



Process Over Product

How Creative Youth Development Can Lead to Peace

Adam Jacobs

“The person who fell off the person who fell off.” This was the response of four-year-old Aaron to the question, “What do you want to do a play about?” in the Kids Creative Summer Camp.

Aaron meant to say “the person who fell off” only once. In most settings, such an accidental double phrasing would be corrected and forgotten. However, in Kids Creative, the rule is “All ideas are good.” Other campers built on Aaron’s slip-up to create a play called “The Journey to Find The Person Who Fell Off The Person Who Fell Off.” This group of 20 children, ages 4 to 12, who came from various New York City schools, engaged in a brainstorming session in which they shared ideas and asked questions. Everyone in the group, including the teaching artists, added their own ideas using the phrase, “Yes, and....” A storyline took shape: The vice president of Chocolateville was standing on the shoulders of the president of Chocolateville at their inauguration when they both slipped into the

Chocolate River. Now a group of heroes has to make a treacherous journey to find them. Each child created his or her character, and the group found ways to weave the story together. Thanks to the Kids Creative process-oriented environment, one idea from a four-year-old child developed into a five-part musical play, which was performed for friends and family at the close of the camp session.

This scenario took place in one of the first Kids Creative summer camps, shortly after I founded the organization with my brother in 2000. At the time, we worked with only about 50 kids each year. We ran the summer camp because we genuinely enjoyed the fun, unique ideas that were sparks for original musicals.

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Now, 19 years later, Kids Creative is a New York City nonprofit that runs afterschool and summer programs with over 1,000 youth each year. Our programs still use this creativity-oriented process to produce original musicals, works of art, videos, dances, and more.

In 2008, when Kids Creative received our first 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant funding, we were able to include more youth and add homework help, STEM, and sports to our arts offerings. Throughout this expansion, we have maintained our process-oriented educational structures. Whether they are creating a musical play or a Lego robot, playing chess or learning a martial art, all participants have a voice as contributors and collaborators.

At Kids Creative, the arts, science, and sports are vehicles for individual and community growth. We see ourselves as a creative youth development (CYD) program engaged in peace education. Our vision is that “a better, more peaceful future is achievable by teaching youth the creative, critical thinking, and social skills necessary to make peace within themselves and in society.” Our process-oriented approach to creativity builds what Elise Boulding (2000) calls a “peace culture.” She writes, “Peace cultures thrive on and are nourished by visions of how things might be, in a world where sharing and caring are part of the accepted lifeways for everyone” (p. 29).

To build peace, people must be able “to imagine something different and better than what currently exists” (Boulding, 2018, p. 29). That’s exactly what the young people in Kids Creative are doing when they dream up a place like Chocolateville—they are envisioning an entirely new world where they are integral parts of both the process and the outcome. In traditional education settings, children are seen as vessels to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 2018). A process-focused orientation considers all participants as equal contributors in building a new and more peaceable world here and now. In this world, what some may see as a mistake on the part of one of the youngest members of the group is actually the catalyst for a creative group project. In this world, when individuals see that their ideas are listened to and respected, everyone is motivated to create, support one another, and overcome obstacles that may otherwise undermine the product.

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What Is Creative Youth Development?

According to the Creative Youth Development National Partnership (n.d.a), “CYD is a recent term for a longstanding theory of practice that integrates creative skill-building, inquiry, and expression with positive youth development principles.” Many people equate creativity with the arts and creative output with artistic products, like plays, music, and visual art. However, creativity is not simply the development of final products. Rather, it is the journey of learning, trying, thinking, failing, and succeeding. A common thread among CYD programs is that we are process-oriented.

The CYD National Partnership is building a community of practitioners, program partners, and funders who advocate for and support the use of the imagination in nontraditional learning environments. As Kids Creative has been combining arts education, youth development, and peace education for almost 20 years, we have in essence been doing CYD without calling it that. I am relieved to have a name for our work and a community across the country to define, develop, amplify, and fund programs that use creativity. The CYD National Partnership’s core values of “racial equity and social justice, youth voice, and collective action” (n.d.b) are particularly rooted in peace education.

Augusto Boal, founder of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), saw his revolutionary project as a way “to reinvent the past and to invent the future” (1998, p. 7). Boal developed TO as an immersive storytelling process that enables participants to understand and reshape narratives around power, class, and race, while focusing on human rights. He even used TO as “legislative theatre” to help make laws when he was elected a member of parliament for Rio de Janeiro in 1993 (Boal, 1998). Although the stakes in CYD programs are not as high as they are in national legislation, CYD can be a training ground for future activism. In a safe environment, youth can use the process of creation to understand the past and work collectively to design a better future, valuing the process of sharing ideas as much as the products created.

All out-of-school (OST) programs have the potential to be process-oriented, and many already are. Because the academic requirements after school are not as stringent as during the school day, the curriculum can be more flexible. For some OST programs, doing CYD may

require only small shifts in training, philosophy, and curriculum—not a major overhaul of programmatic structures that often are already process-oriented. Doing CYD in an OST program, whether the focus is arts, science, or any other discipline that requires both creativity and critical thinking, simply means taking time for individual growth and community development—all of which, I argue, is a way of building peace.

Creativity, Process Orientation, and Peace

Like the creative process, building peace is a journey, not an end goal. As the world shows us daily, peace is not a guarantee, and violence often rears its ugly head. The process of building peace requires creativity, ingenuity, patience, and perseverance. Peace educators commonly frame our work in the domains of *positive* and *negative peace*. This distinction has existed in both theory and practice for a long time (Bajaj, 2008). Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks of these domains in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963), calling for a “positive peace which is the presence of justice,” as opposed to negative peace, which is simply “the absence of tension.” Merely removing physical violence is not enough. In order to change society, people must pursue justice for all human beings (King, 1963).

To bring the distinction between negative and positive peace to life in our OST program, Kids Creative’s former program director Suzu Ledoux reframed them as *reactive* and *proactive peace*. Reactive (or negative) peace involves reacting to existing violence: stopping a physical fight, for example, or intervening in a verbal altercation. Reactive peace can be seen as a product: You stop the fight, surface-level tensions are dissipated, and a type of peace is achieved. By contrast, proactive (or positive) peace, which is the goal of Kids Creative programs, means creating a space where violence doesn’t have to happen. Proactive peace is a process. In fact, the process of pursuing justice is actually peace itself. If we are all focused on a unified goal, we have to learn collective, positive ways of engaging and collaborating. We have to listen to one another, and we have to remove obstacles from our path before they disrupt the peace of the community.

As peace educators, we must believe in our own agency as changemakers. Cesar Augusto Rossatto refers

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to “transformative optimism,” in which people see themselves as “necessary and viable participants in the collective process” of resisting structural violence (quoted in Bajaj, 2008). Transformative optimism enables us to believe that Kids Creative and other process-oriented OST programs can have an impact in the world. Paolo Freire, whose seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018) guides many peace education practices, argues that the oppressed must be able to “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting

situation which they can transform” (p. 49). We believe that our youth, many of whom come from oppressed communities, must have the same perception—that they can change their world. I can think of at least three ways process-oriented CYD programs can help build a peaceable future where youth have the opportunity to thrive.

1. Give Youth Voice

In many traditional education systems, youth are not treated as valuable and engaged participants. They have no voice in, for example, creating programs in their schools. In this system, which Freire (2018) calls “banking education,” educators resist dialogue and treat students as “objects of assistance” (p. 83). They are often concerned with a power dynamic, thinking that giving kids choice means losing control. By contrast, the experience of Kids Creative is that allowing participants to choose how to participate means that they are engaged and therefore feel driven to agree to and abide by program guidelines. Freire calls this approach “problem-posing education,” where people are “authentic” because they are “engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (p. 84). A well-thought-out process-oriented program, where youth have input and responsibility for setting and maintaining the program structure, actually can be safer for youth and staff because of a clear focus on engaging with and managing conflicts. By their very nature, hierarchical, product-oriented settings cannot give young people meaningful choices. They often require teaching staff to spend more time enforcing rules than engaging with the youth and the content.

2. Address Community Issues

OST programs in the U.S. exist in a highly unequal society. Often the areas with the greatest need for OST programs are high-poverty communities of color. The systems of oppression that create poverty and segregation are top-down, rules-heavy communities without much engagement from participants. These structures are replicated when underfunded OST programs brought in from the outside do not concern themselves with making positive, locally driven change. Though process-oriented CYD programs cannot solve all community woes, they do engage youth in the critical thinking and creativity skills that, as Boal (1998) says, allow them to “invent the future” (p. 7).

Process-oriented CYD programming relies heavily on individual relationships. Those relationships, in turn, can result in social change. The ability to make change and to build peace depends on being fully engaged in a collaborative process. In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown (2017) emphasizes the roles of process and relationships in change-driven work. She suggests that change-makers must “be like water” (p. 42), with enough malleability to adjust to specific situations. Another principle is “Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass” (p. 42). Building relationships takes time, but the result is a stronger community that is driven to ensure that its collaborative product succeeds.

3. Build 21st Century Skills

Skills like conflict resolution and critical thinking are key to the creative process. When given the opportunity and guided with positive language, young people can use the same skills they need for an exciting creative brainstorming session to interact peacefully with others in the classroom, on the playground, or in their community. Participants are challenged to make connections between their imaginative stories and the world around them. As they grow older in Kids Creative and experience more sophisticated, nuanced stories, they can also critically analyze situations they encounter in the world in order to devise unique solutions.

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Creating Space for Creativity and Peace

Creativity is a key 21st century skill, but it does not live in a void. It needs structure, particularly when it is part of youth development. The innovative rock musician Frank Zappa said:

The most important thing in art is The Frame. For painting: literally; for other arts: figuratively—because, without this humble appliance, you can't know where The Art stops and The Real World begins. You have to put a “box” around it because otherwise, what is that...on the wall? (Zappa & Occhiogrosso, 1989, p. 140)

Kids Creative uses figurative frames in many ways. Goals and final products, for example, are important frames. We might say, “Group 1 is going to create a 15-minute musical play that we will perform in two weeks about whatever topic you decide as a group. Group 2 is going to put on a science fair in two weeks, with everyone developing their science projects in groups of four people each. After the two weeks, the groups will switch.” The frame of a specific goal—and the expectation of being able to fulfill the goal—builds camaraderie and trust among participants. It also helps the larger community see that they can rely on this CYD program to build something that everyone can see and be proud of.

The Cornerstones of a Process-Oriented Program

Kids Creative frames our programs as peace education. Early on, we had to define how to make peace happen. The result is our Four Cornerstones, which guide how we engage with one another, giving us a structure for creative thinking and peace education.

1. Be Safe, Don't Harm

A process-oriented CYD program aims to offer a space that is both physically and emotionally safe. Peace is visualized proactively, with the goal of building an equitable space for all. The entire program must be set up to identify potentially dangerous situations. Staff, participants, and families learn positive ways to engage with each other and with their environment. All are trained in conflict resolution techniques with the goal of avoiding harm. We also teach positive techniques to engage with

anyone who feels negatively “othered” or bullied and to take seriously any harm that may be done. Process-driven CYD programs clearly communicate that each person is valued, both as an individual and as part of the community. They have action steps to make that goal a reality.

Physical safety is the top priority. Everyone must be trained to keep themselves and others safe, no matter the situation. Many unsafe conditions, such as those that may arise when OST programs share space with other organizations and schools, can be anticipated and managed. OST groups should have plans in place should a situation become unsafe. Program staff and participants should proactively identify potential physical dangers and set up boundaries in a positive way.

“Safety first” refers not only to physical safety but also to emotional safety, with which it is linked. Children who feel emotionally unsafe may engage in physically unsafe behaviors. If they feel secure and supported, they are more likely to be self-aware and to support others in maintaining a safe space.

Bullying, for example, can lead to physical altercations. However, staff and participants can intervene before bullying gets that serious. Teenage author Aija Mayrock (2015), who has experienced being bullied herself, explains that unwanted, aggressive behavior that happens more than once involves multiple parties, not just the bully and the bullied. The “circle of bullying” includes those who assist, reinforce, observe, and try to stop the negative actions. To stop bullying, “no matter where a kid is in the circle of bullying, he or she needs support and guidance” (Mayrock, 2015, p. 17). Those who provide this support, such as teachers, must take care not to reinforce bullying through their words or actions.

At Kids Creative, we found early on that teasing was a challenge, even for adults, so we created the rule “No teasing or fake teasing.” The simple interpretation is that the person who feels teased gets to define what teasing means at that moment. The other parties are responsible for listening, trying to understand why the teased person feels that way, and taking steps to keep it from happening again. That may mean apologizing, using different language everyone agrees to, or changing the game the group is playing.

These tools enable youth to engage in conflict management so that conflicts can lead to growth instead of violence. Approaching conflicts in a positive and proactive way helps reduce harm. For example, everyone at Kids

Creative is trained to use “I statements” and to explain their feelings without attacking. With these tools, staff and participants can identify unsafe behavior and actions early on, when they are easier to resolve or redirect. Safety is a foundation for building peace in the program.

2. Support and Encourage

Part of helping each person feel safe in a creative space is showing support for all voices. Supportive strategies include active listening and asking questions to try to understand the other person’s ideas, actions, and motives. A great strategy during brainstorming is saying “Yes, and...” to ideas rather than “No, but...”

Through training and practice, CYD program participants learn to respond to ideas without attacking. They explore and face the underlying causes when someone feels unsupported and discouraged. With these skills, the whole group can recognize and celebrate each person’s contribution.

The skills of supporting and encouraging others, and the benefits of feeling supported and encouraged, can last a lifetime. If youth are trained early on to recognize systemic and individual biases, they can learn ways to avoid perpetuating the harm done by historical oppressions that still plague us today. Unfortunately, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other biases are a reality, but celebrating and supporting what makes us unique and learning how to truly listen to each other can be beneficial to all parties. These benefits can follow youth into the professional world, where systemic and individual biases often result in the underrepresentation and mistreatment of women and people of color. Columbia University scholar Valerie Purdie Greenaway (2017) explains that there are many benefits for teams in professional settings that recognize and respect differences. Such teams are successful because a multiplicity of voices are present, and the teams have tools to engage meaningfully with all those voices. Although no one OST program can dismantle systems of racism and sexism, programs can teach young people to create supportive and encouraging environments where each person can experience worth both as an individual and as a contributing member of a community. Later, those participants will envision ways to recreate such spaces in their work and their communities.

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3. Create Together

Telling youth to support and encourage each other is one step, but having the space to practice these tenets is another. Creating a play with others is a microcosm for engaging with the greater world. The play may be the ultimate goal, but young people learn many skills along the way. The more fully they engage in the process of learning and growing as part of a community, the more they benefit from the presence of their peers.

An emphasis on standardized testing has reduced the number of opportunities young people have to work in community with others. Process-oriented CYD is thus necessary to provide opportunities to reach a goal as part of a group. Kids Creative uses performances and other events for friends and family, because groups are more unified when they have a tangible goal. Individuals' reasons for participating may vary—one may want to learn new acting techniques while another wants to practice guitar skills—but they all build collaboration skills as part of the process.

Setting the Agenda, a report developed by the National Summit on Creative Youth Development, explains that CYD programs support young people:

to become creators—to apply the skills and content knowledge they are acquiring to create work in the arts, humanities, and sciences, and to use the creative process and products in those disciplines as vehicles to create their own lives and identities (youth development); healthier and more vibrant communities (community development); and a more equitable and just society (social change). (Stevenson, 2014, p. 5)

In keeping with this agenda, Kids Creative gives young people the tools and the vehicle to make change individually and collectively.

4. Let Youth Drive

Educational systems have the potential either to be “banking education” systems (Freire, 2018, p. 83) that replicate knowledge and maintain the status quo or to learn from the past to create change in the future. Process-oriented CYD programs take the second path. Such programs are youth-driven: They engage youth in decision-making on questions ranging from what rules are essential

to what content is taught and what final products the groups will create.

Keeping youth in the driver's seat may be the most challenging aspect of running a process-oriented program. Gathering ideas and feedback takes time, and it is easy for adults to impose their ideas on children. However, putting in the work necessary to build consensus early means that individuals are invested in the creative process and the final product. Adults are creative equals with the kids. Their role is to facilitate and participate, but to not take the creative product as their own. This structure allows children to share and encourages adults to ask questions rather than reshaping ideas. Over time, this commitment to creative equality results in strong program outcomes. Through the creative process, youth learn to respect their own ideas and the ideas of others. They thereby gain skills that enable them to create change.

Managing Process-Oriented Groups

Running a process-oriented program requires a lot of preparation beforehand and coordination throughout its implementation. Facilitators have to check in on individual and group relationships; they also need to work with each group to set key milestones so the group can create its final product.

The result of all of this preparation and the ongoing check-ins is a strong community with space for individuality and self-discovery. Disruptions may happen, but not because people don't want to follow top-down rules. What drives me to continue building Kids Creative is the amazing feeling that kids *want* to be there because they are in charge of the process. As adrienne maree brown (2017) says, “Trust the people. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy)” (p. 42). We trust youth choices, understanding that, with the right structure and common goals, each group can successfully create a final product.

From the outside, process-oriented CYD may appear disorganized. It is actually the opposite. Creativity becomes a form of classroom management, because groups build a unique, common language from their creative ideas that can drive everything from routine tasks to conflict resolution. For example, a facilitator might suggest, “Group 1, when we walk down the hallway, pretend you are your character from the play, silently

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sneaking around a large castle.” Another might say, “Group 2, the conflict between our two group members on the playground seems like the conflict between two characters in our play. How can we resolve this?”

Process Ends in Products

The ultimate goal of Kids Creative is to provide skills and values for peace building, which are primarily learned during the creative process. However, even in process-oriented CYD programs, groups need the galvanizing effect of creating a final product. A common phrase in performing arts is that “deadlines are an artist’s best friend.” Moving toward a specific date on which to perform a presentation whose structure has been set gives all participants a common understanding of their goal, while clearly communicating what they get to create within the structure. Remember, every work of art needs a frame (Zappa & Occhiogrosso, 1989). Process-oriented CYD programs need specific goals to provide a space in which creativity can thrive.

Setting goals for products enables programs to:

- Provide a stage where youth experience presenting or performing before an audience
- Let participants show off their newly built talents so family and friends can celebrate them
- Gather all the families at once to facilitate communication
- Enhance marketing and fundraising by inviting funders and community members to performances that highlight what participants have learned
- Get the community excited about the program

CYD programs thrive when the benefits of both process and product are realized.

Creativity and Peace in Practice

Peace education requires learning and growth. It requires program leaders to challenge our preconceived notions about what makes programs most effective. The CYD National Action Blueprint (CYD National Partnership, n.d.b) calls for a focus on field building, which includes professional development for CYD program staff. The Kids Creative process-oriented CYD approach relies heavily on ongoing trainings to teach staff new skills and

to clearly communicate what the program expects of staff and participants. As part of our process of continuous improvement, program leaders and staff regularly solicit ideas from participants and families—and then engage in change based on those ideas. We might, for example, ask participants what activities they prefer that week or ask families for honest feedback through conversations and surveys.

In order to communicate our work toward peace, Kids Creative has a Community Peace Plan that clearly describes how staff can engage with positive and negative behaviors in ways that do not disrupt programming, but rather benefit the group and help each person grow. The plan democratizes the interactions with families by clearly setting out what participants and families can expect of Kids Creative staff: showing respect for

each family and for each child, demonstrating professional behavior, and communicating each child’s progress and achievement. The plan also specifies what “respect” and “professional behavior” look like at Kids Creative.

In addition to directors, group leaders, and teaching artists, the program has peace and culture leaders (PCLs). These staff members, who are trained in conflict management techniques, work with all groups and individuals to help them engage in peaceful ways. They speak with participants, see who is having trouble engaging in specific activities, and help identify factors inside or outside the program that influence the child’s participation. PCLs may not be certified social workers or counselors, but they do work with children to identify their interests and to ensure that they keep themselves and others safe while having fun. When children’s concerns go beyond PCLs’ expertise, the program leaders work with schools and partners to provide the families with outside resources.

In Kids Creative’s peaceful approach to youth development, classroom management begins with positive reinforcement. Adults use positive feedback, model how to resolve conflicts peacefully, show groups how to compromise, and foster a positive and inclusive team spirit. When positive reinforcement isn’t enough to help children participate peacefully, staff have a list of steps for managing groups. They might remind youth of the group agreement, give participants time to cool down, or suggest that an individual speak with a PCL.

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PCLs and other staff practice “restorative creativity,” working with participants involved in a conflict and with the group to envision different approaches and to practice more peaceful behaviors.

Making Change, Making Peace

With slight changes to structures and processes, all OST programs can be peace-building change makers. They already create spaces where children are cared for and have alternatives to potentially harmful activities. However, they can more fully realize their potential when they work toward positive or proactive peace. Rather than focusing on grades and test scores, they can focus on relationships, teach positive communication and conflict resolution, and help youth build confidence.

To achieve these goals, CYD programs need funding and partnerships. Just as program participants must work together to build a final product, so CYD programs, partners, and funders must work together to raise the profile of CYD and recognize its strengths. Governments, foundations, corporations, and others should create funding opportunities specifically for CYD to help bridge the gap between arts education and youth development.

With this collective support, each program can focus on what matters most in a process-oriented space: individual and communal growth. The skills youth learn affect their lives and their communities not only during program participation but also into their adult lives. CYD program participants can build peace in the present while imagining a peaceful tomorrow and taking action to achieve that vision in the future.

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