The Role of Agency in the Reduction of Youth Violence
A comparison of programs in the United States and Canada

By April Danyluk
Globally, youth between the ages of 15-29 are the largest victims of homicide (UNODC, 2011, See Appendix I). Although the conditions vary from country to country based on civil wars and ethnic conflict, the majority of youth homicides in North America are gang-related, or youth killing youth. This is a depressing statistic and one that policy makers and politicians have been struggling to rectify with minimal success. Clearly, there are changes that need to occur on all levels of the social pyramid in order to preserve the lives of youth. The purpose of this paper, however, is to explore the critical role that education can, and should, play in this ongoing battle.

This paper aims to answer the question - what educational models contribute to lasting peace and a reduction in youth violence? In particular, the paper will explore how more student-led, non-traditional forms of intervention can reduce levels of violence in communities on a long-term scale. To answer these questions the paper will compare two youth violence education and prevention programs in the United States and in Canada.

As of 2010 in the United States, an average of 13 young people ages 10-24 were victims of homicide per day. The majority of these were the result of firearms. Among 10 to 24 year olds homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans, the second leading cause of death for Hispanics, and the third leading cause of death for American Indians and Alaska Natives. (CDC, 2012). Youth violence is an epidemic in the United States and it disproportionately affects minority youth who are often in low income urban neighborhoods that are ripe for gang activity. Past attempts to reduce violence and gang influence have focused on

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zero tolerance tactics. These initiatives have employed increased police enforcement, stricter gun laws and increased incarceration of juveniles for petty crimes.

The United States currently has a juvenile corrections rate that is five times higher than the next highest country, which is South Africa (Mendel, 2011, see appendix II). According to labeling theory, this shameful mark of deviance at an early age leads to repetitive behaviors based on low expectations. The evidence to date has indicated that this punishment-centered approach reduces the rate of high school completion and increases prison recidivism; thus serving to generate the detrimental school to prison pipeline (Mendel, 2011; Aizer, 2013). Furthermore, indirect costs to society of youth violence include resource depletion, loss of productivity, loss of investment, heightened fear, disengagement from the community, and loss of human capital. Direct and indirect losses due to youth violence in the United States exceeded $158 billion in 2000 (Hoffman, 2011).

Although Canada does not have near as many gang-related homicides as the United States, youth violence related to gang activity is still a growing trend. In 2008, 32% of the youth homicides were gang affiliated. Like the United States, the allure and consequent violence of the gangs disproportionally affects African Canadian youth and Aboriginal youth (Dunbar, et. al, 2011). Similar to minorities in the United States, youth of color in Canada grow up in an environment with a disproportional amount of suffering from poverty, racism, and the legacy of colonization. Along with this they must grapple with the destruction of cultural and community values.

Due to these obstacles the minority youth in Canada are at a higher risk for mental illness, addiction, dropping out of school, and getting involved in gang violence. Similar to the United States, gang interventions in the past have focused on activity suppression and increased
incarceration, but these have proven unsuccessful at reducing youth crime on a long term scale. It is suggested in the context of this paper that alternative programs that tackle the deeper, structural sources of inequality and incorporate the voice of the student have more potential for lasting positive impact.

There are many factors that contribute to the escalating violence of our youth – poverty, unstable or abusive homes, systemic marginalization, and relative deprivation to name a few. Regardless of the root causes, which are of vital importance to address and rectify, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that education plays an important role in addressing these destructive behaviors. Peace education and conflict resolution techniques have been incorporated into the curriculum with limited success. Most of these attempts at education intervention involve adult-led, top down, skill-centered programming. They teach tangible skills - active listening, ‘I’ statements, anger management, etc. - that reach a few students, but the efforts have not led to visible large-scale changes.

The intent of this paper is to compare alternative violence prevention education programs that are neither punishment focused nor policy generated. Instead, they are student-led, community centered and give the students agency in the transformation process. Drawing from Paolo Freire’s theories on conscientization, Johan Galtung’s theories on structural violence, and theories of positive youth development, this paper argues for a more socially engaged form of violence prevention education. Through the comparison of two successful projects in the United States and Canada the paper aims to highlight the superior long term effectiveness of student led initiatives over the traditional adult led, curriculum based structures.

Historically, the practices used to reduce youth violence have persisted along the spectrum of control and prevention. The assumption of the control model is that if society can
control young people through punishment and detainment, society can reduce their participation in violent activities. Prevention, on the other hand, attempts to intervene before significant problems can occur through measures such as media campaigns, in-school trainings, or early childhood education. A different and underutilized approach is related to youth agency. One example of this is Positive Youth Development (PYD) which emphasizes the active and legitimate role of the youth in shaping his or her environment. “Youth agency recognizes that young people can and should inform the settings that in turn impact their development” (Collura, 2011). Although PYD is still not a mainstream approach in youth intervention models, the evaluations of its effectiveness in building resiliency and self-efficacy in youth are consistently positive, and it is a well-recognized growing trend in international youth development organizations such as USAID (Catalano, et. al, 2014; Sanders, et. al, 2015; Travis, et. al, 2013; USAID, 2013).

A focus on youth agency follows Paulo Freire’s theories of learning. His pedagogy of the oppressed emphasizes the role of the student not as a receptacle of knowledge, but as a co-creator in the learning process. In his theory student, teacher and society learn together in order to transform the power dynamic of oppression within their communities. It is “… a pedagogy that must be forged with, not for, the oppressed in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (Freire, 1970, p.33). This concept is especially relevant in addressing youth gang violence because its causes are deeply embedded in a legacy of oppression and social disenfranchisement. According to Freire’s theory, it isn’t until students combine reflection with action that they are able to achieve a level of conscientization, or critical consciousness, that will change their reality. The case studies in the paper incorporate that collaborative learning process.
that allows students the freedom to take charge of their learning environment and pro-actively impact the levels of violence perpetrated within their communities.

Building upon Freire, John Galtung’s theories on structural and cultural violence reinforce the need for meaningful systemic change. According to Galtung, positive peace (as opposed to negative peace which is the absence of overt violence without resolutions to the conflict) can only be achieved when mechanisms are in place that involve “long-term, complex processes of overcoming exploitation, marginalization, and dehumanization through building structural and cultural peace” (Mundy, et. al, 2008). There is no better way to achieve these goals than through participatory action using the perpetrators and victims of the violence themselves – the youth.

Here is where the theories of Freire and Galtung compliment each other. To solely teach non-violent values or empathy in a classroom setting could seem impositional or disconnected from the student’s lived reality. Real behavior change occurs from both learning about and actively participating in shared value systems. “Because these youth are the victims of these conditions, failing to include their perspective in both the analysis of the root causes of poverty and in generating solutions to address these causes is a fundamental error” (Hoffman, et. al, 2011, p.149).

The truth is that the real issues, the sources of the violence, are rooted in systemic oppression and structural violence. It is argued that through the student-led creative initiatives, such as those described in this paper, the students will organically acquire the drive and motivation to address these root problems. Anything else is just lip service without intrinsic connection. The students need to discover the meaning on their own and through the process independently choose the next step in their developmental journey. The important point is that if
they cultivate a self-designed purpose, the journey is unlikely to include perpetuating the violence.

This paper compares two alternative educational outreach programs: 1. Leave Out Violence in Canada and 2. The Possibility Project in the United States. Although the two countries have different histories, political landscapes, and cultures, the environments that breed youth violence have enough in common to warrant a rich comparison. After comparing and contrasting these two PYD arts-based programs, the paper concludes by highlighting common threads of success and suggests further research to shed light on future initiatives to reduce youth violence.

Case Studies
The Possibility Project in New York City

The Possibility Project (TPP) performed its first show in 1994, when it was then known as City at Peace. It was formed in response to rising racial tensions and violence in the Washington D.C. area. The program began with 64 teenagers and was led by founding director Paul Griffin. After the success of its pilot group performance it gained national attention and by 1996 over 250 youth auditioned for the program. Since its inception, it has grown and expanded to other U.S. cities such as New York and Los Angeles. It has also expanded internationally and now operates in communities in Israel and South Africa. As they have grown, they have also adjusted their mission to focus on youth empowerment that leads to youth initiated actions to improve the community.

Presently, TPP has the strongest presence in New York City and partners with other existing organizations in other cities. Their attentive approach to one region has allowed them
to concentrate their efforts on enhanced outreach such as a new foster care program. In NYC the Possibility Project’s scope is not huge – according to its website it will serve about 130 youth in NYC this year. Despite its smaller size, the programmatic goals are ambitious. Through its national networks and partnerships it aims to produce eight original shows and tackle over 30 community action projects.

TPP is a year long, performance based after school program. Groups in NYC meet either two nights a week or on Saturdays. Each year a team from the previous year’s program stays on to work as the production team. This team acts as a board of directors, or producers, hiring the artistic staff, establishing goals, setting policies, recruiting, and attending regular training sessions to develop their leadership skills. They are an integral part of the process from beginning to end. The format of the program creates a safe environment for students to use interactive exercises and discussion based inquiry to explore topics related to diversity and conflict.

In addition to the original show they create and rehearse throughout the year, students are also expected to design and implement community action projects within their respective communities. The Youth Council guides the participants and collectively provides them with social change engagement opportunities. Following the tenets of Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the leaders of TPP facilitate exercises in self-reflection and sharing that give the students the freedom to expose the reality and root causes of their experienced oppression. This self-discovery in turn leads to an intrinsic motivation to change the system.

“But because they take a leading role in all elements of the production, the teens develop the interpersonal, communication, analysis, and creative skills needed to foster personal and social change.” (Possibility Project website, 2015)
TPP has demonstrated consistently positive impacts on youth and the surrounding communities. Since 2002, 99.3% of the participants have remained in high school and 92% have gone on to college (compared to the national averages of of 71% and 68% respectively) (Possibility Project website, 2015). Additionally, their participants have demonstrated increased competencies in cross-cultural understanding, leadership, self-efficacy, conflict resolution, and performing arts excellence. The program also enriches the students with a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, improved peer and friend relationships, a motivation toward social change, and hope in the future. These universal human needs of belonging and purpose are elements the youth may have previously sought in gangs or other violent-leaning groups. At TPP they can realize these needs in a safe and caring space born out of love, not hate.

Below are two student testimonials that capture the transformative nature of TPP:

“I felt like everything that happened was “the way it is” and that homophobia, racism and abuse were just a way of life. They were things that happened but no one spoke about. And I felt like if I did, then I wouldn’t be heard, because as a child I wasn’t allowed to leave a child's place and take on an "adult role" which to me is becoming more aware about an issue and speaking about it... [But at TPP] It was real, it involved stories in my life that I wanted people to hear, stories that I wanted people to understand and to help me make a difference about. My cast members and I were talking to 500 or more people per night that listened to us and it felt great. By the end of my first year I slowly started to notice that my life was changing...” – Karen Beckford (City at Peace, Case Studies 2005).

“We must recognize that youth are not empowered by being fed a party line, by being told to obey, or by being coerced into supporting something they do not understand. Young people need space to ask questions, to make mistakes, and to grow. At the same time, young people deserve honest and realistic frameworks through which to view their lives which place their experiences as part of larger patterns and place their current situations in a historical context. City at Peace gives us that.” (City at Peace, Intangibles 2005).

Leave Out Violence in Montreal Canada

Leave Out Violence (LOVE) was founded by Twinkle Rudberg in 1993 several years after her husband had been murdered by a fourteen-year-old mugger in downtown Montreal. In coming to terms with her husband’s death she began to understand that the youth responsible for her husband’s death was a victim of violence himself. She began to recognize the debilitating
cycle of violence that snare urban youth. With the help of a journalist and a photographer she formed a program to give students a voice through creative expression. From the first group of 15 students in Montreal the program has grown to encompass five cities, 200 youth leaders and reach over 40,000 youth. “In the same manner that Rudberg took a tragic event in her life and turned it into positive social action, the youth participating in the LOVE program take the violence that they have experienced and transform it into violence prevention” (Lekes, 2008).

Leave Out Violence incorporates photojournalism, leadership training, broadcast journalism, outreach workshops and violence prevention committees to achieve its goal of reducing violence through a youth led team trained to spread the message of non-violence. As part of LOVE’s core values they pledge to create a safe atmosphere where all youth can be heard, they aim to give youth a sense of purpose that allows them to realize their individual capacities, they create strong trusting relationships that bridge boundaries, they encourage youth to remain in school, and they try to reach out to the youth most marginalized to build happy, constructive lives.

During the central Media Arts Program (MAP) youth learn how to recognize, analyze and document the issues surrounding violence in their lives. Through the process, stories are shared, ideas are generated and reality-based solutions are imagined. Along the way marketable skills in photography, journalism, videography, and broadcasting are developed. Equally valuable are the intangible life skills of critical thinking, communication, social awareness, and problem solving that are attained. According to the website, LOVE based in Montreal has a high success rate for keeping students in school. Based on an Alumni Questionnaire from 2015, 92% of participants have completed their secondary education compared to the average Montreal graduation rate of 64% region wide (LOVE website, 2015).
LOVE targets the proven criteria for successful youth prevention such as early intervention, creative sheparding (one on one attention) and youth empowerment. It is important to note that LOVE is not a primary prevention program because most of the youth have already experienced violence. However, there is still an early intervention component in the school outreach done by youth leaders. LOVE provides strong mentorship and individual attention from committed adults. All of the trainings and instructions are also conducted in small, intimate groups that incorporate valuable skills in communication, public speaking, technology, conflict resolution, leadership, artistic expression, and social activism.

The youth leaders are trained to go back to schools, tell their stories, and speak to their peers about violence prevention. A story coming from a peer rather than an adult authority figure makes it more likely that students will relate and identify with the message. There is a pervasive theme of giving youth a voice in the activities of the program. “By allowing youth to express their feelings and experiences honestly, the LOVE programming provides opportunities for young people to make meaning out of their lives and contribute to the positive development of their communities” (Lekes, 2008).

Below are two testimonials from LOVE participants:

“Once a week when we all gather in the LOVE room, it’s as if all of society stays out and we are all comfortable with each other and we are able to just let go and relax and be ourselves… You are able to let go and release whatever you mind has been bottling up because you know that someone is always listening and that there is someone who can relate to what you are going through and can help!”  
- Jennifer, seventeen (Lekes, 2008, p. 137)

“I never thought that photography was creative. I thought I was just taking a picture to see what it was. It was fun to see what kind of message I was going to put out. I've asked myself how did LOVE change me? I was shadowed all my life I never wanted to be seen before living in the shadows….The writing and the photography and being surrounded with other people with similar experience all worked for me. I started writing a 187 page story about what it was like to be in LOVE. It was like day and night my life changes. I think you guys caught us by surprise during the dark days. Nobody wanted to listen to us” (Chase, 2008).
Comparisons and Conclusions

By using their own voices – whether through theater or journalism – the youth in both programs are given a platform, often for the first time in their lives, to openly share their realities. This narration is often suppressed within the structure of the traditional school system. As Freire writes, “Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it” (Freire, 1998, p. 74). Creative centered and expressive educational programs that both LOVE and PPT exemplify afford youth the opportunity to share that experience with their educators, their peers, and the surrounding community. It is both empowering and liberating to tell their story. It facilitates the two-way channel of learning between teacher and student that is potentially transformative for both.

In line with the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and transformative teaching practices, both programs inspire the students toward self-driven activism to improve their communities. In LOVE, the students return to their schools to be role models and mentors for their peers and in TPP the students are expected to design community impact projects. These projects range from organizing flash mobs to raise awareness about teen suicides to guerilla performance art to address the global sex trade. Imbedded in this new awareness and activism is the opportunity for leadership. Written into the structure of both programs is the expectation that students take on organizational leadership roles. The roles are not trivial, fabricated activities designed to make the students feel like they are contributing; they are critical positions that further the sustainability of the organization. These positions of power and influence build confidence and agency in the students while also contributing significantly to the overall mission. Both
programs understand that youth know better than anyone else how to market to and connect with their peers in their surrounding communities, and they give them the autonomy to do this.

An oppressive history of structural violence and low expectations fuels the fire of violence. The youth from these under-resourced neighborhoods, homes, and schools never feel they are worth anything more than a familial legacy behind bars. This leads to a developmental process of increasingly low self-esteem and self-worth. “Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (Freire, 1970, p.49). The high expectations that both programs have for their participants undermines this incapacitating social branding of worthlessness. At LOVE, one student commented how she couldn’t believe she was entrusted with an expensive camera on her first day (Chase, 2008). In a society where these youth are labeled as thieves and misfits, this subversion of the power structure breeds a culture of trust and accountability.

The results of having high expectations and proactive, influential positions within the organization naturally includes hands-on experiential learning. Although LOVE incorporates more formalized leadership training, neither program focuses any time on classroom style authoritarian teaching. The learning happens automatically as the students actively participate in new activities that incorporate skills in communication and respect. The mentors provide tools and facilitate the self-directed process of discovery rather than trying to enforce the knowledge acquisition. This is in stark contrast to the historical majority of youth violence intervention approaches that focus on control rather than engagement.
As argued by Robert L. Woodson, the typical behavior modification or therapeutic approach offered by the larger social services has not been particularly successful. As a case in point, he cites that “a recidivism rate as high as 60 percent has been reported for boot camps for delinquent youths” (Woodson, 1996). There is an equally the poor track record in the American jail system. According to the Bureau of Jail Statistics, during a study conducted between 2005-2010, 3 out of 4 former prisoners were arrested within 5 years of release. The rate of recidivism was even higher (84.1%) for inmates who were 24 years or younger. (Durose, M., Cooper, A., & Snyder, H., 2014).

Many prevention programs run the risk of stigmatizing the ‘at-risk’ students by isolating them from others. At LOVE, by combining all of the students together – perpetrators, victims, and witnesses – they avoid this division and, instead, invite open dialogue and increased understanding. TPP also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a diversity of perspectives when choosing their participants. Both of these approaches of bringing varied opinions and experiences together facilitates a deeper understanding of the world and creates more authentic opportunities for conflict resolution engagement. The programs both promote distinct group identities while also nurturing a mutual understanding of differences. In doing so, they acknowledge and celebrate student differences, while also highlighting the power of combining their efforts to make collective change in the world.

This learned respect of the other’s experience is demonstrated in both programs’ mechanisms to tell stories through the lens of an outsider; a process that can be both liberating and enlightening. Throughout the creative process at TPP cast members work on other’s stories, not their own. Early on, students share the salient fragments of their life stories so that there is room for everyone to make it their ‘own’ story. “In developing the script the participants then go
from similarly stereotypic ideas about characters and plots to evermore-complex understandings of individual motivations, role pressures, relational dynamics, and action consequences” (Hanson, 2012). Similarly, LOVE participants incorporate non-judgmental reporting techniques from journalism to re-tell the stories of their peers. This process of both listening and being heard expands their ability to empathize. Empathy is a key milestone along the path towards violence reduction and self-realization in the world.

More modern educational models teach the negative consequences of prejudice and tell students not to do it, but they don’t explore the complexities and realities that breed the prejudices in the first place. TPP and LOVE give students a safe space to do this. The safe environment is in contrast to the violence – both structural and physical – that penetrates the homes and communities of the youth participants. Through shared experiences and re-imaginings of alternative ways of being, the participants create a new world view together that empowers them with ownership and pride.

Together, the youth become change agents, which in turn leads to community transformation. By recognizing and being able to articulate the sources of their oppression, the students are then emboldened to go out into their communities - local, regional and even national - to try and correct the offending structures. This is the transformative process of individual and social change as explained by Freire and supported by the violence theories of Galtung. Instead of a problem driven approach – let’s get kids off the street, let’s teach them right from wrong, etc. – both LOVE and TPP take a theory driven approach and look for what works in regards to transformational behavior change. Whether intentional or not, both programs are incorporating Positive Youth Development theories into their programs and the positive results speak for themselves.
The common theme of a safe space that both programs provide for their students is an element worthy of further exploration. According to Maslow’s theory of human motivation, a sense of belonging and self-esteem are essential elements for individual well-being (Maslow, 1954). Undoubtedly, both of these programs, and others like them, provide these basic needs when they are severely lacking in the students’ daily lives. Building upon these acquired desires, the students are given the freedom to endeavor toward self-actualization through their creative works as well as through their proactive community involvement (Chase, 2008).

**Further Reflection**

Just as the students model self-reflection through these two programs, it is prudent that researchers also fully reflect upon the findings. This paper has highlighted the positive results of the individual programs but there is ample room for a more critical analysis.

In both programs the students choose to join the group on their own accord. They are not required by the juvenile justice system or the schools. Due to this self-selection one could argue that these students are the positive deviants who were already motivated to make a change. Perhaps these students were already on a path out of their circumstances and LOVE and TPP were one of many possible programs that could have helped them along the way. This then begs the question - how do you reach the students who are not intrinsically motivated? How do you reach the students who do not go to the auditions or who are so already disconnect from their schools that they never learn about the opportunities? These are questions that are worthy of further exploration.

Each program appears to operate successfully in isolation, but once the student has graduated from the program, neither program shows established mechanisms for external
environmental transfer of skills. The high rates of participant high school graduation, as compared to their respective regional averages, speaks to their transfer capabilities, but there are other variables that could be influencing these statistics, including the self-selection process as mentioned above. What happens to the students after graduation? What is their retention rate for university and/or careers? How many students continue work in the field of social change? More in-depth, tracking studies to confirm the programs’ effectiveness at transferring the acquired skills into real world situations would be a challenging, yet highly important task to complete in order to apply the lessons learned to future educational models.

There is no one-size fits all solution to the crushing forms of violence that plague our youth. This isn’t a new problem and it isn’t going away any time soon. The real question is, what are the proven best practices for enacting long term, transformative change for the youth who are both the victims and the perpetrators of the violence? Certainly there needs to be a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of the violence on all levels - political, social, local, family and individual. As the case studies in this paper substantiate, when incorporating positive youth development on the individual level it has the potential to spread up to the other levels through constructive community activism. Even though both of the programs started off as solitary, grass roots non-profits, their models have expanded to other cities and countries. This speaks to the trans-regional success of their programs. Youth agency is a universal developmental need, regardless of the region or circumstances.

According to the World Health Organization, promising youth violence prevention programs must include: teaching positive parenting, early childhood intervention, improved security, reduced access to alcohol, restrictive firearm policies, and the reduction of poverty through options such as housing vouchers. (WHO, 2015). These elements are certainly relevant
and should not be undermined, but they also maintain the status quo approach of prevention and control over theory led, evidence based programming. In conclusion, this paper argues that the core successful elements of alternative programming as highlighted in these case studies should also be included in the promising youth violence prevention framework. These include: youth agency, student-led projects, the incorporation of creative arts, community action elements, a supportive and diverse cohort, sharing of stories, and the provision of a safe space to facilitate a truly transformative process. In the end, the youth must be their own agents of change and educators have to trust and encourage them to realize that process.
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The Possibility Project.  http://the-possibility-project.org/


Appendix I

Global homicide rate by sex and age group (2008)


(UNODC, 2011)
Appendix II

YOUTH INCARCERATION RATE: UNITED STATES VS. OTHER NATIONS
JUVENILE INCARCERATION RATE PER 100,000 YOUTH POPULATION


(Mendel, 2011)