With a metallic click the cold black gate locks behind me. Now that I’m removed from San José’s city streets by tall cement walls, my breathing slows and I remind myself to relax. My iron-tight grip begins to loosen, allowing newsprint sheets and other supplies for my nonviolence workshops to peek out of my bag. Stepping forward into the San Juan Elementary’ entryway, a colorful hand-painted sign greets me: “Children for Peace.” Blue and white flowers and hearts adorn its corners. This sign’s warmth and positive message should be a comfort, but it does little to slow my racing heart. Emblematic of Costa Rica’s peaceful ideals, the sign’s message clashes with a national reality of violence and fear manifested in the barbed wire-topped gate behind me.

One of Costa Rica’s signature characteristics has been its identity as a peaceful nation. Known as the “Switzerland of Central America,” the country prides itself on its long history of democracy and peace. Having disbanded its military in 1949, scholars and politicians have cited Costa Rica as a successful example of the possibilities for peace for much of the last half-century. As neighboring Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador faced violent conflicts and large-scale civil war peaking in the 1980s, Costa Rica held on to this identity, declaring itself a neutral peacekeeper in the region.

In recent years, however, Costa Ricans have begun to question the validity of this facet of their country’s national identity. Increases in violence and crime within the country over the last 20 years have accompanied a skyrocketing social perception of insecurity, danger and violence. This fear has transformed the streets of San José through the construction of cement walls and the protective barring of all visible windows. Fear of violence has become tangible, and the once-idealized peaceful image of the country has become removed from reality. Most Costa Rican media coverage of crime and violence in the country, for instance, reflects the view that peace has come to an end. According to some scholars, this media image has helped produce the same disillusionment with peace among much of the population, leading to, among many societal changes, increased support for tougher zero-tolerance laws to reduce crime.

Historically, much of the world has cited Costa Rica as a beacon of peace. Today, Costa Rica’s struggle with violence threatens to eliminate its national identity of peacefulness entirely. With Costa Rica serving as an example for the world, the disappearance of peace as possibility here could threaten peace work worldwide. Some organizations within the country, however, have taken on the challenge of dealing with this schism between peacefulness and violence as they continue to working towards peace.

This past summer, I interned at one such organization, the San José-based Centro de Estudios para la Paz (Center for Peace Studies – CEPPA). CEPPA’s work entails providing workshops on nonviolent conflict resolution to a variety of groups, such as schools. Helping facilitate these workshops, I observed how they address contemporary themes of violence while maintaining Costa Rica’s ideals. In this paper I will first explore CEPPA’s creation within Costa Rican history and as the brainchild of my summer supervisor, Celina Garcia. Looking at three different workshops, I will then analyze how CEPPA’s work fosters mindfulness, communication,
and community as a means of violence prevention. Perhaps by identifying how programs like CEPPA’s function, we can find new ways of reconciling the peaceful ideal with the growing fear and reality of violence embodied in the city’s barbed wire-topped walls.

CEPPA: Reconciling Idealized Peace and Modern Violence
Warm light pours in large windows wrapping around the side of the restaurant. On the other side of the glass, green-covered hills roll out into mountains, obscured by stretches of low-lying clouds. Inside, the smell of sizzling chicken and spicy black beans emanates from the kitchen. Across the table from me, Celina pores over her menu deciding between the many variations of the typical Costa Rican lunch or “casado,” to find the healthiest option that strikes her fancy and the birth of a middle class. Costa Rica’s political system developed with relative stability. At the same time, many nearby countries experienced waves of political turmoil, punctuated by civil wars, authoritarian dictatorships, and military takeovers. By presidential decree in 1882, Costa Rica openly declared its right to remain “neutral and immune” from these other regional conflicts. Following in the spirit of this declaration, a constitutional amendment officially abolished the country’s army 60 years later. When regional conflict came to a head in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador during the 1980s, Costa Rica served as a mediator and leader in the Esquipulas summits and peace process. Many Costa Ricans have come to view peace as an integral part of the country’s nature and identity. Coming from the United States, where military-related spending consumed 22 percent of the 2011 federal budget, the concept of a peace-focused country with no army intrigued me.

Given Costa Rica’s history, the creation of a center devoted to peace studies seems natural. Since its independence, the country has had a deep connection to democracy, neutrality and peace that remains distinct from its neighboring countries in Central America. In Costa Rica, land distribution was far more equitable than in other nearby countries, leading to smaller wealth disparities and the birth of a middle class. Costa Rica’s political system developed with relative stability. At the same time, many nearby countries experienced waves of political turmoil, punctuated by civil wars, authoritarian dictatorships, and military takeovers. By presidential decree in 1882, Costa Rica openly declared its right to remain “neutral and immune” from these other regional conflicts. Following in the spirit of this declaration, a constitutional amendment officially abolished the country’s army 60 years later. When regional conflict came to a head in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador during the 1980s, Costa Rica served as a mediator and leader in the Esquipulas summits and peace process. Many Costa Ricans have come to view peace as an integral part of the country’s nature and identity. Coming from the United States, where military-related spending consumed 22 percent of the 2011 federal budget, the concept of a peace-focused country with no army intrigued me.

Marvling at the splendor outside our window, Celina and I sit in silence at our table. While the country’s rolling hills are new to me, Celina grew up with them. A native Costa Rican, she also grew up with the impression of her own country and compatriots as naturally peaceful. Throughout much of the 20th century, the majority of Costa Rican citizens and politicians alike believed firmly in a national identity revolving around the nation’s peaceful and democratic nature. When Celina moved to New York in the 1960s this remained the popular image of Costa Rica both internally and abroad. Upon her return to her home country in the late 1980s, things were beginning to change. Rising levels of crime and violence, and more importantly the escalation of fear connected to these increases, have meant many changes to the Costa Rican peaceful identity since Celina has been back.

“All these walls and barbed wire you see in the city is something new. When I was a child we didn’t have any of it,” Celina tells me. San José now has the highest number of private security guards per 100,000 inhabitants in Central America. These changes to the streets of San José reflect Costa Rica’s newfound pervasive fear of violence. In 2004, a poll sampling around the country showed that 77.6 percent of respondents described Costa Rica as unsafe; 64.2 percent stated that houses needed fencing; and 59.9 percent declared that one should not leave one’s home unguarded. In reality, crime rates in Costa Rica have not exploded over the last 20 years, but have generally increased at a continuous rate. Surveys show that more Costa Ricans (35 percent) view violence and crime as their country’s primary concern than do the populations of nations with higher crime rates. Newspaper and TV coverage of violence has led much of the population to view goals of peace as
impossible, shifting focus instead towards stricter zero-tolerance laws to deter crime.20

In 1988 Celina started CEPPA to address the growing fear of violence through workshops teaching conflict resolution skills. In an environment in which many Costa Ricans have lost faith in the value of peace for their country, CEPPA’s mission of peace through prevention has become paramount.

I grew up in a household run by politically engaged, war-protesting parents. As a result, I have become skeptical of violence as a means of problem solving or peacekeeping. From my first reading of Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience in high school, to studying nonviolent movements in college, my interest in conflict resolution outside of violence has only grown. I had come to Costa Rica curious about this country whose traditional values appeared to line up with my own. Facilitating workshops for CEPPA, I would take part in the fight to keep these now-threatened ideals alive.

Our waitress brings Celina her lunchtime cup of chamomile tea. Celina is a regular at The Viewpoint. She frequently travels this highway to reach the northern part of the country where many of her workshops take place.

CEPPA’s workshops in nonviolent conflict resolution target at-risk youth, healthcare workers, and teachers. Celina picked up the workshop methodology now employed by CEPPA while volunteering with the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and its sister program, Children’s Creative Response to Conflict, in New York City in the early 1980s. In AVP, facilitators work with prisoners to teach nonviolence through communication, cooperation, problem solving, affirmation, mediation, and other conflict resolution skills. When she started CEPPA, Celina was the sole workshop facilitator. CEPPA now has more than 30 facilitators, three full-time office employees, and the occasional unpaid worker. Celina still leads many of the workshops herself, and spends most of her time outside of the office doing things to further CEPPA’s mission.

Waiting for our lunches, Celina asks me which part of the upcoming workshops I want to lead. Celina takes a very interactive approach as an internship supervisor, viewing it as part of her responsibility to train the next generation of peace workers. Part of the anti-war movement in the US in the 1960s and active in many organizations working for social change in New York, Celina has seen waves of activists rise and fall. Unlike many jaded by the difficulty of change, Celina has accepted that the kind of change she wants to see takes a long time to achieve. Celina believes in AVP methodology and changes she witnesses in individuals touched by the program. With their focus on mindfulness, communication, and community, CEPPA’s workshops continue this fight for peace.

Once my steaming plate of rice, beans, and plantains finally arrives, Celina motions for me to start without waiting for her food to get there. “Eat up!” she insists. “We’ve got a long road ahead of us…..”

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I watch uneasily as none of the teachers makes any move to stop them. “Shouldn’t they be doing something?” I ask Noelia, my co-facilitator. “Don’t worry about it, they’re just playing. Besides, the teachers know what they’re doing,” she reassures me. I glance back over my shoulder as we make our way to a first-grade classroom, still uneasy about the children’s rough interaction.

Inside the mayhem continues. It takes the classroom teacher, Maria, several minutes to quiet her students enough to introduce Noelia and me. I scan the group. At five and six years old, these kids buzz with so much energy that many have a hard time simply sitting still. All the kids wear the same white button-down shirt and navy blue pants uniform. Some of the fidgeting children have well-starched collars and shiny shoes, while others sport wrinkled pants and tattered sneakers. One boy with a particularly wrinkled shirt and disheveled hair rolls around on the ground, wrestling over a shiny new action figure.

Mindfulness in a Cacophonous World
Silence blankets Esperanza Elementary School. An hour before class officially starts, only a few children stroll around the school building’s dirt yard. Slowly, teachers begin to arrive. Some head straight to their classrooms to prepare for the day, while others, assigned monitor duty, cluster in pairs around the schoolyard. The pace hastens at eight o’clock. Before long, children cover the yard; shouts, screams, and giggles from their rowdy play fill my ears. Teachers monitoring the yard mostly ignore the bedlam around them, intervening only when the play gets too rough. Two little boys topple to the ground, wrestling over a shiny new action figure.

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Noelia and I invite the students to take a minute to start the workshop by greeting one another. In workshops with adults, this usually takes the traditional Costa Rican form of handshakes and cheek kisses. A few kids laugh as they shake hands, finding the formality silly. Others wave shyly to one another. The boy who had been rolling on the floor moves from handshakes to shoulder punches and our activity disintegrates. Maria tries to restore order from her desk, shouting “Carlos! Stop that!”

The room is silent. Carlos remains seated with his eyes shut after most of the other kids have opened their eyes. I ask the kids to describe the places they imagined and how they felt being there. A little boy describes the colors of butterflies he pictured in a field near his house. “I was at the beach!” a small girl with black pigtails smiles, “It was relaxing.” Carlos finally opens his eyes but says nothing.

In private, Maria explains that Carlos is one of her biggest problem students. Most of the issues come from his home life. A difficult night at home, a morning without breakfast – these all factor into children coming to school with a high level of stress before the day has even begun. Parental unemployment, household financial worries, and other family problems can all affect stress levels in the home. Regardless of where it comes from, stress has a direct impact on children’s health and happiness. Beyond kids’ own well-being, research also shows that stress during childhood and adolescence can play a large part in the development of criminal behavior. None of us can eliminate the children’s stressful home situations. Through the workshop’s mindfulness activities, however, we hope to teach the children new ways to deal with this stress.

According to AVP methodology, every workshop begins with breathing exercises and meditation. Today, Noelia leads the students in a series of deep breathing techniques, inhaling slowly through the nose and exhaling from the mouth. Ever the class clown, Carlos pretends to pass out from hyperventilating.

“Close your eyes, listen to my words, and focus on your breathing,” I tell the children as I begin a guided meditation. Mindfulness as practiced in these activities has a very strategic goal in the workshop itself. As AVP workbooks explain, breathing exercises help people physically relax while meditation helps them bring their full awareness to the present in the workshop. No matter what state students arrive in, taking a moment to breathe and clear their minds allows them to relax and start from a fresh place.

I instruct the kids to focus on different parts of their breath. I motion for distracted kids with wandering eyes to shut them and concentrate. Many of them continue to fidget, but almost all of them eventually comply. Across from me in the circle, Carlos gets bored of poking the boys next to him and closes his eyes. I have the children visualize a place where they feel comfortable and relaxed. Eyes shut, some of the children smile to themselves.

I describe my own favorite spot by a river at home. My shoulder muscles loosen, just as they did my first time meditating, during my freshman year at Brandeis University. Feeling meditation’s powerful relaxing effect on my own body that day, I soon became a frequent meditator. Most of the students here today have never meditated before, so I keep the practice short. I have the students return to their breath before counting to ten and having them open their eyes.

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Beyond the calm Carlos and his classmates experience today, these mindfulness activities play a part in CEPPA’s work to reduce violence in Costa Rica at large. Studies show that regular meditation practice can have long-term benefits like reduction of stress and increased reported levels of happiness, self-confidence, and general effectiveness. Perhaps this explains why studies within prisons show a correlation between meditation and decreased violence during incarceration, and lowered rates of criminal relapse after release. Given the connection between stress and criminal behavior, teaching children how to manage stress through meditation can perhaps affect crime and violence in Costa Rica at large as these children grow into adults.

This workshop, like most others CEPPA performs, is a one-time occurrence. Carlos and the rest of his classmates may never meditate again, and they may not reap the
long-term benefits that so many studies find correlate with regular meditation. This large unknown, while frustrating for me and CEPPA’s other facilitators, is a reality of our work. As Celina says, however, “We are planting a seed. We cannot know for sure if it will grow, but it certainly won’t if never planted.”

**Tearing Down Walls: Communication as Connection**

Crammed into a tiny classroom, 26 students between the ages of 13 and 15 sprawl out over chairs and floor space. Chatter and laughter fill the air. Juan, a 22-year-old Costa Rican coworker at CEPPA, works with me as I try to get the attention of the students here in Soledad Secondary School. Looking around the room, I immediately recognize distinct cliques, just as obvious as they had been in my own high school in Florida, three years long gone and thousands of miles away from the present. I don’t know their names, don’t speak their native language perfectly, and still have a lot to learn about Costa Rica, and yet the whole scene is eerily familiar. In a back corner, boys with gel-spiked hair snicker. Towards the front, girls giggle over a text message. Some students scattered around the room work on other assignments. Although all physically corralled into the same tiny space, invisible social walls separate them. A microcosm of society at large, these classroom divisions reflect the human tendency to separate ourselves into monolithic groups of “us” and “them.”

For the “Cooperative Machine” activity, groups of students collaborate to create the theoretical machine of their choice and then act it out in front of the class. I had separated the students into groups, but they disregard my designations and end up working with their friends. These self-selected groups work well collaboratively, but their reinforced separation prevents some of this activity’s intended social consequences. Research in schools demonstrates that the presence of entrenched cliques, while normal, can exacerbate students’ alienation from one another. This social disconnection makes empathy more difficult, increasing the likelihood of bullying and other forms of violence. Activities like the “Cooperative Machine” intentionally force students to interact with others outside their friend groups. These interactions have the potential to decrease alienation by creating new connections.

After students finish presenting their machines, I invite them to share their thoughts and feelings on anything that came up during the exercise. According to the Alternatives to Violence Program around which CEPPA’s workshops are based, this space allows participants to discuss how the skills practiced could be implemented in their lives and serves as an open space for reflection and sharing. This space usually serves as another potential place for connection between students. Today, however, the students just laugh uncomfortably and grudgingly give one-word responses expressing their thoughts.

Having volunteered with AVP in a Boston prison the semester before coming to Costa Rica, I am already aware of how the communication component of these workshops is supposed to work. Behind the barbed wire-topped walls of the penitentiary, I met and worked with men deemed unfit, unsafe, and undeserving to be part of mainstream society. Muscular men with short hair sat in the traditional AVP circle, getting rid of the typical hierarchical set-up typical of many workshops in order to signify the equality of all participants and facilitators. In the circle, they began to open up more and more in the discussion after each activity. Men I had been taught to fear, loathe, and look down upon began telling stories of their past, along with their hopes and fears for the future. Even though the concrete walls and bars containing them marked them as subhuman pariahs of society, I began to see past my own prejudices to our common humanity. At the same time, the men began to connect with one another as they let their guard down through discussion.

Today, behind the school’s spiked black gate, this process of sharing does not begin until the last activity, called “Concentric Circles.” For this communication-focused activity, each student is matched up with a partner and prompted to speak on a topic while the partner silently listens without interruption.

Although all physically corralled into the same tiny space, invisible social walls separate them.

“What is your favorite hobby? What do you enjoy about it?” I prompt. Paired up at random, many students remain silent at first, unsure of how to interact with the people in front of them. With each question, however, their answers get longer as they start to warm up to one another. After a few rounds the partners move from just listening to listening and then paraphrasing back what they hear at the end. Questions move into more personal territory, probing students’ memories, goals, regrets and dreams. I have to shout to be heard over the students’ discussions and story-telling to wrap up the workshop.
On the surface, this activity practices active listening and basic communication skills. Its results, however, go much deeper. Speakers receive the gift of being completely and totally listened to. They are being understood. Physically and emotionally, listeners accompany their partners, sharing whatever feelings and ideas arise. At least temporarily tearing down the invisible walls between them through empathy, this connection makes the “other” familiar.28

In society at large, this process of “othering” frequently occurs around lines of race, gender, class, and nationality. Since it often plays a dangerous role in perpetuating violence and hatred, the connection built through these communication activities serves an even more important purpose in the societal fight for peace in Costa Rica. These conversations between students, while not the ultimate destroyers of social walls, are an important step in bringing them down.

Building Community
Our third workshop targets teachers.

A small circle of 20 chairs sits in the middle of an expansive gymnasium. Cold air streams in a continuous flow from a large, wall-mounted air conditioning system, transforming this cavernous room into a massive icebox. Exhausted from a full day of work, teachers of Harmonia Secondary School slowly make their way in and slouch into seats around the circle. The principal, having just informed them of this mandatory nonviolent conflict resolution workshop, does not appear to have the attention of his teachers. Several impatiently check their cell phones while others sit with their arms crossed over their chests. Sweat freezes on my back, a chilling reminder of my afternoon of workshops in this school’s barely ventilated classrooms. Juan and I grab seats at one end of the circle and begin our third workshop of the day.

CEPPA’s primary goal with teachers is that they pass on what they learn to their students. In other words, CEPPA’s philosophy remains intact. During the “Cooperative Machine,” the teachers spend minimal time interacting with each other coming up with their machines. The air conditioner’s loud whirr creates a roaring silence in the space left for discussion. With a few pointed glares from the principal, a few teachers throw out comments about the ideas of cooperation and collaboration behind this activity. Another teacher mentions how it could be put to use in his English classroom. Their responses demonstrate an understanding of the activity’s purpose, but their lack of engagement with each other and the material makes the workshop feel like a failure. If the teachers hold the material and one another at arm’s length, how will they ever get anything out of it? I had come to Costa Rica to explore and further nonviolence as a viable means of conflict resolution. I had not come to force educators to sit through a workshop they had no interest in.

Reaching our first “Light ‘n’ Lively,” Juan and I lead the group in a game of “A Big Wind Blows.” Juan starts the game, removing his chair from the circle and standing in the middle. Running his fingers through his short brown hair, Juan says “A big wind blows for everyone with brown hair.” In a flurry, everyone in the circle with brown hair (all but two of the teachers) stands up to find a new seat. One chair short, the last teacher standing in the center becomes the new statement maker.

The teachers take a few rounds before they start to really get into the game. But once they become involved, an intensity that was entirely lacking for most of the first half of the workshop warms up the room. Elbows come out and feet move faster as teachers gain a spring in their step, eager to avoid getting stuck in the middle. A small teacher in red heels skids into the remaining chair, almost knocking over a gym teacher twice her size. The whole group bursts into laughter, which echoes off the walls, finally filling the
space with noise over the whirr of the air conditioner. The game continues and questions become more creative and personal, related to people’s families and past experiences. As people change chairs, stories start to come out and they begin to share with one another. This feeling of connection carries onward through the rest of our workshop. When we get to “Concentric Circles,” the connection fostered in “A Big Wind Blows” and the following “Light ‘n’ Livelys” has already established a sense of openness and comfort. Teachers’ voices fill the room as their stories push out the last of the cold emptiness from earlier.

At the end of our workshop, a man stands up and clears his throat and turns to his fellow teachers:

You know, I had been expecting this to be just another boring meeting with a speaker. But it really was something else. We all know each other here. Everyday we say hello as we head to our classes, ask each other how we’re doing. But how often do we get to laugh together like we did here? And how often do we actually talk and actually listen? We spend more of our time at school and preparing for school than practically anything else, and yet here we are each day, and we barely know one another. But today, today I feel like I really got to know some of you. And I just hope we can perhaps have something like this more often, because we truly need it. For our students and ourselves.

As this man’s words show, the creation of community can play an extremely important role in human well-being. With social isolation connected to violence, community building becomes an important factor in nonviolent work. Helping people let their guard down during the activities and “Light ‘n’ Livelys,” CEPPA’s workshops combat the negative effects of social isolation by helping create new space for community and connection.

Conclusion

The day of workshops at San Juan Elementary draws to a close. I circle the room collecting the last of the students’ evaluations. A few of the last students stop me to shake my hand and ask when I will be coming back again. Outside the classroom, students giggle and talk as they playfully make their way towards the gate and out to the street. Their laughter bounces off the tall cement walls that still frame their reality.

Costa Rica’s modern history reveals that its peaceful identity does not reflect contemporary reality. With the growth of both crime and the social perception of it, Costa Rica has had to reconcile increased violence with a national story that denies its existence. This growing disconnect must be acknowledged in order to shape a safer future. Most media sources and much of the public have shifted towards the view that peace no longer has a place in Costa Rica. Still, CEPPA’s workshops present a model whereby peace can help in the fight against Costa Rica’s tide of violence.

Shuffling the students’ evaluations, I sneak a peek at a few. Barely legible scrawls declare “It was a lot of fun!” and “I liked the games.” Aside from these remarks, I have no way to measure the workshop’s results or to know my work’s ultimate impact. I remind myself of Celina’s seed analogy.

While I will never know for sure if the seed I planted here today will grow, only in planting it does it have a chance.

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Students might not have walked away with a mastery of nonviolent conflict resolution, but the workshop still represents a new direction for this country, one in which fear and violence are dealt with directly. Since many of CEPPA’s workshops are one-time occurrences, these children likely will not reap all the possible benefits of meditation, new communication skills, and community-building activities. Moving forward, more work must be done to determine how a larger initiative related to these factors could be implemented on a more consistent basis than just temporary workshops. At the same time, other factors related to crime and violence like poverty and growing economic disparities need to be addressed by the government in order for other peace measures to be effective. Perhaps only then will CEPPA’s seed planting bear fruit.
Ethnic Studies Report

Conflict," American Paradigm for Resolving Regional
The Esquipulas Process: A Central
title in these conflicts, see Johanna Oliver,
5. For more on Costa Rica's peacekeeping
Interamerican Studies and World Affairs
between Two Worlds," Journal of
4. William Furlong, "Costa Rica: Caught
Eve of the Export Boom
Coffee: Society and Economy on the

9. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes and dialogue come from the author’s daily journal, kept throughout the summer.
11. Furlong 142.
13. Oliver 150.
15. Much political rhetoric in Costa Rica during the 20th century has focused on these aspects of the country’s identity. For instance, in a 1986 speech, then-President Oscar Arias referred to the country’s national heritage in terms of “our love of freedom, the willing realization of democratic policies and manners, our love of peace, a sensation of brotherliness, and many other things that unite us and distinguish us from all other nations.” For more on themes of peace in Costa Rican political rhetoric, see Huhn “A History of Nonviolence.”

Notes

1. All names of schools and people referenced from author’s experience have been given pseudonyms.
2. Originally in Spanish. Unless otherwise noted, all dialogue, signs, etc. referenced here have been translated from their Spanish original to English by the author.