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Youth-Led Organizations, the Arts and the 411 Initiative for Change in Canada: Critical Pedagogy for the 21 Century

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to document a group of Canadian youth activists' and artists' perceptions and experiences with developing and sustaining an arts-based educational initiative that "undertakes public education and the promotion of civic participation of young people on social issues that frame their development within their communities." Through the youth activists' and artists' narratives, we highlight the youths' motivation to establish this organization, the methods they use to engage their audience in social commentary and activism, how they confront and overcome barriers in schools when implementing their pedagogical initiatives, and the challenges they face in keeping their project intellectually vibrant and culturally relevant to youth. Moreover, we argue that critical pedagogues must take seriously the cultural work proffered by youth-led social justice initiatives if critical pedagogy is to remain relevant in promoting equity and social justice in schools and in society.



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The implementation of commercialized and militaristic policies within K-12 schools across North America have made it arduous for even the most committed, transformative school leaders and educators to guide their students to reflect critically upon the nature of their social world and to gain the courage and skills necessary to join other cultural workers in the struggle to eliminate social inequalities in schools and in the wider society. Many schoolteachers, especially social actors who mentor and educate students in urban contexts, are situated in debilitated, unsafe, and unsanitary educational environments, where their students are criminalized and demonized through an array of surveillance equipment, armed security guards, military recruitment stations, and draconian ‘get tough on youth’ zero-tolerance policies. They also educate youth amid overcrowded educational structures where they must implement ‘teacher proof’ drill and skill forms of instruction and assessment in order to ensure their students perform adequately on a battery of corporately-produced examination (Casella, 2008; Kozol, 2006; Porfilio & Carr, 2008; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010). Amongst an array of reprisals, failing to perform well on the exams can result in teachers losing their jobs, closing of schools, corporate or state takeover of underperforming schools, as well as the confiscation of vital resources from already cash-strapped educational structures.

Fortunately, some youth artists and activists are cognizant commercialized and dehumanizing forms of schooling afforded to them and other ‘border’ youth fail to spark their intellectual desire to understand the relationship between self and Other, knowledge and power, or the constitutive forces giving rise to institutional forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism and homophobia. Moreover, they realize schools fail to include the pedagogical outlets necessary to formulate intercultural alliances that question what is responsible for the world’s unjust conditions and advocate for building a society on the ideals of justice, equity, and democracy (Lund & Nabvi, 2010; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Prier, 2010). Consequently, critically-aware youth have collectively formulated a burgeoning emancipatory pedagogical movement, which is geared to filling the pedagogical hole generated by most educational institutions. Through multimedia presentations, workshops, and student-developed artistic projects, they set out to garner resistant students’ attention and interest in understanding what give rise to human suffering in their communities and other social contexts, give students space to vocalize their concerns and apprehensions with challenging the structures and social actors who impact their personal and social development, and provide unfamiliar information in ways that aid youth in making sense of unfamiliar concepts and connecting this knowledge to their own lived experiences (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Prier, 2010).

The purpose of this essay is to document a group of Canadian youth activists’ and artists’ perceptions and experiences with developing and sustaining an arts-based educational initiative that “undertakes public education and the promotion of civic participation of young people on social issues that frame their development within their communities” (<http://www.whatsthe411.ca/>). Through the youth activists’ and artists’ narratives, we highlight the youths’ motivation to establish or to be active in this organization; the methods they use to engage their audience in social commentary and activism; how they confront and overcome barriers in schools when implementing their pedagogical initiatives; and the challenges they face in keeping their project intellectually

vibrant and culturally relevant to youth. Moreover, we argue that critical pedagogues must take seriously the cultural work proffered by youth-led social justice initiatives if current and future teachers are to have the emancipatory vision and courage to find fissures amid commercialized and militarized schooling structures so as to “provide students the knowledge and skills they need to learn how to deliberate, make judgments, and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that effect everyday life, institutional reform and government policy” (Giroux, 2008, p. 3). Or if schoolteachers and the general public are to move beyond the debilitating portraits of youth in media culture, which characterize them as aberrant, violent, and anti-intellectual creatures who must be blamed for the social and economic problems created by adult economic and political ‘leaders.’

The essay is organized as follows: In the first section, we provide a brief overview of the social and cultural conditions that are affecting the aims and scope of socially transformative youth-led initiatives, which have been implemented across North America over the past decade. In the second section, we highlight several of the 411 members’ narratives in order to capture their motivation for organizing or being a part of the initiative; document the methods they employ to captivate students’ attention and spark their awareness vis-à-vis the constitutive forces generating injustice and human suffering; document how they overcome obstacles in the educational arena that often make it arduous for teachers, youth, and scholars to sustain youth-led, transformative projects; and detail the challenges they may encounter in sustaining their youth-led initiative. We conclude the essay with a brief summary of the value of the 411 Initiative as it relates to promoting culturally-responsive teaching in K-12 schools, fostering critically-engaged citizenship, and providing schoolteachers alternative visions of how to conceptualize teaching, youth, and activism.

Youth-led Resistance and Transformation in the Age of Neoliberalism

The ruling elite’s push to commodify all elements of social life, to eliminate social entitlements for citizens, and to outsource labor from First World to the so-called Third world regions, is having a deleterious impact on many citizens in North America. Working-class citizens are frequently facing job loss, home foreclosures, living out of tents, boxcars, caves, and cars, are without medical assistance or adequate transportation, and are working several dead-end service-orientated jobs in order to feed and clothe their families. The neoliberal ordering of our social world has been particularly devastating to our youth: It has generated a political, cultural, and economic context that is “unforgivable and intolerable for youth” on numerous levels (Grossberg, 2007). For instance, more and more youth, particularly youth of color, at a young age are grappling with police harassment, living in debilitated, blighted communities, living without adequate food and shelter, and living without adequate public facilities. Echoing Giroux (2008), “the cultural of cruelty and inequality” present in the age of “bootstrap capitalism” is also spawning an “epidemic of violence,” which is causing pain, suffering, and alienation for many youth. As Grossberg suggests (2007):

The U.S. infant mortality rate is higher than that of any industrialized nation in the world. More importantly, 75% of all violent deaths (including homicide, suicide, and firearms-related deaths) of children in the industrialized world occur in the United States. The suicide rate for kids under the age of fourteen is double the rate of the industrialized world...And while it is hard to get statistics, it appears that for every violent and sexual offense committed by kids, there are three such crimes committed by adults against kids. (p. 97)

Today's youth are also often preyed upon by political leaders in economically depressed communities in the US. These communities often turn to the elite leaders, the very individuals responsible for the lack of adequate jobs, resources, and social provisions in North America, to build juvenile detention centers and prisons. In essence, securing jobs for its citizens often comes at the expense of minoritized youth of color and impoverished youth of the dominant culture, who are, ultimately, forced to live, at an increasingly younger age, life in confinement (Giroux, 2009).

Youths' quality of life has also been denigrated by the implementation of commercialized and militarized practices in K-12 educational structures. For instance, many urban schools in the US and Canada, plagued by the state contracting its economic support of education, are unsafe, unsanitary, dilapidated, racially segregated and overcrowded institutions, where ill-equipped educators implement "drill and kill" methods of instruction (Kozol, 2006; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Porfilio & Malott, 2008; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010). Minoritized students must also grapple with military recruiters' continual attempts to cajole them to join the US imperial forces. When NCLB (No Child Left Behind) was implemented in 2001, the US military was granted the power to enter school settings and, not coincidentally, have preyed upon the most socially and economically vulnerable student populations.

In response to the child-hating culture offered by the ruling elite, youth have increasingly banded together over the past decade to raise their doubts, concerns, and oppositions to the policies, practices, and structures imperiling their life chances as well as affecting the quality of life of working-class peoples across the globe. Unlike youth in previous generations, however, today's youth are starting to organize around local, community, and international concerns in high school settings, rather than remaining idle until they attend college or university (Fine as cited in Verderame, 2009). Fortunately, compared to youth in previous decades, today's youth have an easier time unearthing where they can turn to work with others who have encountered similar debilitating situations or are critically aware about the urgent need to dismantle structures, policies, and practices that cause oppression. They also have an easier time locating additional informational sources so as to understand the nature of social and economic problems impacting global citizens. The growth of mass media and social networking have provided outlets for youth to connect with marginalized populations, build globalized intergenerational networks that are designed to highlight what causes oppression, and find political sites and other 'free spaces' where they can lobby for fundamental change in schools and in the wider society (Kippenbrock & Thornburgh, 2009; Verderame, 2009). According to Fine (2009), mass media and social networking have also broadened the scope and sophistication of youth activism:

People are working both locally and in some cases globally. So it's operating at multiple levels, and that's really exciting. It's powerful for young people to feel like they're part of national and sometime international movement of youth trying to create change. (Fine as cited in Verderame, 2009)

In some cases, new forms of youth activism have emanated from preexisting youth movements that have challenged unjust social and economic formations on a local, national, or international level. For instance, over the past several years, numerous minoritized and impoverished youth from dominant cultures across the globe have been inspired by the cultural work and alternative narratives of hip-hop and punk pedagogues who banded against many of the unjust conditions influencing their lives in North America during the 1980s and 1990s. Their narrative reflected working-class youth and communities dealing with joblessness, homelessness, over policing, police brutality, and overcrowded and unfunded schools (Malott & Porfilio, 2007; Porfilio & Carr, 2010; Prier, 2010). Youth have now merged the two alternative cultures, analyzing their music, art, and activism, in order to reflect critically on how neoliberal globalization, deindustrialization, speed technology, and Western militarism are spawning social and economic problems in localized contexts as well as fueling economic and environmental devastation across the globe.

The hip-hop and punk pedagogues' activism also functions as emancipatory guideposts for many of today's disaffected youth. They learn what steps to take in building a collectivist worldwide, intergenerational movement to subvert the social relations responsible for today's morally bankrupt world. For example, hip-hop artists, punk pedagogues, activists, and other intellectuals have created a virtual community called Rap Conscient (www.rap-conscient.com). Community members generate blogs, essays, and share their music to confront the policy makers, business leaders, and politicians responsible for marginalizing youth socially, emotionally, and economically. Artists who frequent the website also invite calls to action, highlight worldwide protests, and publicize events and concerts designed to challenge the neoliberal status quo. Furthermore, the website provides community members with links to the following categories of social justice organizations and groups: Anti-publicity organizations, hip-hop artists, militant groups, libertarian groups, media alternatives, and political prisoner organizations (Porfilio & Porfilio, 2010).

Other youth have developed an online presence to bring awareness to their grassroots efforts, which are designed to confront social injustice in their schools and in their communities. For instance, Seattle's Young People's Project is typical of how many youth-lead organizations, which are supported financially by non-profit organizations and socially by adults, employ the Internet to showcase how their groups empower youth "to express themselves and to take action on the issues that affect their lives" (<http://www.sypp.org/about-us>). Youth showcase a range of activities on the Internet, such as workshops, participatory action research projects, conferences, and speaker series, in which they partake to make sense of the hegemonic forces causing racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, and environmental degradation. Finally, some youth artists not only employ technology and generate cultural activities to educate other youth about social problems impacting the globe, but also use the same pedagogical forms to engage educators and activists about the salience of implementing their messages,

cultural work, and art directly within schools and their surrounding communities. It is here that we pinpoint how one particular youth-led initiative, the 411 Initiative for Change, uses the virtual world to get its social commentary and instructional materials to youth and educators, as well as to showcase how art, music, and technology can be fused to generate culturally-relevant forms instruction. Their artistic and pedagogical work have the potency to captivate youths' attention and interest in understanding their social world and in joining their peers and other socially-committed actors in the ongoing global struggle to eliminate injustice, hate, and hostility.

The 411 Initiative for Change and Research Methods

More than 10 years ago the 411 Initiative for Change launched in Toronto, Canada in an effort to offer a pathway for young people to analyze and resist unacceptable patterns of human corruption. Tamara Dawit, Patrick McCormick, and Anita Wong founded the organization; they realized that the growing intensification of violence, poverty, pollution, racism, and other social maladies, permeating life across the globe, can only be ameliorated if youth are prepared to be agents of social transformation, individuals who hold the civic imagination to be "self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live" (Giroux, 2010). The founders also believed it was imperative to provide youth opportunities to network with other 'border' youth, activists, and socially-committed artists. By building these connections, they hope the participants generate collectivist movements "on common global issues, in their domestic and international contexts" ("The 411 Initiative for Change"). Thus far, they have reached over 100,000 youth with their multimedia presentations, music, workshops and art in schools and communities across Canada, and have given inspiration and hope to numerous young adults who frequently seek advice and guidance in relation to solving pressing problems in their lives, problems within their communities, and understanding social issues impacting peoples across the globe. They have also inspired countless educators and activists to implement culturally-relevant curricula in K-12 classrooms and other social sites. The curricula are intended to guide youth to be socially aware, empathetic individuals who are dedicated to transforming society. Educators and activists have found invaluable information on the organization's website in their pursuit to transform students' lives, such as instructional designs, youth-led organizations' cultural work, and strategies for developing youth-led organizations within often-hostile educational communities.

Employing qualitative research methods, a uniform set of interview questions was compiled and distributed through email to the participants. The participants include two of the organization's founders and two of the organization's current artists. A qualitative framework was employed because it allows researchers to capture the experiences and subjective experiences and interpretations of social phenomena as well as establishes the participants rather than researchers as the experts in the study (Creswell, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). The interview method employed in this study allowed the participants to share their experiences with creating or taking part in youth-lead organizations and being situated in oppressive contexts during their childhood. This method also allowed the participants to share their insights in terms of the impact the initiative has had on youth, educators, and other community members, of the social forces that cause young people to

become disaffected and oppressed, and of the challenges that may make it difficult to sustain the 411 initiative.

The researchers also engaged in telephone exchanges with the participants. This allowed the researchers to clarify any ambiguous information from the transcripts and the participants to provide further information on their experiences with youth, schools, and social activism (see Appendixes A and B). Then, the authors combed through the transcripts to find common themes within the participants' narratives. The data collection process was completed when the authors examined the youth-led organization's website for additional information that focused on the organization's pedagogical and cultural work.

The participants' narratives provide teacher-educators, administrators, schoolteachers, and activists key insight in developing sustained informal educative initiatives inside and outside of K-12 classrooms, which have the potency to develop students' self-confidence, critical-thinking skills, imagination, and engagement in social and political issues impacting life across the globe. Within the scope of their interviews, the 411 members focused their attention on their *communication* with youth across Canada, the *reaction* from students and administrators to their messages, workshops, multimedia presentations, and community work, and what the *future* looks like for the organization.

Communication with Youth Across Canada

The artists and founders of the 411 Initiative for Change are quite cognizant that classroom practices typically generated by schoolteachers in North America to spark, echoing Freire (2005), a "passion to know" within students are generally a failure. For instance, most students find little relevance in social studies teachers continually spewing disconnected facts about 'dead White' men and their military conquests for the purpose of having them regurgitate this information on corporately-sponsored, high-stakes examinations (Kornfeld, 1998). Instead, the 411 team recognizes that most of today's 'border' youth express themselves, communicate with each other and their family members, and learn about their social world through various 'teaching machines,' such as televisions, videogames, cell phones, zines, music, and other art forms¹. The founders of the organization have much experience engaging youth with technology and culturally-relevant artistic forms. For instance, Tamara Dawit, a founder of the organization and currently the Executive Director, has formulated educational programs that impact social issues around the world, has led initiatives that focus on youth and AIDS, and also has employed the media and advertising to capture social commentary proffered by young people. Tamara has also worked with the National Youth Anti-Racism Network, the 2006 International Aids Conference, and the United Nations Association. Here she speaks

¹ We are very cognizant that corporate giants also win from youths' use of multimedia and attraction to media culture, as they not only inculcate youth to embrace such hegemonic ideologies of consumerism, individualism, and intolerance, but also propagate a lucrative market to sell goods and services to children and their caregivers. The 411 Initiative for Change does attempt to get beyond how youth typically use technology and their interaction with media culture. The artists guide youth to develop their own alterative stories and poems with technology. They showcase their intellectual work online and perform their work in schools and in their communities.

about how technology is fused with art to give socially-conscious artists an outlet to express their ideas around issues impacting youth and society as well as to grab the attention of youth who are exposed to their school or community-based presentations.

411 is a Canadian arts-based organization founded by a group of young people interested in using art to engage young people in social commentary and advocacy. 411 has worked with members of the Canadian arts, music and film industry to produce quality arts programming fusing the content of Canadian NGO's and charities working on international development issues affecting young people both in Canada and around the world. 411 aims to provide a platform using the arts as a medium for the voices and ideas of young people to be heard on the world stage.²

Patrick McCormack, Program Director of the 411 Initiative for Change, is also deeply familiar with how to incorporate music, technology, and art to gain youths' attention and interest in social issues impacting their lives. With a love for hip hop and a talent for organization and music, Patrick formed the successful group *Boogaloo Trybe*, which gained popularity from its roots in urban Ottawa. As Mantes, one of the group members, stated, "Boogaloo is not just about a crew, it's about a force, it's about building business, it's about recognizing our roles, it's about stepping up and becoming leaders" (Dj Alive, 2003). Patrick has worked and studied in many areas dealing with music creation, production, and engineering. He has also participated in numerous speaking engagements pertaining to music, Black history, and conflict resolution.

In addition to the particular platform that is used to communicate with youth, the 411 organization is cognizant that in order to forge a critical dialogue amongst youth and to generate a mutual point to embark upon the process of peaceful and transformative social change, its members must illustrate to youth that young people are the social actors who have been the most exploited and have experienced the most social and economic oppression with the rise of neoliberal capitalism (Grossberg, 2007; Author & Carr, 2010; Author & Malott, 2008). Below, Tamara addresses some of the societal issues that the 411 foregrounds to its audience to give a more personalized perspective of why they must become educated about what causes oppression and why they must be active in the struggle to build a more socially just world.

Some of the most critical issues impacting young people, both in Canada and internationally, relate back to the basic rights of young people as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child. In Canada and other countries youth play a very tokenistic role in policy making (if they play any role at all) – especially in the formation of policy that directly impacts young people. Other critical issues including HIV/AIDS (infection and stigma) which is further impacted by poverty – both which are real issues affecting young people even in a "developed" country like Canada. The final issue which 411 has noted through our programming in Canada and overseas relates to integration and belonging (faced by immigrant and refugee populations) and discrimination and exclusion faced by indigenous populations.

² To help center the participants' voices in this center, we chose to italicize their narratives and lyrics.

The artists and administrators of the 411 team also create a deep connection with their audience because their cultural work is often a product of struggles they have confronted living in this unjust society, as well as a reflection of a deep commitment to improving the human condition through critical awareness, collectivist movements, and pro-social values, such as freedom, respect, and empathy. Here Patrick notes some of the issues of focus for the 411. Several of the issues he confronted when growing up in Ottawa, Canada, where racism, violence, and encountering Whitewashed curricula in schools.

Key issues of focus for the 411 Initiative have been HIV/AIDS, Human Rights, Black History Education, Asian Heritage Education, Anti-Violence and Conflict Resolution, Diversity and the Canadian Identity, Girl's Rights, Women's Rights, Anti-Racism, Diversity Appreciation, and various aspects of the music business.

It can be noted that some aspects seem to be significant to all administrators and artists, while other categories are personal and unique. Tamara, for example, has extensive experience dealing with AIDS awareness and social stigma for those who have the disease. Patrick has dedicated much of his time drawing attention to the importance of Black history and eliminating youth violence. The administrators seem to look at the concepts and goals from a macro perspective. They outline the total impact of the 411 organization and highlight all the artists and the topics that the artists cover. The artists, however, have more focused issues emphasized by the nature of their performances and backgrounds. Here Eternia, one of the many artists involved in the 411 Initiative for Change, discusses some of the issues most critical to her work.

We have a number of initiatives that we work on including AIDS Awareness, Global Women's Issues, Gun Violence, Black History Month, and more. I've had the privilege of touring with the 411 for AIDS awareness in Canadian high schools, and am about to embark on a tour creating awareness for Women's issues globally.

Eternia was raised in a poor multicultural Canadian neighborhood. She sought her own path by leaving her household at age fifteen. Despite dealing the social, emotional, and physical costs associated with being impoverished for most her life, she completed high school and college with outstanding grades. Strongly influenced by the wonderful women in her family, Eternia has been active in the Canadian hip-hop industry for more than a decade. She is also deeply committed to learning more about what causes social injustice because she recognizes, unlike the mass media conglomerates and political leaders that demonize, criminalize, and trivialize youth, that young people are “smart and empathetic and aware.”

Below, Dwayne Morgan, another artist from the 411 organization, reflects upon how some the artists' interests to solve specific social problems motivate thousands of young people to learn more about what causes injustices and how they can formulate their own youth-led initiatives or join other social collectives to eradicate human misery.

Through the tours that we've done, we've managed to reach thousands of

young people, some who have gone on to start chapters of Amnesty International in their schools. Recently, one of the artists, Rochester, went to Africa with the organization. That experience led to his desire to do more. As a result, he is now actively fundraising and encouraging young people to join him to raise funds for African AIDS orphans. Personally, I hope to help others to understand sexism and misogyny in pop culture.

A distinguished musician who lives in Toronto, Dwayne has spent his life attempting to better the world in many ways. Dwayne has toured numerous countries and, in appreciation for his music and writing, has been awarded with the African Canadian Achievement Award for Youth Achievement and the Harry Jerome Award for Excellence in the Arts. Frustrated with racial inequity and inspired to help youth across the globe, Dwayne encourages youth to become educated and empower themselves to change the world. A family man and college graduate, he has published chapbooks³ and volumes of his work.

Each of the administrators and artists brings strength to the organization and, as has been observed, their communication with youth varies. However, as their narratives illustrate, they are cognizant that many youth will only be open to the ideas they proffer during their presentations if they use the technological modalities that youth harness to communicate and to understand themselves and their social world on a daily basis. Their narratives also indicate that the artists must have a deep connection with the issues they highlight during their presentations if youth are to open to the messages generated during their presentations. Finally, the artists and organizers realize that most youth will only connect with their cultural work if they demonstrate how specific social and economic problems impact them and other youth across the globe.

Although the organization's first priority is to develop its workshops and multimedia presentations to make young people engage in social commentary and advocacy, it also must try to package its presentations to at least be palatable to the educators, media outlets, administrators, and citizens who have the power to thwart the organization from engaging young people in the struggle to transform the world. Despite the organizations' and artists' attempts to position the various constituents surrounding the education of youth in Canada to be open to the 411's activists' agenda, the reaction to the organization's agenda and presentations is not unified. Ultimately, there are many social processes involved in how an audience responds to any texts, such as the audience members' subject position, the social context of the act of consumption, and the form in which the text is packaged and presented (Dover, 2007). ⁴Below, we document the 411

³ A chapbook is recognized by Dictionary.com as "A small book or pamphlet containing poems, ballads, stories, or religious tracts." Modern chapbooks frequently appear as online publications of poetry that circulate within specific spheres of content.

⁴ There is much to offer critical pedagogues by taking a more in-depth examination of the social process behind youth and teachers' consumption of media texts produced by student-led organizations such as the 411 Initiative for Change. This form of investigation is beyond the scope of our project, since our focus was centered on understanding the youth artists and leaders' motivation for creating this youth-led initiative, how they spark youths' interest in understanding the nature of their social worlds, their experiences with interacting with youth and teachers who were exposed to their cultural work, and the strategies they implemented to overcome barriers to enacting youth-based initiatives in K-12 schools.

members' perceptions and experiences with how youth, teachers, and administrators react to the multimedia theatrical presentations, workshops, and other online social-justice initiatives generated by this organization.

Reaction to the 411

Two major audiences seemed to emerge in the communications with the 411 organization. According to the participants, each group held different perceptions and reactions to the messages of the 411 Initiative for Change. The first audience, and primary recipients of the work of the organization, is comprised of students. The second audience includes those individuals and organizations who are related to the target audience, but who are not the chief benefactors of the presentations. These members include media, parents, teachers, and administrators.

The reaction from students has been overwhelmingly positive. This is not surprising because, as demonstrated above, the organization packages its messages in ways to spark students' interest in unearthing what causes injustices and how to work collectively to eliminate oppressive conditions within their schools, communities, and the wider society. The 411 organization serves as a catalyst for social transformation: Its members spread a message of hope and they serve as positive role models who youth can relate to, who youth can believe in, who youth can understand, and who youth can harness to examine socially-mediated nature of their own experiences. Administrators and artists alike highlighted numerous instances where students responded eagerly and genuinely to the organizations' cultural work.

Really, just watching how the youth get into our presentations is very positive. The interaction and engagement is truly inspiring. Young people are smart and empathetic and aware. Everyday it inspires me to learn more, know more, and be a better example. Young people are looking to me for answers. I know many women and girls have approached me and reached out to me, expressing how my music mirrors many of their experiences, such as pain, sadness, joy, and others. They say, "It's like you wrote my life story in your songs." That happens a lot. I think people crave authenticity and genuineness. I provide that for a lot of people. I'm just me.

Eternia discussed the energy, inspiration, and responsibility that modeling for youth entails. The artists draw in this strength and fortitude and use them to instill the need for fundamental personal and societal change. Students can then guide their friends and family members to reflect upon what causes oppression, generate youth-led initiatives that challenge social inequalities, and procure funding for critical global issues themselves, which have the potency to fuel an ever-expanding epicenter of progress. Many students have discussed the organization's initiatives long after the artists moved on. Not consequently, some of these students joined youth-led organizations; some students fundraised to meet personal and collective goals; and some students even created their own youth-led groups, which are designed to challenge injustice, remove unjust policies, and to implement pro-social institutions.

The accepting and positive reaction of students has not necessarily been the conventional reaction of parents, teachers, and administrators. For those individuals in power in the educational arena, there have been some instances, albeit rarely, where reaction to the presentations was negative. Some individuals hold negative perceptions and uninformed opinions of youth, minorities, and hip-hop music and artists. They appear to have internalized pernicious stereotypes often associated with youth in general and hip-hop and minoritized youth in particular, such as being criminals, lazy, gang bangers, drug users, and anti-intellectual social actors.

The organization felt that some of the audiences' initial perceptions of youth and their presentation also emanated from the privileged racial class status of the audience, who may never have dealt with institutional forms of oppression. Other adults also may have failed to connect with the groups' messages because the form of the presentations employed music and technology that were unfamiliar to them. Most often, the initial misunderstanding or skepticism about the organization was replaced with acceptance and encouragement.

Teachers are often wary of us when we arrive. For example they find out the project is being run by a group of young people or, in some all white parts of Canada, people of color (we actually had a teacher in Nova Scotia tell a presenter that the school had never had a black person come and talk to the students). These things make the principals and administrators look visually worried before the show starts. However, after the show, they are always happy with the project and many of those schools have invited us back. Basically our group defies the stereotype of what guest speakers to high school are supposed to look like.

Tamara noted that some teachers and administrators from White middle-class communities hold stereotypical views of minoritized youth and hip-hop culture and look "visually worried" before the 411 artists perform. Patrick, who wisely observed that the organization had the ability to "smash stereotypes," also shared comments about the need for the organization to build credibility with multiple institutions, particularly schools. Many times adults questioned the motives of the group, most likely because they wonder whether the group has the understanding or ability to make a difference in the lives of students, and doubted that the 411 organization could accomplish its goals.

However, the participants do not mention the numerous educators, administrators, and teachers, and youth across Canada who never got beyond their resistance to the 411 organization, its messages, and its members. They are the individuals who were exposed to the artists' messages and the organizers' lesson plans on the Internet or learned about the organization from students in their learning communities. Beyond this shallow contact with the 411, they never plan to have any additional contact with the youth-led initiative. They never got beyond the negative stereotypes associated with the artists, beyond seeing the artists' messages as irrelevant because they believe the Canadian society supports multiculturalism and diversity, and beyond blaming youth for the social and economic problems resonating within and outside of Canada. In the end, most schoolteachers and adults realized that the 411 organization felt positively about the impact the presentation had on their academic communities. It remains questionable, however, whether some audience members believe in the organization's message of

guiding students to become self-reflective about the nature of their world, and whether they build upon the organization's cultural work in the attempt to leave youth better prepared and more motivated to become involved in promoting social justice and equity in schools and in society.

The Future of the 411

Accompanying the themes of communication and reaction, there was a realistic and hopeful message concerning the future of the 411 Initiative for Change. Each member of the organization had her or his own concerns and hopes about the future of the organization. Much of the concern was stated in the repeated comments that considered future funding. Because the organization deals with arts and youth, it falls outside many traditional charitable funding categories that are recognized by the Canadian government. With the assistance of numerous artists, organizations, and corporations, the 411 organization has been able to flourish, at least in the short-term.

Another potential challenge for the organization is the need to keep youth-focused. As every organization grows and ages, there is a distinct possibility that the original energy and focus strays, changes, or loses touch with the initial excitement and direction that brought the organization to life in the first place. Here Dwayne makes it clear that the organization's impact may wane if it fails to address how the social world is altering what is important to Canadian youth:

The major challenge that faces the organization is the fact that it isn't run by young people. With that said, the organization has to keep in tune with the speed with which youth culture changes, so that it can always stay relevant.

Just like the organization, I need to stay relevant. The older I get, the further removed I am from the heart of youth culture. The difficult thing is finding an "in," so that I can always know what issues are on the minds of youth.

Dwayne and the remaining participants all recognize the importance of their age may eventually disconnect them from the culture that impacts their current audience. Addressing this challenge is necessary to keep the organization relevant to its current audience and to bring new youth into its programs.

Not coincidentally, the participants mentioned they think it is vital to be open to the ideas put forth by youth in terms of making the 411 more culturally-relevant and youth-centered. Over the past decade, the organization has, in several cases, acted upon the suggestions put forth by youth. It now incorporates contemporary issues impacting youth in Canada as well as the cultural forms consumed and produced by young adults. For example, based on youths' feedback, the organization generated a "video commentary with girls in countries around the world, theater, music performance and audience participation" for the purpose of giving girls across the globe a space to highlight "both their struggles and successes in impacting change as local heroes" (<http://www.whatsthe411.ca/>). Also, based on youths' suggestions, the organization is contemplating reaching out to punk artists who are committed to fostering youth consciousness and activism. By continually acknowledging and respecting world issues significant to youth, as well as listening to the concerns and ideas generated by its

audience, the 411 organization believes it will stay relevant, young, and positive for many years to come.

Eternia provided the researchers some lyrics that summarized her thoughts and desires for the future:

*The story isn't over, my friends, it's the beginning.
Some things I can't explain in words, it takes a stronger vision.
But still – listen to the story, God forgive him for me,
Have mercy on my father's soul when he's to meet your glory.
'Cause every man's a sinner right? Some will take a life...
Some will beat their wife, repenting for sins in afterlife.
Nobody deserves the life you led – my mother, you bled for me,
Fought tooth and nail just to be there for me.
In the trunk of the car, were you scared for me?
Knowing that he'd pull the trigger on you, in a second you'd be dead for me?!
And that's the funny part of matrimony –
Feeling that you got a duty to the church, u'd sacrifice your own body.
I love my life, I love my mother, and I love myself.
I love my family, I'd sacrifice to no one else.
And if you taught me one thing, Mother you taught me well:
this is just another survival story to tell.
And if you taught me one thing, Mother you taught me this:
Always have Faith, Live Strong, and Resist! ("Its called life," 2005)*

As the song described, invoking positive change in a society predicated on greed, materialism, and individualism is a struggle. It is not an easy road, but there is tremendous significance in those who lead the way as well as in the journey itself. The selfless and talented individuals in the 411 Initiative for Change exemplify such leadership.

Through the participants' narratives, we learned several key insights in relation to promoting culturally-relevant and youth-centered pedagogies within schools and other social contexts. Teachers, activists and other citizens would be best served to have a personal connection to the social and cultural issues they highlight for their audience, employ technological mediums familiar to contemporary youth, and capture how current social and economic issues directly impact youth across the globe. They ought to be prepared to confront resistant educators, parents, administrators and youth who have been inculcated to believe that the problems confronting global citizens are a result of individual deficiencies, the toxic values embraced by minoritized groups, or today's socially-generative youth, rather than connecting how neoliberal policies, practices, and

structures are behind the intense suffering and misery experienced by most globalized citizens. Finally, they ought to be responsive to the social and economic forces that alter what youth find socially relevant, be open to the ideas put forth by youth, and recognize if their way of thinking and doing are out of sync with youth.

The Value of Youth-led Organizations and Arts to Engendering a Transformative pedagogy for the 21st Century

The clarion call generated by Joe Kincheloe, (2007, p.10) before his untimely death, to reinvigorate critical pedagogy “as we move toward the second decade of the twenty century,” so that it “is to be more than a historical blip on the educational landscape” can be answered, in part, by schoolteachers, administrators, critical scholars, and other activists taking seriously the artistic forms and cultural work produced by youth-led organizations, such as the 411 Initiative for Change. The directors of the 411 Initiative for Change place at the forefront the experiences and ideas of youth who are dedicated to understanding what causes oppression in their world and how they can engage other youth in the same reflexive examination of uncovering the policies, practices, and structures making the world miserable for youth and the vast majority of global citizens. Unlike some critical pedagogues who fail to think about how to make their messages of critique and hope assessable to youth and other citizens, the activists and artists from the 411 are dedicated, like Kincheloe, to developing methods that broaden the scope of transformative work in schools, on the Internet, and in other social contexts. As we have demonstrated, they design multimedia presentations that attract youths’ interests and attention, reflect upon how their own lived experiences can be used as a bridge to help youth and adults reflect upon what is responsible for injustice inside and outside of schools, and structure workshops, instructional designs, and highlight other resources that can help educators and school leaders develop additional forms of critical pedagogies inside and outside of their learning communities.

Therefore, we call on critical pedagogues to examine the cultural manifestations and cultural work generated by youth. For instance, the Ya-Ya network is a youth-led organization that uses multimedia presentations and workshops, and engages in critical dialogue with anti-racist, anti-sexist, and other allies in order to eliminate the recruitment of disempowered youth into the US military (<http://www.yayanetwork.org/>). There are also critical elements of youth culture, such as those possessed by anarchists, queer youth, and female punks, that capture what factors cause oppression in youths’ lives, provide guidance in building collective movements that challenge the structures breeding social inequalities, and lend vision for structuring schools and the wider society on democratic rather than on asymmetrical power relationships (Driver, 2008; Leblanc, 1999; Haworth, 2010). If critical pedagogues take seriously the cultural manifestations and cultural work generated by socially-aware and critically-engaged youth, critical pedagogy will move beyond being an ‘ivory tower’ phenomenon that merely stirs discussion and debate amongst academics and students in graduate seminars, in coffeehouses, in journal articles, or at academic conferences. Critical pedagogy will become an inclusive social force that pinpoints how today’s globalized, technological, electronic-based era impacts youth as well as highlights subjugated knowledge generated by youth and other oppressed social groups. Therefore, critical pedagogy will have the

potency to meet its major challenge of the second decade of the 21st century—engaging youth and other concerned social actors in a reflexive process to critically understand and transform the world.

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Appendix A

Questions for the directors:

1. In your own words, tell us about the 411 project?
2. When did the 411 movement begin?
3. What was the motivation for the 411 project?
4. What are some of the most critical issues facing contemporary youth in Canada and across the globe?
5. Does the 411 organization focus on specific issues? Please list those issues, explain what they are, and elaborate on 411's methods to impact the issues.
6. Specifically, how have individuals and organizations responded to the 411 project?
7. What are some of the implementation challenges that occurred during the formulation and continuance of the 411 project?
8. What are some of the most positive aspects of the 411 project?
9. How could the 411 project be improved?
10. Where is the 411 organization going in the future?

Appendix B

Questions for the artists:

1. In your own words, tell us about the 411 project?
2. What are the most positive aspects of the 411 project?
3. Can you provide some examples that show how the 411 project has influenced youths in Canada and across the globe?
4. What challenges does the 411 organization face?
5. How could the 411 project be improved?
6. Please tell us some personal history (such as your age, the location of your birth, the location of your childhood, etc)
7. What were some key struggles that you faced when growing up?
8. When and why did you begin in the 411 organization (what was your motivation)?

9. What specific issue(s) do you hope to bring to the forefront of public knowledge? Please list and explain those issue(s).
10. Please list some figures that influence(d) your life/art.
11. Can you provide some examples that show how your music/art has influenced youths in Canada and across the globe?
12. What things have you done, do you do, and do you plan on doing that positively impact social justice issues?
13. How have individuals and organizations responded to you as an artist?
14. What challenges do you face?
15. Can you provide some lyrics that summarize your thoughts and desires for change?
16. Where do you see the 411 project going in the future?

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