

The Truth N' Trauma Project: Addressing Community Violence Through a Youth-Led, Trauma-Informed and Restorative Framework

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Abstract This paper describes the implementation and evaluation of a youth violence prevention and intervention program on Chicago's south side. Forty-four high school-age youth from violence-exposed urban communities participated in a nine-month, multidisciplinary, after-school program aimed at supporting their development and positively impacting their communities. Restorative practice principles informed planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program. The youth developed skills in leadership, trauma-informed practice, documentary production, theatre, and participatory action research. This paper discusses the program, an initial evaluation of its impact, and potential practice and research implications.

Keywords Trauma · Community violence · Restorative practice · Mentoring · Youth

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Introduction

Over 800 young people have been killed in Chicago since 2008, with the majority residing in 22 African-American or Latino communities (Chicago Red Eye 2014). Research in Chicago communities and nationally suggests that youth who are exposed to community violence have increased rates of aggression and high-risk behavior (Cooley-Strickland et al. 2008; Gorman-Smith and Tolan 1998). The role of neighborhood as a significant influence on youth and violence has also been documented (Santiago and Galster 2014; Voisin et al. 2011; Sampson et al. 1997; Jenkins and Bell 1994). Many treatment programs targeting youth offer effective interventions, but often fail to take into account the community context, and are not focused on youth empowerment. Program models that seek to engage youth through empowerment practices are shown to be more in alignment with positive youth development principals (Travis and Leech 2014). Some of these programs can be referenced as best practices when servicing youth, but little has been done to examine trauma-informed programs that offer youth the opportunity to engage their peers and lead others in addressing violence.

Trauma-informed practices have developed over the past 20 years in response to research associated with understanding the impact of the exposure to violence on survivors (Kliewer et al. 2004; Amaya-Jackson and DeRosa 2007). This includes the bio-psychological impact of traumatic events. Now, there are numerous evidence-based strategies to address childhood trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2014). Many of these programs either train clinicians to perform interventions with survivors of violence, or help related providers understand the impact of traumatic events on survivors that they may encounter in their professional or personal lives. The

National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network provides a clearing house on research and best practices related to childhood trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2014). While there are many programs serving youth survivors of trauma, or youth exposed to community violence, there is little in the literature concerning approaches that use a positive youth development or youth leadership framework, while engaging young people and communities around exposure to violence. This paper describes the implementation and evaluation of a promising youth development program within an urban context, designed to address exposure to violence and youth advocacy. The impact of the intervention on program participants will be discussed.

Theoretical Framework

The Truth N' Trauma (TNT) program was developed by a multidisciplinary group of faculty, staff and students, each bringing diverse expertise and understanding of the program's target communities and youth populations. As the program was constructed, a consensus developed to emphasize an empowerment philosophical stance, and selected theoretical and practice perspectives as guides to program planning and implementation, including positive youth development, restorative practice, trauma-informed practice, and psycho-education. These perspectives guided development, implementation, and evaluation of the project.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development explores the ways that communities and programs promote resilience and protective factors for youth. This includes programs that promote a healthy youth-adult partnership, and seek to engage young people through informal and formal mentoring, and leadership opportunities, in addition to general youth programming. For African American youth, positive youth development can also include cultural affirmation, and support of unique identity factors that apply to African American communities. These factors include combating the negative portrayal of Black youth media, and within low-income communities, and providing access to positive role models (Travis and Leech 2014; Williams 2014). Within this framework, several theoretical and practice guidelines emerge, including, promotion of youth-adult partnership, critical consciousness, youth identity development, and cultural affirmation.

Youth-adult partnerships facilitate the ability of young people to grow alongside positive adult mentors and role models, encouraging independent responsibility, autonomy and accountability. Youth-adult partnerships allow for demonstration of positive relationships, with opportunities

for teaching and mentoring. Within this context, attention to critical consciousness can support the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills, which are essential in promotion of societal change (Freire 1970; Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Watts and Flanagan 2007). Youth identity development seeks to provide a space for youth to explore particularly intersecting identities (e.g. being Black and male, athlete and scholar, etc.). Youth-adult partnerships can include creation of social and emotional space where youth can explore aspects of identity in a safe way, learning to define, articulate and affirm who they are (Akon et al. 2008). Development and maintenance of youth-adult partnerships became an essential component of the daily operations of the TNT program.

Restorative Practice

Restorative practice is a method of building social capital and achieving social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making, that enables people to restore and build community (Zehr 2002; Pennell 2006). Restorative practices can range from formal to informal processes, including developing emotional literacy and learning how to express affective statements that communicate emotions, facilitating peace keeping circles, and conducting program planning (Umbreit et al. 2005). They may include culturally restorative practices that involve addressing the impact of oppression on diverse communities (Akon 2006). Research has begun to explore how these practices can be effective in healing trauma in adolescents (Juyoung et al. 2008), an idea that was critical in developing the TNT program and was compatible with the development of a trauma-informed practice curriculum.

The umbrella of restorative practices also includes use of the concept of restorative justice, which can be defined as, "a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" (Zehr 2002 p. 38). Restorative justice practices have been utilized with youth involved in the criminal justice system with some positive effects (McAndrews 2011; McNevin 2010; Bradshaw and Roseborough 2005).

Positive outcomes of restorative practices include group collaboration and empowerment for all individuals who participate in the restorative process (Juyoung et al. 2008; McCold 2004; Umbreit et al. 2005). Other positive effects include victim and offender satisfaction, reduced frequency of recidivism, and increased perceived safety (Umbreit et al. 2007). Youth who may be exposed to traumatic events such as sexual and physical abuse, neglect, community violence, or vehicle accidents can participate in peace circles with peers and trusted adults. In the day-to-

day implementation of the TNT Program, restorative practice was evident and believed to promote the development of positive communication skills, and also the creation of safe spaces for youth to explore their healing, and support others in healing from exposure to violence. In combination with trauma-informed practice, restorative practices helped create the type of positive community building that promotes affirmation, resilience and positive relationship building, all needed to support people in recovering from trauma.

Trauma-Informed Practice

In studies of urban youth, high rates of trauma exposure, including direct and indirect witnessing of community violence and domestic violence exposure, are shown to produce trauma symptoms indicative of post traumatic stress (Post et al. 2014; Lieberman and Knorr 2007; Margolin and Gordis 2000). One national study of lifetime victimization of youth ages 15–18 found that over 10 % are poly-victims (Finkelhor et al. 2009). Rates of victimization are particularly high for minority youth in low-income urban communities. The effects of trauma experiences may be pervasive even when exposure does not meet established diagnostic criteria (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014). Previous research has determined that community violence exposure can adversely impact academic performance (Hardaway et al. 2014), including engagement in school (Borofsky et al. 2013). Because the agents of the trauma are often in care-giving relationships with the child, the developmental impact on interpersonal relationships can be profound (Courtois and Ford 2009). This evidence, combined with awareness of the demographic profile of the participating youth within the TNT project, led the project designers to assume that the youth and those they will educate are likely to have experienced some form of adversity and would benefit from trauma education.

Psycho-Education

The use of peer educators to provide trauma psycho-education is a relatively recent innovation. Psycho-education is often provided by professional clinicians, as a component of evidence-informed trauma interventions. Trauma education is known to assist youth and their families in understanding symptoms that emerge in the aftermath of trauma exposure and in providing information that trauma symptoms are normal, often transient and that recovery after trauma exposure is possible (Cohen and Mannarino 2008; Wessely et al. 2008). Psycho-education in this context is defined as, “the provision of information about the nature of stress, posttraumatic and other symptoms, and what to do about them” (Wessely et al. 2008, p. 287).

Truth N' Trauma Intervention Design

The TNT program, funded by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority to address violence prevention, was part of a larger effort at Chicago State University (CSU) to increase civic engagement at the university and address violence in the communities that surround the university. The university is embedded in a predominately African American community on Chicago's south side, and the neighborhoods are heavily impacted by community violence. Faculty involved in the design of the project have been involved as investigators in both federally and state funded youth interventions, including school-based mentoring and youth empowerment programs addressing public health concerns. They were drawn to violence prevention due to the continued need expressed by youth and families in Chicago communities. The TNT intervention was multidisciplinary, and included faculty and representatives from Social Work, Psychology, Counseling, Criminal Justice, and Communication, Media Arts and Theatre (CMAT). Community partnerships were established with two community-based organizations and several high schools within the area.

The team included faculty and undergraduate and graduate students from the contributing university departments. These included youth development specialists and students in various disciplines within the university who were committed to positively impacting community violence, and addressing it through an empowerment agenda. This focus anticipated participating youth becoming leaders and having a positive impact on their communities. The project plan included identifying and selecting youth from the communities contiguous to CSU, creating a community within which they could develop skills and activities that they could then take to their home communities to positively influence peers, families, community leaders, and other community stakeholders.

Program Structure

Forty-four youth were selected as participants. Primary selection criteria were their expressed concern about community violence, and demonstration of leadership skills in both formal and informal settings. They were given a stipend for program participation as an incentive. The participants selected a focus area, chosen from four concentration options (trauma-informed practice, video production, action research, and theatre). Throughout the nine-month project implementation, participants met regularly in small groups focused on their chosen area of interest, and in a large group for overall learning and engagement. Youth met on the CSU campus 2 days per week after school, and on Saturdays. The project utilized a

restorative practice framework as an overarching philosophy and methodology. Staff and youth were trained in restorative practice theory and methods, including how to conduct and facilitate circle-keeping, small group conferencing, and planning. They were introduced to restorative methods aiming to heal trauma and promote peace. Participants were encouraged to weave these methods into their activities throughout the entire project. Based on the restorative practice perspective, youth would initially meet in a “peace circle” to check in, sharing current concerns in their lives. This ritual was followed by a snack break that would precede engaging in their smaller group focus areas. Larger meetings, involving the entire cohort, were regularly held throughout the project.

Trauma-Informed Practice Curriculum

All participants engaged in trauma-informed practice training, and a smaller cohort focused on this topic more extensively. The past few years have seen the development of a wealth of evidence-informed practice approaches that are aimed at responding to trauma in childhood (i.e. Cohen and Mannarino 2008; Saxe et al. 2007), which were referenced to explore development of a training program for the youth participating in TNT. A youth-oriented curriculum was developed and implemented that included modules on trauma-informed practice that all participants and staff received. These included culture and identity modules, critical analysis development, and techniques to address trauma from a community perspective, including spirituality, alternative healing (yoga, mindfulness, etc.), and restorative justice. Table 1 summarizes the content of the six modules.

Because the TNT conceptual framework utilized youth-led empowerment strategies, participating youth worked with program staff to develop their own version of the trauma training after completing their own initial training. The youth curriculum used examples and cultural references that were designed to engage an adolescent audience. The active involvement of youth in the research and development of the training was essential to the engagement of program participants and ultimately their audiences. While the training was initiated by adults, the involvement of youth in their final product was youth-led. Adult staff provided guidance in the development of training skills and peers provided ongoing feedback on training effectiveness. The participants developed a 20-minute trauma-informed presentation to offer to their peers and communities.

Media Production

Students in the video group acquired basic camera and editing skills. They also learned the fundamentals of pre-production (elements of the planning phase), production

(framing, shot continuity, directing talent) and post-production (editing and finishing for distribution). The learning instruments and class exercises were developed to connect the production skills to the trauma-informed framework of the overall project. The video production instructors utilized theories of media and social justice in the lectures, discussions and training exercises. The participants were taught to regard the hard skills as tools for social change. Youth were asked to think about issues of media representation, community media and the limited access of marginalized populations to media production and distribution resources. Participants in the documentary film cohort filmed interviews with young people who experienced or witnessed episodes of police brutality in Chicago. This video was combined with footage that Palestinian youth had shot of interviews with teens who had been brutalized or arrested by Israeli police. A local production company edited the footage from the two groups together and hosted a screening event in Chicago. This allowed the TNT students to see community media in action. The experience of partnering on the project expanded the student participants’ understanding of global media justice and the role of media in community organizing. In addition to these projects, the TNT video production cohort also wrote, directed, taped and edited public service announcements that modeled the approaches to violence prevention that were taught in the trauma-training sessions. The cohort helped in the filming of a 40-minute video documentary about the project.

Theatre

Participants in the theatre component learned basic theatre fundamentals such as projection, enunciation, character development, movement, and gesture alongside more advanced techniques including viewpoints of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, and activist Anne Bogart (Boal 1979; Bogart 2007). Through a synthesis of the techniques of Boal and Bogart, participants were challenged to embody complex ideas, emotions, and concepts into the physical storytelling of theatre through the creation of evocative tableaux and short scenes. Literature suggests evidence of the positive use of theatre for healing (Palidofsky and Stolbach 2012). Ultimately, this work culminated in the collaborative creation of a movement-based devised theatre piece. The entirety of the text was drawn from the journal writings of the participants, just as the blocking was crafted through the physical explorations of the ensemble. Through this piece, titled the only way out is the way through, participants were able to process the concepts they had acquired through the trauma-informed practice training as they also voiced their own social concerns around such topics as family, friendship, gossip, trust,

Table 1 Trauma-informed practice curriculum

	Description
Part one: Trauma basics	
Module 1: Too much: The impact of traumatic events on youth	This module introduced TNT participants to the impact of traumatic events on children and youth. A definition of trauma and a framework for understanding traumatic experiences was provided
Module 2: Not enough: When trauma involves a loved one	This module provided TNT participants with a framework for ongoing exposure to interpersonal violence and the resulting impact on the developing self and relationships
Module 3: I have been changed	This module provided TNT participants with a framework for the manifestation of trauma exposure in emotions, behavior and in changes in the body including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Trauma symptoms; (ii) Trauma triggers and behavior and; (iii) Basic neurobiology
Part two: Resilience, hope and restoration	
Module 4: Rebuilding the broken places	This module provided TNT participants with information about healing after trauma by addressing safety and emotional regulation skills
Module 5: Reconnecting	This module provided TNT participants with information about healing after trauma by addressing relationship skills and the use of social supports for youth that have learned not to trust easily
Module 6: Making a difference	This module provided TNT participants with information about healing after through involvement in activities that allow youth to help others and make sense of their adverse experiences

sexuality, and identity in looking at their past, their present, and their future.

Evidenced through the work with the participants, the act of collaboratively creating theatre was liberatory. Participants learned to take risks and to be vulnerable to each other; working as an ensemble, they learned to trust themselves and their co-creators; they found a voice through the communal sharing of stories; and they sharpened their artistic acumen by critiquing, reworking, and

heightening these stories. Participants found the act of performing empowering: though they were nervous, they successfully performed in front of live audiences many times; they covered mistakes and miscues for each other, further building the level of trust they placed in each other and the ensemble; and most importantly, they commanded the attention of the audience and were heard by it. Finally, the audience itself was affected by the performance, hearing new perspectives from the participants and perhaps viewing the youth in a different light as a result of the performance.

The theatre piece premiered at the opening night of the 2012 Institute for Youth and Community Engagement Conference, and was remounted 2 weeks later at CSU Theatre's 10 min Play Festival. It was then reworked to include additional text and restaged at a TNT Community Night. The success of these stagings earned the TNT Theatre Ensemble prestigious invitations to perform outside of the program. The ensemble participated in the Chicago Home Theater Festival, performing at an event at activist Bill Ayers' home; it headlined an evening of the Building Peace and Justice Series at the Jane Addams Hull House, and, finally, the ensemble performed at the Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition's Symposium on Child Trauma in the Public Sector, marking the first time that performance had been included in this academic conference.

Youth Participatory Action Research

The youth participatory action research (YPAR) component trained youth in participatory research methods, with the youth identifying an area that they wanted to research related to community violence. YPAR engaged youth in the research process as active researchers, with them studying social problems that impact their lives and becoming engaged in creating solutions (Camarrota and Fine 2008; Ginwright 2008). Educating and training youth in the research process can be a significant benefit to youth and their communities, and facilitates their learning ethical principles and behavior, compatible with the Social Work Code of Ethics (Barbera 2008). YPAR can empower youth and engage them in the research process as a way to not only teach skills, but also strengthen youth-adult partnerships and support agency among youth. (Fine et al. 2003, 2004; Akon et al. 2008; Cammarota and Fine 2008).

Training included human subjects protocol, data collection, data entry and analysis, and presentation. Program youth were introduced to the research process, and reviewed different types of research, and how they might do current research within their schools and personal lives. Several exercises took place that supported the youth in developing critical analysis skills related to current and historical problems in their community. This included

sessions on the relationship between community violence and structural inequalities, such as economic disparity and school inequality, the criminal justice system and the police role in their communities, and episodes of large scale violence in communities of color, and root causes impacting them. Curriculum and exercises included processes learned from the Stanford University's Gardner Center's Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning, YPAR curriculum (YELL) (Gardner Center 2007) and Project Nia's Something is Wrong curriculum (Project Nia 2010). These curricula also included several processes to engage young people in research methods, including designing research questions, creating survey instruments, interview and focus group protocols, and data entry and analysis. In addition, program participants received instruction concerning research methodology and human subjects protocols from project staff and local researchers from other universities who specialize in trauma, youth development, or community violence.

Deciding that they wanted to utilize a strengths perspective to understand how youth survive traumatic events, the YPAR group designed a study to focus on resilience and youth who have been exposed to violence, collecting data via focus groups, interviews, and a questionnaire. The group also interviewed leading experts in the field to uncover themes from professionals associated with resilience. In addition, the participants mapped the assets associated with peace within their communities, and created an asset map of "safe" places within their communities.

Program Evaluation

The evaluation protocol, developed during the planning phase of the TNT project, was designed to capture evidence of change in the participants, and to document experiences of the participants and faculty/staff over the course of the project. The aim was to contribute to a narrative that would reflect the TNT project's value, the process of change in the project implementation and in participants, and to identify both challenges and strengths of the program. Empowerment (Gutierrez et al. 1995; Freire 1970) was utilized as an organizing principal in understanding the change observed in the youth. The evaluation plan was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Methods

The Ozer Empowerment Survey, designed for youth, was selected as compatible with the aims of the TNT project. Reliability of the original instrument had been established by the authors (Ozer and Schotland 2011). It was utilized to document change in characteristics indicating

empowerment, as reported by the participants. Survey items were categorized as self-esteem, academic achievement, social climate, and sense of community—social support. Responses to each item were rated on a 5-point scale. There were additional items added to the survey to document demographic characteristics. Data analysis utilized a paired samples comparison of means test to indicate change (Abu-Bader 2011). The survey was utilized as a pre- post-test measurement for the participants and for a comparison group. It was administered at the beginning of the TNT Program to participants and at the end of the program, 9 months later. It was administered to a comparison at an approximately eight-month interval.

A qualitative research component was developed and administered to 32 participants and 18 faculty/staff. The purpose of the qualitative component was to discover and document the experiences of participants and faculty/staff. Organizing questions were developed for participants, including exploration of involvement their communities, exposure to violence, motives for involvement in the project, experience of involvement in the project, and experience of change. They included such questions as:

- How and why did you become involved in the TNT Program?
- What has been your experience in the TNT Program?
- What is your experience with violence and violence exposure?
- What have been your responses to violence exposure?
- How are you involved in your school/neighborhood/community?
- What is your involvement with your family?

Faculty responsible for evaluation and selected, supervised, students conducted interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Narrative and grounded theory principles were utilized for data collection and analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Data collection interviews were open-ended, utilizing the described questions as guides to the interview process. Data analysis followed grounded theory principles, and selected quotes were utilized to construct themes reflecting the experiences of participants and faculty/staff. Selected findings from the mixed-method approach are described below.

Demographics

The 44 students who initially enrolled in the program were African American high school age individuals from the communities contiguous to Chicago State University. They ranged in age from 14 through 18 with 55 % age 17 and 30 % age 16. Forty-five percent were high school seniors, 25 % were juniors, 5 % were sophomores, and 25 % were 'other'. Fifty percent were male and 50 % were female. Mother was

the primary caregiver for 60 %, and 16 % indicated more than one primary caregiver, with the grandmother for 7 %, 'other' for 7 %, foster mother or aunt for 5 %, and the father 2 %. The primary care person worked in 66 % of the family situations, and attended school in 14 %.

Individuals in the comparison group were also from communities contiguous to Chicago State University. They ranged in age from 14 to 18 and over, with 42 % over 18, 23 % age 16, and 16 % age 15, thus a slightly older group. Twenty-five percent of these were high school seniors, 21 % were juniors, 18 % were sophomores and 15 % were freshmen, and 11 % listed 'other'. Fifty-two percent of this group were male and 48 % were female. Mother was the primary caregiver for 42 % of this group, the stepmother or grandmother for 10 %, and 10 % listed 'other'. Thirty-nine percent (39 %) indicated more than one caregiver. Sixty-five percent of the primary caregivers worked, and 20 % attended school.

Survey Findings

Significant positive changes were reported in forty-one variables representing empowerment, and significant negative change was reported in one variable. Reported here are variables that indicated change from pre-test to post-test, and that were significant at the .05 level.

TNT participant group variables

Variable	t score	Significance level
School		
Played sports on a team	4.624	.000
Engaged in after school activity	4.391	.000
Engage in activities outside school	2.970	.009
Engage in arts activity during school	4.86	.000
Community		
Participated in religious activity	4.288	.001
Youth have a say in community	2.304	.035
Have led others for change	3.951	.001
Made presentations to strangers	2.729	.015
Have interviewed adults in the community	2.509	.023
Family		
Parent has lost a job	2.163	.046
Parent have separated/divorced	2.163	.001
Family member has been seriously ill	2.762	.014
Family member has died	2.433	.027
Moved away from friend and family	2.519	.023
Experience		
Have been attacked by an outsider	3.096	.007
Pressured to join a gang	3.096	.007
Stay within group	2.864	.011
Racial putdown	2.416	.028

continued

Variable	t score	Significance level
Have been teased about how I look	2.985	.009
Unfairly accused due to race	3.002	.008
Have been excluded by race	3.405	.004
Self		
Persistent in work	-3.165	.006
Hard time seeing good about myself	2.729	.015
Good at self improvement	5.892	.000
More talented than other kids	2.640	.018
Blame self when things go wrong	2.509	.023
Work hard to develop talents	3.887	.001
Hang around bad kids	2.163	.046
Treat others the way I like to be treated	4.869	.000
Perfectionist	2.210	.043
Persistence, keep trying after failure	4.824	.000
Care about self	3.721	.002
Respect teachers	3.597	.003
Care only for self	2.416	.029
Work hard to achieve goals	3.435	.004
Work to make things better	3.149	.007
Handle problems well	2.448	.027
Compare self with others	3.217	.006
Prepared to handle future problems	4.069	.011
Prepared to make things better in future	4.069	.001
Prepared in future to handle feelings	3.464	.003

In contrast, the comparison group reported significant positive change in only two variables, and significant negative change in two variables:

Variable	t score	Significance level
Understand political issue in community	3.798	.002
Cooperate well in a team	-2.280	.040
Gather data to solve problems	2.379	.035
Compare self with others	-2.569	.026

Findings from the paired comparison test suggest the TNT participant group indicated many more positive changes on the survey items than the comparison group. The TNT group's responses suggest increased involvement in school between the start and end of the project. Their responses also indicate an increase in active involvement in their communities, and increases in individual perception

of empowerment-related characteristics, including self-improvement, creativity, talent, cooperation with others, and the ability to work hard, and the ability to handle problems well. They indicate increases in their ability to handle future challenges and feelings, and their commitment to working to make things better.

There were negative changes in some areas, including increased self-blame and critical self-evaluation, difficulty recognizing the good things about oneself, and more hanging around other youth who caused trouble. They did not see themselves as more persistent at the end of the project than they had been at the beginning. Their responses suggest an increase in family disruption and distress during the course of the project, including separations, divorce, illness, death, and moves. Their responses also suggest an increase in community stressors related to their community engagement, including racist experiences and gang pressures. In contrast, the members of the comparison group had only four items demonstrating significant change during roughly the same period.

The findings also suggested an increase by program participants in their understanding of political issues affecting their communities, and an increase in gathering data to use in solving problems in the community. The other two items suggested a decrease in cooperating in a team situation, and a decrease in a tendency to compare themselves with others. With a small sample and a less-than perfectly matched participant and comparison group, causal claims cannot be made about the relationship between perceived positive changes documented and participation in the TNT project. However, these findings are suggestive of increased self-perceived empowerment among participants, under challenging social conditions, during their tenure in the project.

Qualitative Findings

While the empowerment survey provided evidence of positive change in the participants in areas that are suggestive of their resilience and capacity to positively engage in their communities, the survey findings did not link directly to the program components they were involved in during their TNT Program tenure. Qualitative data was more directly linked to their experience in the program and perceived changes related to that experience. Qualitative findings from the participants are reported below. One or two illustrative quotes are included, selected from the large pool of quotes derived from the data.

Response to the Program

Integration of a trauma-informed practice perspective was established as a central skill set for the participants early in the planning phase of the project. Faculty expertise was

brought to bear, and a youth-focused trauma-informed training curriculum was developed. A restorative practice orientation emerged during the planning stage and dominated planning and implementation of program activities throughout the course of the project. These two perspectives became intertwined and integrated as the project was carried out.

I think the combo package of the restorative stuff and trauma together was brilliant.

Participants internalized a general understanding of trauma and how to respond.

I've learned the true definition of trauma. Basically it's something that happens in your life that you can be affected by mentally, physically, and emotionally. And it just leads to a lot of things that I didn't know about. I learned that some people can overcome it.

They also internalized and shared an understanding of 'perpetrators' of violence as also traumatized. This understanding was contained in a phrase they often stated: 'Hurt people hurt people'.

What it means is for a person to do something to somebody they had to be hurt, something had to occur or something for them to do something. So in reality if it is a perpetrator whenever you do something in reality they're both victims, because for him to be hurt to also hurt somebody else.

Participants utilized this learning to re-explain and better handle their own personal experiences.

I want to get over my trauma. I really want to learn how I can get over mine 'cause I can't help nobody else if I can't help myself. I just want to learn how trauma even start. How something so little - it wasn't little, me getting chased. How I'm still holding onto that for so many years. How I'm still gonna hold on it for the rest of my life. I don't think I'm ever gonna get over it.

They value utilizing their new understanding to help others.

I expect to be able to reach out to people who have been traumatized, to help them through their traumatic events, and just to inform people on the things that I learned so maybe they can carry it on and tell others.

The restorative practice perspective insisted on critical self-reflection, an activity that was initially alien to many, and challenging to achieve. However, staff and faculty recognized the value of this process, for themselves, for the participants, and for the program. Restorative justice, a

dominant historical component of restorative practice, was incorporated into the implementation of this perspective into the TNT program. When issues of conflict, illegal activity, and other justice related issues came up in the course of programming, the leadership consciously utilized a restorative practice stance in response. This was not always natural or easy for staff or youth participants. There was a tendency to default to a more punitive response, and this tendency had to be attended to.

So when we sit around the circle and I hear, this is one incident that just sticks in my mind. There are several like this. We had this young man who had smoked some weed on the break, and came back smelling like weed. And everybody was like “You can’t do that here. We don’t do that here”. So we were in a circle and he was being confronted. And he said basically said “I don’t see what the big deal is. I did it. I said I was sorry. I was wrong and I will not do it again. But it’s not a big deal nobody got shot. Nobody got killed. Nobody got hurt”. Then the young lady said “Wait a minute, you hurt me. I care about you”. And tears came to her eyes, and she said “It bothers me that you do this to yourself, and that you would do this to us. I care about you. I got hurt. You hurt me”. And he stopped, and he got silent. And I could see the wheels turning.

Learning through experience about restorative justice is a strong component of the participants’ new experience.

It’s like if a kid is always in trouble, if he always wants to fight and he knows the punishment is going to be getting 10 days they can’t...he can eventually use that as a excuse to get out of school. Like I want to fight so I know if I fight I’m going to get out of school, but restorative justice is if you don’t let them get out of school you could instead talk to them and say you don’t have to fight. This is not an excuse to get away; you just...it’s like you’re just working with the person instead of working against the person basically.

Some participants integrated trauma-informed practice and restorative practice principles in their own unique formulation, not distinguishing between the two concepts. The phrase ‘hurt people hurt people’, described above as representing a learned trauma-informed practice orientation, gained traction and credibility in a restorative practice context, and informed responses to peers experiencing problems.

When we practice it shows...it’s like a process, because at first the person was feisty and angry like that type of dude. He was aggressive; he didn’t show his real

feelings. We finally got to see that soft side. After we’re showing him we’re here for you, this is what we can do for you, and nobody is perfect and tell you the mistakes we made. Because sometimes people think they’re alone in doing bad stuff so you have to let them know I did this. He ended up confessing and he started to...he actually shed tears and he was opening up saying how the things he went through, and it was stuff like my momma didn’t have food on the table.

As the ‘community’ is created, nurtured, and maintained, staff and participants are able to experience the community as safe and peaceful, and to value its unique characteristics.

Understanding this concept of community, creating spaces, and safe spaces of healing. What does it mean to construct an environment of peace, and not focus on anti violence or stopping violence? That comes through community, shared knowledge, shared value system, shared practices, rituals. TNT has allowed me to really become embedded in that type of sense.

TNT gives a sense of what it should be like, what it can be like if everyone just lives among each other peacefully. You can have conflict, but it can be handled in a peaceful way, without the youth having to be putting on and taking off armor. You can get to that deeper impact.

This restorative community creates an ecology in which individuals can get inside the experience of others in a way they haven’t before.

I began to see them differently and try to understand why—you know, exactly why they’re doing what they’re doing. You know, and see that they’re often victims themselves, because they’re surrounded by violence, and they’re hurt. You know, like I said, “Hurt people hurt people”. And that—that phrase is so very true.

There’s a lot of kids that have come from different areas, we’re all in the same community kind of, but we all come with different stories and we’re able to open up to each other. So that helps with the violence more when you’re able to talk about what you’re feeling instead of showing how you feel with your anger, and so I just want more people to join and they’ll see how there’s another way.

They recognized their own adaptation to this unique and created community.

And that’s how it was with me with all the other people. Like I was the person who rejected like, “No.

I don't know you. I don't want none of your candy. You keep it to yourself." I'm staying in my corner or whatever. Then one day I'm like, "If I'm going to work with these people, I might as well get to know them. "I just can't judge them by what I see or the way they talk, or they hair is, or whatever." So, it was like a gradual friendship that came along with us crying, getting to know each other.

They recognized the value of this experience to them personally.

Yep. It's like actual people actually listening to my thoughts for once.

Lived Experience

Other qualitative findings speak to the lived experience of the participants in their communities. The TNT Program provided a safe virtual community during an important period in their young adult development. However, their exposure to violence and experience of that exposure are ongoing.

Violence Exposure

Participants are significantly exposed to violence. Some describe the exposure more generally. Others describe more close up personal experience.

Yeah. Every day somebody dying and it's not even natural causes no more. It's everybody dying 'cause they got shot. Innocent people.

For me, getting mugged, getting chased. I've experienced violence on different levels from a close friend being shot, to close friends dying, to classmates getting shot, classmates dying.

Staff are very aware that the youth came to the project with vast violence exposure and experience. Staff are also aware that for many of the youth, the experience of violence exposure is ongoing and almost normative.

The stories are literally a terror. I think the youth are very aware that people do die. People their age are dying, people who they know around them. When they face those circumstances, I don't think they have that shield of invulnerability. They don't have that shield. If they've ever had it, it's been torn away. These things are profound to them.

Then there's this other ongoing experience of things that come up. "This happened this week. This happened last week. Did you hear about so-and-so? I had a friend who—" you know all that is ongoing.

Responses to Violence

For participants, one important and problematic response to violence exposure is normalization, getting used to it, and no longer being upset by it.

Since I experienced like gunshots at a young age like that. If I heard gunshots now, I wouldn't really—it doesn't startle me anymore. When I hear in my apartment, look, and just—I'm numb to it now, you know, so I just finish getting about my business.

And some participants express an attitude of fatalism in response to the violence exposure.

Because I know that bullets don't have any name if they're in the case of a gun or whatnot. I know that it doesn't have a name so that bullet can be for anyone of us, the bystander, the victim, suspect, whatever.

At the same time, the participants express constant hyper-vigilance about their surroundings.

I can't go outside when I want to. It's certain places you can't go cause it's not safe. It's a certain time you gotta be in the house. Well, not even really that. You can get shot in broad daylight. So, you just can't do the same things you used to do. Like kids used to be able to go outside and play. You can't even play without worrying about getting shot.

Though not necessarily describing their experiences as traumatic, the participants note definite and negative change in experience after significant violence exposure.

It's affected me greatly, because I'm scared to be...you've always got to watch your back, you could die anywhere.

Participants also express some positive changes in response to violence exposure.

I like to believe it had a positive impact on me because I stopped doing the stuff I was doing before the accident happened or whatever. So, if I was going to keep going at that route, who knows where I would be right now. I'd probably be dead. I probably would be in jail.

Ecology

The ecological surround is an essential context in which to understand the youth participants' experience. The communities surrounding the university are, by reputation, inner-city ghettos, populated by poor and working class African American families. The media would suggest that they are dangerous and gang infested, and that violence in

these communities is rampant. The ongoing violence exposure that the participants report suggests some 'truth' to this portrayal. However, the youth report a much more complex relationship with the ecological surround. Participants express varied involvement in their neighborhoods, schools, and larger communities. One strong theme is the experience of limited involvement in their immediate communities and involvement in activities outside their communities.

As far as my community, I'm not as involved as I should be because partly, I really don't go outside a lot.

When I'm involved I try work through my school. I really don't go out into the community. I do work through my school, because my school touches so many bases in the community because we're well known.

The participants realistically assess the challenges of their neighborhoods and the often negative impact on them.

The affects that it gave me was it's not easy out there living on the streets. When you're at home you get fed, you get the roof over your head, you get a sense of safety. When you're out in the street you've got to worry about trying to eat, but you've also got to worry about being safe. You don't have anywhere to stay, you're scared anything can happen to you while you're sleep so it was hard.

They perceive gang violence as very active, and significantly impacting their comfort in their neighborhood and school.

With my brothers, I don't like them really walking to school. I don't. Cause the boys—they kinda getting bad over in our neighborhood. They like to, "Oh, he got this. Let's go jump him. Let's go mess with him. I've never seen him before." And I don't like that. I feel uncomfortable with that part.

The participants compare their neighborhoods to perceived or imagined 'nicer' neighborhoods on the north side or in other parts of the Chicago area.

Yeah. I have some uncles that live in Evanston. And when I go up there it's like everybody is more friendly and more with each other. And usually all the neighbors outside are always talking to each other and getting along with each other. But when you come back to the south side everybody just always outside arguing and threatening each other. And there's always police everywhere. But I don't experience that when I'm on the north side.

They are frustrated with conditions and want change.

Yeah, I'd like to see some of my cousins get up out the street life. And the community, I just want to stop seeing little kids get killed. Well, not even little kids, it's everybody, period. Because it's just crazy. It's just real crazy.

Family

Participants experience family as foundational and an essential reference for caring and stability. This foundational experience is strong, despite some challenging family situations.

My immediate family, we close kind of sort of, but like when we all get together, it's crazy. My mama don't like my uncle wife. My uncle wife don't like my mama. And my grandma don't like my uncle wife. It's just a lot.

The participants have to negotiate very complex relationship dynamics. Also, they feel the pressures of meeting parents' expectations as they try to negotiate growing into adults.

I don't know, I guess my grandparents and my parents they just try to make me into this person I don't want to be; so I guess I'm trying to get them to see me for me. So I'll be able to achieve the things I want to do so I guess it's a work in progress.

Thematic findings from the qualitative component of the evaluation suggest a great deal of experience with violence exposure, and varied responses to that exposure. Participants indicated the importance of family as a stabilizing force, and limited involvement in their communities. Their responses also indicated that the participants experienced important learning about themselves, and about how to understand and respond to their experience of violence exposure. They incorporated and personalized the trauma-informed practice perspective from the training, and they internalized the restorative practice perspective from experiencing involvement in the created TNT community.

Discussion

In our implementation of the TNT Program, we found that youth in the communities served experience pervasive traumatic stress and in multiple manifestations. Participants describe situations where family and community members never directly or indirectly exposed to traumatic violence begin themselves to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic

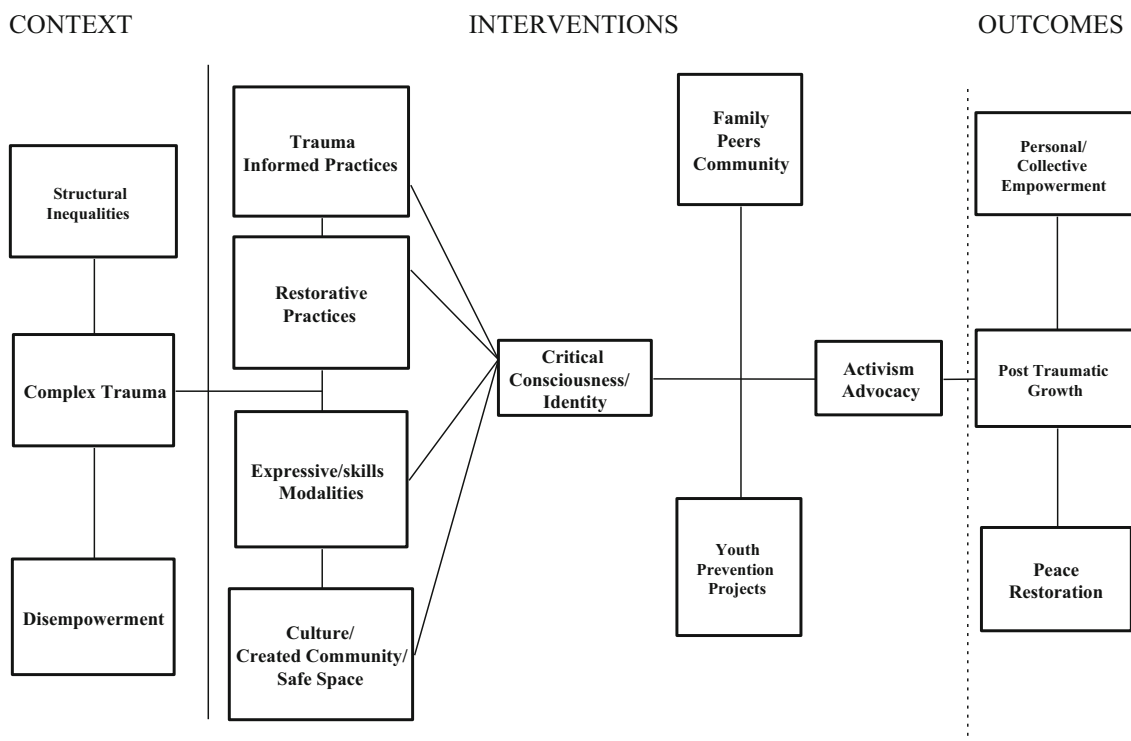
stress as a result of intimate or indirect interaction with those who have been exposed.

We developed and implemented an integrated eclectic youth-oriented trauma-informed practice perspective with an emphasis on restorative justice and youth. This interdisciplinary and, we believe innovative, approach included expertise from social work, educational psychology, counseling, criminal justice, theater, and media arts. Evaluation of the program suggested that participants changed positively in their self-perception of empowerment. It also suggested that participants experienced the program as a virtual community facilitating their positive change.

A tentative schematic chart, representing this approach is presented below:

notion of “doing something to the participants” as opposed to “doing something with the participants” and have yet to find the language to distinguish this important difference.

We found statistically significant pre-post-test differences in mean scores for participants on 41 outcome measures (for school, community, family, experience, and self) as compared to just 4 statistically significant pre-post-test differences in mean scores for the comparison group for measures of community and self whereby two of the changes reflected decreases in desired behavior. There were some unexplained negative changes in the participants mainly having to do with self-perception (for example, difficulty being persistent) that need further examination which may very well be related to increased family and community stressors experienced by partici-



The components on the far left (structural inequalities, complex trauma and disempowerment) may be considered ecological or pre-existing factors. The middle components (trauma informed practices, restorative practices/peace circles, expressive/skills modalities, the culture/community/safe space, critical consciousness/identity/youth adult partnership, family/peers/school/community, youth prevention projects and the activism/advocacy/civic engagement) may be considered interventions. The components on the far right (personal/collective empowerment, post traumatic growth, and healing/restoration) may be considered outcomes. However, we have struggled with the

participants during the study. These increased stressors may, in turn, be related to increased engagement with family and community on the part of participants.

There were design problems associated with the evaluation, having to do with the lack of randomization, small sample size and statistical power. There were measurement problems as some of the outcome variables may be more complex than what the measures utilized were capable of accurately capturing. For example, some of the unexplained negative changes in the participants had to do with aspects of critical consciousness (self-blame, self-evaluation, and difficulty recognizing good things about oneself)

that may in fact be veridical, reality-based self-evaluation resulting from a higher level of critical consciousness.

Programs like the one described here that utilize integrated strategies, interdisciplinary collaboration, youth activities designed to impact others need sufficient multiple year funding to develop and establish a comprehensive model that can then be experimentally tested in subsequent years, and in ways that address design problems mentioned above. Nevertheless, we believe we have developed and evaluated a program example that suggests implications for practice, policy and further research.

Implications for Practice

Programs, like the comprehensive and interdisciplinary one described here, should seek to engage youth through empowerment practices that emphasize positive youth development, trauma informed practices and restorative justice that offer youth (with learned skills) the opportunity to advocate, engage and lead their families, their peers, their schools and communities and others in addressing violence. The perspective represented by this program is consistent with the “strengths perspective” gaining dominance in Social Work practice (Shriver 2008; Saleebey 1996).

Implications for Policy

As stated above, innovative programs that are comprehensive and interdisciplinary require multiple year funding (at least 3–5 years) that allows for establishing a theoretical model and then for rigorous experimental testing and analysis that leads to evidence-informed best practices for violence prevention. Sample size, randomized control trials, data collection and analysis for such comprehensive programs can be quite expensive but seem necessary if we are to move beyond treatment programs that, at best, offer mental health services that are prescriptive to young people, and at worst, are paternalistic and rely on outdated treatment modalities to provide services.

Implications for Research

The research agenda for the projects following the one described herein would involve rigorous replication with a continued small, randomized experimental-control sample of perhaps 50 participants and a matched comparison group. The components of a proposed model need to be operationalized in a manner that allows for complex measurement. The trauma-informed youth oriented curriculum needs to be standardized, and should follow established implementation protocols. At the same time, replications of the approach described here, or any of its

components, need to be flexible and adapt to particular social and cultural context in which they are carried out. Evaluation of future projects should include comprehensive process measures as well as a rigorous outcome measures, and be guided by the impacts and the tentative model described.

Our shared experience with the TNT project is a recognition of the need and practicality of the development of empowerment-oriented programs responsive to youth exposed to violence, recognizing the potential strength of those youth and their capacity to positively impact the problems associated with community violence exposure.

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