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# **EDUCATING A NEW GENERATION OF PEACE LEADERS AS A WAY TO PREVENT HOMEGROWN TERRORISM**

## **Educating a New Generation of Peace Leaders as a Way to Prevent Homegrown Terrorism\***

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## Abstract

Countering radicalization and violent extremism whether overseas or domestically is a very complex problem that will require long-term efforts occurring in several different arenas simultaneously by numerous different government and non-governmental actors. Indeed, nothing short of a whole-of-problem approach will suffice.

One of these areas of activity to especially focus on is working with young Canadians in order to take them out of the reach of terrorist recruiters.

Current anti-radicalization strategies which rely on surveillance, reporting, and rather passive attempts to attract would-be terrorists are not enough. Instead of relying primarily on increased surveillance and passive outreach to young people, what if we responded to their need for exciting, meaningful lives in a different manner. Why not replace the allure of being a terrorist with the allure of being a peace leader? That is, someone who wishes to “wage peace” in order to build a better world for themselves, their family and their neighbours.

This paper presents an innovative, new model for educating and empowering a new generation of young peace leaders as a way to prevent homegrown terrorism. The model is based on the “Peace Guerilla” (PG) pilot project that the Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation (CIAN) ran with grade 6 and 7 students at Ross Road Elementary School in North Vancouver, BC in 2011.



## Introduction

Paris, Beirut, Ankara and now Brussels: it seems there is no end in sight to the deadly terrorist attacks that are not aimed at destroying critical infrastructure inasmuch as they are deliberately targeting civilians at soft targets such as airports, markets, concert halls and metro stations in order to strike fear into the population. Indeed, this targeting pattern would signal that there is a strong hate and revenge motive behind these attacks. If the terrorists were pursuing the goal of seriously debilitating a country, on the other hand, then it follows that they would be targeting water, electrical, military, and economic facilities instead.

Fortunately, Canada has not been a victim of such a wide-scale, coordinated terrorist bomb attack. That does not mean, however, that we are immune to such an event. Indeed, Canada has had its own terrorist attacks in the recent past; most notably, when an armed attacker shot and killed a soldier at the National War Memorial and then accessed the nearby parliament buildings where he was eventually shot and killed by security forces.<sup>i</sup> Sadly, there were 3 separate warnings issued prior to this attack.<sup>ii</sup>

Globally, 2014 was the worst year on record for terrorism with the Islamic State terrorist group being responsible for the majority of the attacks according to US intelligence officials.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, the same report said that there was a growing threat of Russian cyber-attacks from hackers that are working to hack electric power grids, mass transit systems, and fuel pipelines.<sup>iv</sup>

Returning to the situation in Canada, however, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has used its expanded powers to disrupt terrorist plots nearly 2 dozen times since the fall of 2015.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, estimates vary but there are about 100 Canadians currently looking to go abroad to support terrorist activities and 60 who have returned to Canada from abroad after having participated in terrorist activity – few of these people have been arrested since the law is a grey area on these matters.<sup>vi</sup>

In other words, we can safely conclude that the issue of homegrown terrorism isn't going away anytime soon. When thinking about preventing (rather than averting) homegrown terrorism at a very early stage then the topics of youth well-being, employment, gangs and violence must be considered.

Unfortunately, youth gang violence seems to be an ongoing problem in Ottawa (and elsewhere) as evidenced by recent gang style shootings that occurred in Ottawa during March, 2016:

Twenty-year-old Taylor Morrow-Flint was killed in an execution-style shooting on Ritchie Street: a bullet to the head, and another to the thigh. He was a young man who was known to police, and the killing was “targeted.”<sup>vii</sup>



According to an Open Letter by the Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation (CIAN) a number of factors can help explain the rise of youth violence:

The latest statistics on violence in Canada show that the majority of our violent crimes are committed by young people 15 – 24 years old. Many of these youth face a toxic combination of personal, family, and socioeconomic factors that can make them susceptible to gang activity, aggressive or violent behaviors; and in some cases, homegrown terrorism.<sup>viii</sup>

Oddly, however, while the overall youth crime rate is decreasing, the rate for violent crimes is actually increasing:

In the 10 years between 1997 and 2006, the overall violent crime rate in Canada declined 4%. However, the violent crime rate among youth has risen 12% in the last 10 years and has climbed 30% since 1991.<sup>ix</sup>

All of these stats lead us to consider the questions of what is currently being done to address the problem? Is it enough? Is it the right thing? According to this view, current approaches are falling short:

Current anti-radicalization strategies which rely on surveillance, reporting, and rather passive attempts to attract would-be terrorists are not enough. Because youth are drawn to the lure of terrorism because it provides an identity and mission in life, we need to meaningfully engage our youth and foster the growth of an identity that values Canadian ideals. Those ideals are pro-peace and against violence, plus they include the toleration and even celebration of differences rather than exclusive self-righteousness. Because youth naturally want excitement we need to engage them in numerous exciting ways to become proud Canadian citizens. Out-reach needs to take an individualized, personal approach that is done via numerous face-to face meetings and encounters. Youth need a chance for quick wins in which they get public recognition, supported by positive peer pressure which promotes good citizenship.<sup>x</sup>

Moreover, Bill C-51 isn't without critics and the newly-elected liberal government is apparently revamping this bill. Bill C-51 is, “an Act to enact the Security of Canada Information Sharing Act and the Secure Air Travel Act, to amend the Criminal Code, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts.”<sup>xi</sup> In other words, it will expand the powers and reach of the state security apparatus.

The Montréal centre for de-radicalization is an innovative effort that appears to have some early successes. For example:



Since Montreal's anti-radicalization centre was officially inaugurated four months ago, it's received more than 600 calls. Nine of those cases were referred to police.<sup>xii</sup>

However, aside from these examples, there is no systematic and organized program that is specifically addressing this problem either within the school system or via other youth agencies such as the Scouts, the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA and so on.

Other countries are doing some very innovative things to address this issue and there are many valuable lessons for Canada. For example:

The Swedish Institute's Young Connectors of the Future Programme (YCF) is an intercultural leadership programme that aims to lay a foundation for dialogue and knowledge sharing among young leaders from South Asia.<sup>xiii</sup>

The [Youth Civil Activism Network](#) (YouthCAN) unites youth activists, artists and tech entrepreneurs to amplify efforts to counter violent extremism.<sup>xiv</sup>

The [Young Leaders Fellowship](#) (YLF) invites a selection of young and engaged trailblazers and puts them through a rewarding leadership scheme. The YLF course aims to empower young men and women to confront extremism in all its forms and become role models in their communities. From debate training, to panel discussions with leading policy makers and influence figures, the YLF's will have unparalleled access to the foremost minds in the fight against extremism and the opportunity to make their voices heard.<sup>xv</sup>

Clearly, Canada needs to rise to the challenge now in order to prevent future tragedies by developing and supporting new programs that specifically aim to prevent youth from turning to violence. But what can be done? The following section of this paper presents a pilot project that was run at an elementary school in British Columbia as this is a good model to be replicated elsewhere.

### **A Pilot Project Emerges in 2010**

Inspired by her previous involvement with Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation (CIAN), the Vice Principal (VP) of an elementary school in BC (Ms. Anami Nath) wanted to create a whole new peace project for her students using the skills and concepts that CIAN teaches. The project became known the Peace Guerilla (PG) Project to reflect the thinking found in *The Peace Guerilla Handbook* (2007) which was written by CIAN's Founder & President, Dr. Ben Hoffman as a practical, hands-on guide for peacebuilders working domestically and overseas.



The PG Project was premised on the fact that everyone can identify the path to war and how to become involved in war but not many of us know the path to peace and so educators have a duty to the students/children/young adults to carve that out.<sup>xvi</sup>

Fortunately, the VP had the full support of the school's principal and CIAN helped arrange for an intern from the MA in Conflict Resolution Program at Royal Roads University (Victoria, BC) to work on the project as part of her placement (Ms. Inya Mitrovic). Moreover, the parents were supportive of this effort and that was a vital ingredient for success.<sup>xvii</sup>

## **Background on the School**

The school where the PG project ran was called Ross Road Elementary and it is located in the North Vancouver School District. It is a dual track (French immersion) school of approximately 550 students.

The school had a few (typical) leadership programs for grade 6/7 students such as Peer Mediators, Lunch Monitors, Crossing Guards and so on. Also, bullying, intimidation, and harassment (mostly done online) was a real concern at the school.

## **Vision of the PG Project**

The Vice Principal then set the vision of the project by asking a series of “what if” questions, as follows:

What if we believed that some children at this age are interested in examining Peace but have no place or format to learn about it and/or contribute? What if we provided a group of students the opportunity and guidance to look at Peace as it applies to self, community, the environment and the world? What if we took these students and worked with them intensively over a period of 10 months? What if we challenged them to look at their world through this lens of Peace? What if we documented that journey? What might the outcomes be?

## **Goals of the PG Project**

The Vice Principal outlined the following goals for the Peace Guerilla project:

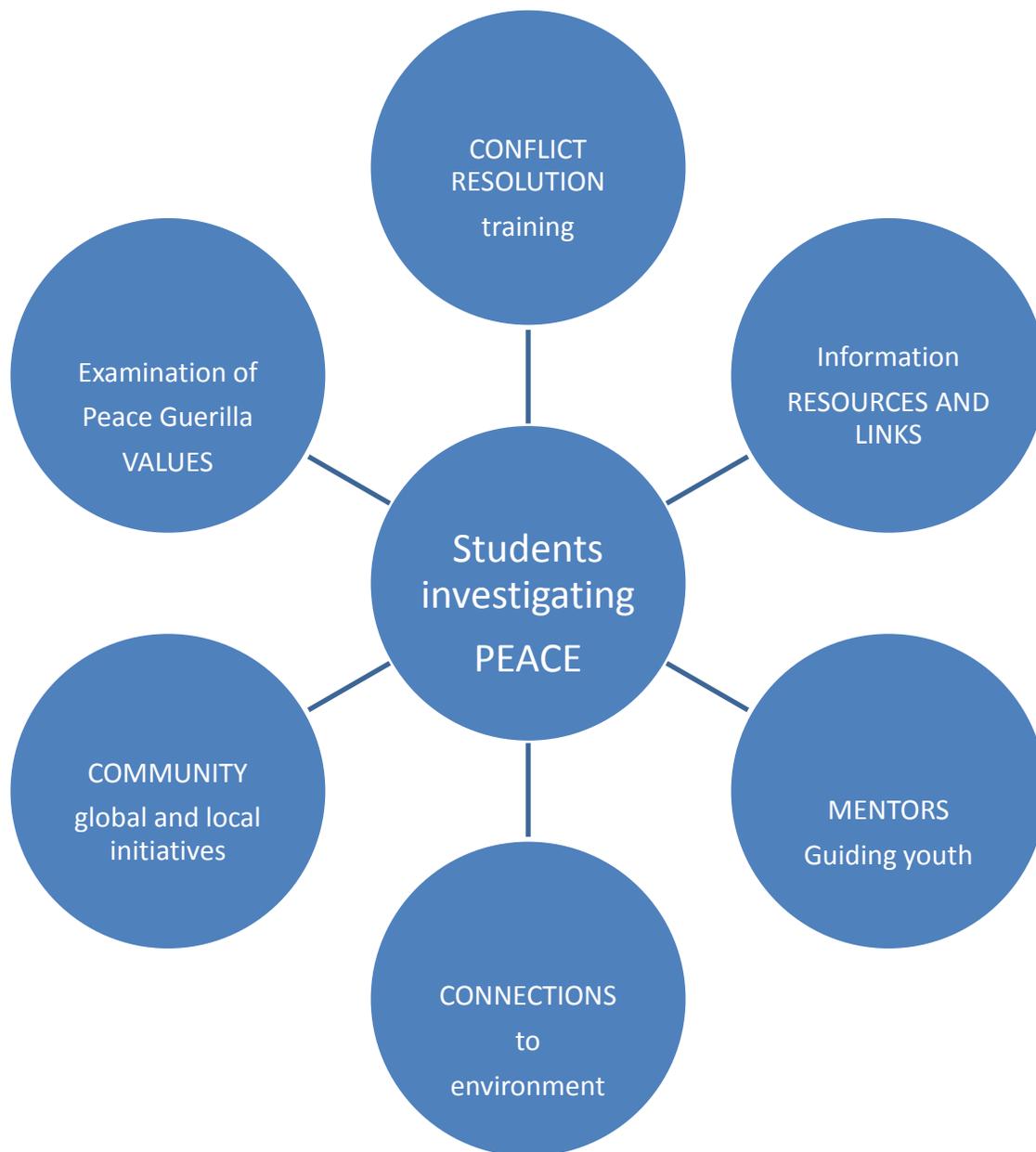
- Facilitate students getting into a peace mindset
- Identify tenants of peace
- Develop the language for students
- Create a culture of peace/kindness/non-aggression
- Provide those students who are interested in this topic, the time, place and resources to learn and become student leaders



- Connect peace to self, environment, community and world

### Project Design

The Vice Principal envisioned the structure of the program as a central hub of “students investigating peace” with several spokes radiating from it, as depicted in the below diagram.



## What the students actually did

The students that participated in the PG project did a variety of activities throughout the school year and as result of these activities they were able to:

- Develop greater self-awareness
- Explore their own role in the world
- Share resources (like Youtube Videos with social justice activists such as Severn Suzuki)
- Discuss world events (like the Arab Spring)
- Debate some difficult questions about ethics and morals (how do we know we are doing the right thing?)
- Discuss the meaning of terms like War and Peace
- Learn about New Math for humanity where using your power constructively can lead to outcomes where the sum is greater than the parts ( $1+1=3$ )
- Learn about systems theory and conflict analysis. Did a conflict analysis of the movie Avatar
- Attend *We Day* where they heard Al Gore, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rick Hansen and many more share inspirational stories with 18,000 elementary and high school kids from around BC and Alberta
- Receive Peace Guerilla T-shirts, books and stickers
- Become introduced to adult role-models and mentors who were working on peace issues domestically and overseas

According to Anami Nath, the Vice Principal at the school:

What is important about the above is that students often get opportunities in class to do these sorts of things and to have these discussions. What was different here was that they were coming in after school to do this. They were discovering, for the first time that there were like minded peers who had the same interests, and that there were teachers who were interested in what they had to say and learn about this.<sup>xviii</sup>

## Some Challenges

The Peace Guerilla Project at Ross Road Elementary wasn't without some challenges. For example:

Some of the 'resistance' came from peers who didn't understand what the group was about and wanted to tease the PG kids. We talked about that and it was important to empower students with skills and support to deal with those who do not understand. I advised them



to first take the position of sharing: most of the resistance comes from ignorance in the true sense of the word: not knowing.<sup>xix</sup>

## Recognizing Success

While no formal evaluation of the project was ever conducted by an external evaluator, those involved with the project recognized the value of this work. To this end, the VP of the school remarks that:

As educators, we rarely if ever know how our words and actions, our teaching and counseling affects the youth in our care. What we can know is the here and now...and move forward on the potential. This was a small pilot that showed us (educators, adults, leaders) that there is an appetite for this.<sup>xx</sup>

This ‘appetite’ for the program is perhaps best reflected by the fact that, “the students participated 100% of the time during the course of the program (there were no or barely any absences and students were fully engaged); they asked a lot of questions about the topics being studied; and most of all, they asked about how to continue staying engaged.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Moreover, the students that were part of the project went on over the subsequent years to become quite active members of their school and community working towards making positive changes.

In sum, “the program made a difference in their lives, changed and challenged their thinking, and I think that’s what defines success at such a young age.”<sup>xxii</sup>

## The Pilot is Adapted for a Nation-wide Roll Out

The leadership at CIAN became increasingly concerned about the influence of ISIS on Canadians and, in particular, the fact that Canadian youth seem apparently vulnerable to recruiters. As proud Canadians who are peace researchers, trainers and practitioners plus innovators and thought leaders in this field (we have worked globally over the last 20 years in some of the worlds’ deadliest, most protracted conflicts) we wanted to apply what we’ve learned in our own backyard to educate and support the next generation of Canadian peace leaders. The timing is right for Canada to take greater action to tackle this growing problem.

Just as the PG Project at Ross Road Elementary was premised on a series of “what if” questions we began to ask a new set of what if questions, as follows. What if vulnerable youth were:

- Detected early through channels at the community level
- Recruited to join an exciting alternative
- Challenged to engage in constructive, nonviolent activities



- Given the tools and support to be positive, contributing young people
- Rewarded for achievement at different levels of accomplishment
- Connected to a national community of positively-engaged peers and role models<sup>xxiii</sup>

We began to think about the type of person the project would target. We will target any young person (13-21) who is:

- Isolated
- An underachiever
- Unrewarded
- Alienated
- Bullied
- Angry
- Without or has a poor adult role model
- Without or has an ineffective mentor
- Feeling that life is meaningless, hopeless
- Vulnerable to recruitment to extreme violence
- Looking for a different experience<sup>xxiv</sup>

These are the same qualities that terrorist recruiters purportedly exploit in order to attract new followers.

We also considered the specific set of activities that the project would undertake, as follows. Our new Peace Guerilla program will:

- Mentor young peace leaders
- Inspire and Support youth peace efforts via our small grants fund
- Equip young people with the skills and tools to do peace work via our peace training
- Give them a chance for positive peer support, networking and quick wins

We also decided that multiple channels will be used to recruit people to the program and the below example illustrates how a concerned woman alerted authorities to the increasingly dangerous and erratic behaviour of her boyfriend.

It was Habib's girlfriend (now his ex) who alerted police to his alleged jihadist sympathies. She told police he keeps extremist video of beheadings by ISIL on his computer and had identification under false names.<sup>xxv</sup>

So, where are we now? CIAN leadership developed a concept paper during January, 2015 and met with senior government officials from the Harper government in May, 2015. The government officials were enthusiastic about the proposal and especially the practical and



applied focus of the efforts but with the election in the fall of 2105 they said the timing just isn't right to fund it.

After the election CIAN held meetings with a newly-elected Liberal MP in the riding of Ottawa West-Nepean and issues an Open Letter to PM Justin Trudeau calling on his government to support youth peacebuilders.<sup>xxvi</sup> We are currently exploring the possibility of launching another pilot project in the riding of Ottawa West –Nepean to test the concept once again with the aim of replicating the project in other Canadian cities.

CIAN and the Civilian Peace Service Canada has also recently applied for government funding to have a post-secondary student work with us over the summer of 2016 to help grow the pilot project in Ottawa. The student would be tasked with the following job duties:

- liaise and network with other agencies working with at-risk youth
- conduct research on community health and safety issues
- hold community meetings with at-risk youth
- plan, promote and deliver conflict resolution training to at-risk youth

## Conclusion

We can't ignore this problem or hope it will go away on its own. Quite the opposite, this is one of those problems that without focussed attention and sustained efforts it will most likely simply get worse.

Some people have commented on CIAN social media that perhaps it is the job of parents to do this work. However, this task can't be left to parents alone and other support systems need to be in place. Moreover, most parents themselves aren't equipped with the specialized peacebuilding skills, tools and knowledge that would allow them to impart this info to their children. As another commenter on social media noted, it takes a village to raise a child!

The road ahead won't be easy and even with ample funding this is difficult work and success won't be guaranteed, as this quote from an opinion piece by a CIAN Senior Associate reminds us:

Let's not harbor any illusions, however: both the need and difficulty of preventing homegrown terrorism are huge. We can, however, help prevent future homegrown terrorism and build stronger communities through modest investments in programs that support and encourage youth to become active, positively-engaged global citizens.<sup>xxvii</sup>



## Endnotes

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- <sup>viii</sup> <http://unpublishedottawa.com/letter/52386/we-need-support-young-canadians-be-community-peace-leaders>
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- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.embassynews.ca/opinion/2016/01/08/waging-peace-to-counter-the-allure-of-extremism/48060>
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- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/anti-radicalization-coderre-budget-increase-1.3474982>
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- <sup>xvi</sup> Naths, personal comms, 2016
- <sup>xvii</sup> Naths, personal comms, 2016
- <sup>xviii</sup> Naths, personal comms, 2016
- <sup>xix</sup> Naths, personal comms, 2016
- <sup>xx</sup> Naths, personal comms, 2016
- <sup>xxi</sup> Mitrovic, personal comms., 2016
- <sup>xxii</sup> Mitrovic, personal comms., 2016
- <sup>xxiii</sup> CIAN Project Proposal to Create the Canadian League of Peace Guerillas for Preventing Homegrown Terrorism and Building Positive Citizenship, 2016 (unpublished)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> CIAN Project Proposal to Create the Canadian League of Peace Guerillas for Preventing Homegrown Terrorism and Building Positive Citizenship, 2016 (unpublished)
- <sup>xxv</sup> <http://www.ottawasun.com/2016/03/08/warrant-issued-under-new-terrorism-law-for-suspected-gatineau-jihadist>
- <sup>xxvi</sup> <http://unpublishedottawa.com/letter/52386/we-need-support-young-canadians-be-community-peace-leaders>
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