing. It means that people are accepted for who they are – no matter their colour, or language, or cultural background. Not painting every learner with the same paint brush means a lot to them – you see the person with emotions and feelings, and they see you as a person, with emotions and feelings. The teacher is therefore not far removed from the child.

Learners doing AVP become more confident. This also rubs off on other learners, typically their peers, whom they are in contact with. AVP learners are seen as the leaders at school. They take on more responsibility, for organising activities, for example, and do not always wait for the teacher to initiate things.

AVP learners have displayed a different attitude towards their schoolwork. They seem more focussed, and more responsible, as they experience throughout the workshops that every action has a consequence. They also do a lot of reflection exercises, forcing them at a young age already to do introspection and to become self-aware. Their attitude towards discipline also changes – they more readily accept consequences for wrongful actions. They also teach others how to resolve problems differently, show that alternatives exist, and [encourage them to] search for alternatives.

AVP has definitely played a major role in decreasing the drug problem at our school. It is also contributing to a safer school. The AVP learners at the school are known as the Ambassadors of Peace. They are now the majority in the school. Their mission is firstly, to make school a safe place; secondly, to bring learners together as a community, and thirdly to take care of each other. The AVP learners are actively involved in revising the outdated school code of conduct. They are spearheading the learner input into the code.

We are creating leaders from the kids. They increase their circle of influence. They become more responsible, and take on tasks, like organising, etcetera.

Feedback [received by] the school shows that these learners do well after school - at the tertiary institutions [they attend], they become leaders in the student organisations they are involved in.

I have seen transformation over and over. One recent example: Polari was a quiet, unassuming person. She became this confident girl who won a modelling contract! We want more learners to do AVP.

Elvida Smith: As head of the Grade 9s at the school, learners who misbehave usually get sent to me. I also deal with all the complaints of learners in that grade. I can happily tell you that after the latest AVP workshop earlier this quarter, which was held specifically for the Grade 9s, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of referrals and complaints from teachers in general.

Relationships between learners who have done AVP, and between learners and myself, are better. I am not seen as just the strict disciplinarian any more, I've actually built up a good rapport between myself and the kids.

I deal with the learners very differently. For example, Richard, who was on an AVP camp recently, has been diagnosed as having ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]. I can even handle him now. The camp has had a positive impact on him. Even his various subject teachers commented on the change.

The learners who did AVP keep one another to account – 'you are not supposed to behave like this, you have been AVP'd.'

I'm using AVP now all the time. For me it is more what the child wants, instead of what I want, as I used to be. And the response is amazing – I get so much more accomplished. It is a healthy relationship, based on respect and mutual understanding. This is but one way of how I am applying the skills I've learned. Our relationship can just improve all the time.

Lee-Anne Florence: I now have a very good relationship with my class, and my personal relationships have benefitted tremendously. I now discipline and counsel the behaviour of errant children, whereas I previously just yelled at them and disciplined them harshly. I now actively listen to their side of the story, and will explain to them the impact of their disruptive behaviour. Just now, before coming here for this interview, I've done this to a boy – I kept him after class, and had a one-on-one session with him. Previously I would have shamed him in front of the whole class.

Martin Struthmann: Does AVP make a difference at your school?

Charles Naidoo: Definitely. For one, there are fewer incidents of violence at my school. We find that more and more learners are becoming active bystanders, especially to counter the incidents of bullying which happen at the school.

The learners who have done AVP demonstrate an increase in coping skills – in the way they approach their studies, in the way they exercise the choices they have to make generally.

They demonstrate an alternative way of approaching discipline – insisting on positive consequences for their actions, instead of punitive ones.

Learners who are active Ambassadors of Peace are perceived by many others as being cool. Many learners now want to be part of it. They are drawn to the activities, camps, Lekgotlas [formal and participatory conferences], and actions taken – cleaning of toilets, running peace assemblies, taking

over special days etcetera. Every event in the school is being taken over by the Ambassadors of Peace, promoting peace on each occasion.

Whoever wants to join the Ambassadors of Peace needs to fulfil only 3 criteria:

- Would you like your school to be a safe school?
- Do you want success, and to make friends with people who also want to be successful?
- Do you believe in world peace?

Elvida Smith: Our learners are also becoming active bystanders. There was an incident last year when a cell phone was stolen from a senior learner by a junior learner. When the culprit was found, the AVP pupils spontaneously formed a circle around him to prevent mob justice from taking place.

Learners informally keep one another to account. They check up on behaviour, and each other's responses, and then kindly, and sometimes less kindly, remind the other to implement what they have learnt in the workshops.

Lee-Anne Florence: My experience is that learners that did AVP are more disciplined, more compliant with school rules. They have actually become role models of good behaviour, and of respectful conduct. They tend to be more co-operative, and more understanding of the actions of others. Other children see how they, and us, do things, and they copy it.

Martin Struthmann: What difference does AVP make to learners?

Charles Naidoo: AVP is an important tool in our developing of leaders – a tool which equips young people with communication skills, who can articulate their feelings and express them in a non-threatening way. Our AVP young people become more confident, assertive, and more empathetic. They've discovered the value of respect, and are increasingly leading the way in showing respect to themselves and to others. They experience increased levels of confidence, which spill over into all areas of their lives. They are seen as, and act as, some sort of informal peer counsellors to their peers, as they get turned to in the event of conflict in the playground.

Elvida Smith: The AVP learners are almost elevated to the position of role models to other learners and peers. It is a case of 'monkey see, monkey do' – they see and learn good or appropriate behaviour from one another.

After the last workshop, where quite a few learners from one class did AVP, we've found that the behaviour of the whole class has changed, the dynamics of the class changed – their responses, their behaviour, their attitudes. This we find pretty remarkable.

Lee-Anne Florence: Learners behave differently in class – this is often mentioned by other subject teachers. This also rubs off on others – classmates and friends at school. Learners become more confident. They become more aware of themselves, and also of others – their needs etcetera.

They learn the importance and value of respect for others and of themselves. They even show respect to the caretaker and the tea lady, both of whom many children at the school take for granted, or do not even acknowledge the presence of.

Martin Struthmann: What does it mean to you be an AVP facilitator?

Charles Naidoo: AVP has caused a reawakening in me, of my values, of my calling, of my humanity. I accept the differences in kids more easily. I can handle difficult situations with more confidence, as

I've learned to really listen, as opposed to listening with a response ready. I have increased my arrays of skills, which is good for a teacher. I never leave home without AVP, it helps me navigate and survive a bombardment of stimuli. AVP just makes my life easier to navigate through all this. In it [life], AVP acts as a guide and a moral compass. AVP makes me a better human [being] and parent.



Elvida Smith explaining an exercise during training with teachers

Elvida Smith: I love growing as a person, and AVP for me is that vehicle. In every single workshop I grow, even more than the participants. I love it. AVP forces me to relearn certain things. I am becoming more aware all the time, of my words, my actions – those things that I have learned to just do automatically, I am now more mindful of. AVP reinforces things which are important to me. I enjoy AVP, since my very first workshop, back in 2009.

Lee-Anne Florence: AVP grows my family. I now have family all over different schools in the Western Cape, and we are all connected, and I love it. We grow our connections, using social media, in a way like never before.

Martin Struthmann: Thank you for availing yourself for the interview and sharing with us.

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