ConTextos: Fighting Crime Through Literacy

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These are the last two stanzas of René Moises Amaya Martinez’s poem, “Mapa de chocolate” – Chocolate map. They speak of the 17-year-old’s experience before he got in trouble with the law, and were written during a poetry workshop, Soy Poeta, imparted at his juvenile detention center in El Salvador, Central America.

A few months after writing these lines and after being released into freedom, René Moises Amaya Martinez was killed. He became yet another victim of the gang violence plaguing not just the Central American region, but also urban North American cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and Camden. A report by ConTextos, a Chicago-based non-governmental organization operating in El Salvador calculated El Salvador’s homicide rate to be 69 per 100,000; as a point of comparison, Chicago’s rate is currently 15 per 100,000. In 2015, Chicago reported more than 488 homicides, and in 2011, gang violence accounted for approximately 61 percent of the murders, according to Contextos.

Although there are several ways to tackle the ongoing problem of gang violence, including afterschool programs, tutoring and athletic intervention, countless studies have demonstrated that one of the most effective ways to counteract violence is to improve literacy rates and to engage youth in literature-related activities. “It’s said that if a child does not have the correct literacy level for their age, that child is 90 percent more likely to end up in jail,” Alejandra Mejía, director of development of ConTextos, said.

The data backing Mejía’s statement is overwhelming – according to a 2010 Forbes article, approximately 60 percent of American inmates are illiterate, and 85 percent of juvenile offenders have reading difficulties. More than 30 percent of Salvadoran children attending public school drop out before third grade, and those who do continue their educations attend school for half a day, where they lack access to books and learn to read and write via rote memorization. As Debra Gittler, founder and executive director of ConTextos said in a 2014 WBEZ Chicago interview, “Books alone aren’t enough to change the culture of learning.”

The organization focuses on two main programs in their mission to transform education and prevent violence in Central America. Their pilot project, TurnKey, was initially centered upon building libraries in public schools. The team eventually realized, however, that providing books was not enough to truly promote change. “Resources alone do not make the difference,” Mejía said. “Teachers are the true basis of transforming the educational system. We work with the teachers so that they are the

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“VENGO DE AMIGOS ALEGRES, DE FINES DE SEMANA CON CAFÉ."  
**I COME FROM JOYFUL FRIENDS**  
**(FROM WEEKENDS WITH COFFEE.)**

**SOY DE LA COLONIA DE SONRISAS Y LÁGRIMAS.”**  
**I AM FROM THE TOWN**  
**(OF SMILES AND TEARS.)**
true protagonists of the library.”

Mejía added that as part of TurnKey, the teachers underwent several workshops designed to help them incorporate reading into their daily classroom routines. “In other schools, each child will write exactly the same,” Gittler said. “In our schools, children will be taught to express their opinions.” The changes observed were astounding; not only was there a marked difference in the reading levels of children participating in ConTextos’ programs, but there was also a distinct cultural change. Before being exposed to ConTextos’ reading programs, Mejía said, “The children didn’t even look you in the eye, but as they continued learning and sharing, there were certain aspects of their personality that began to change.” As I experienced firsthand while working with ConTextos over the summer, ConTextos children run up to visitors, smothering them in hugs and fighting over who gets to hold their hands.

These same cultural and psychological changes brought about by ConTextos’ first project paved the way for their second program, Soy Autor – I’m an author. “When kids start to read a lot, they naturally start to write a lot,” Mejía said. In conjunction with research proving that exposure to reading and writing programs decreases recidivism levels, ConTextos harnessed this natural progression in order to address the escalating levels of violence in the country. With a grant from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), ConTextos developed a writing workshop consisting of 16 to 24 classes for children who were either in high-risk situations or in juvenile detention centers, like René Moises Amaya Martinez.

During these workshops, children and teenagers are taught how to use tablet technology to generate text and pictures in order to write a memoir, which is eventually published by ConTextos. “A writing process, or rather, a dialogue process, is in some way healing the terrible experiences the children have gone through,” Ruelle said. “It’s not just the inmates and youth that need this process, but the Salvadoran society at large. Most of the population has undergone trauma of some sort that they haven’t been able to address.” According to a 2014 study conducted at Emory University, neurologically, reading and writing are chemical processes that alter the physical structure of the brain, creating relaxing effects as well as contributing to the healing of trauma. Soy Autor provides a platform for youth to heal, to express themselves and to share their stories with society – stories that are at times brushed aside in favor of negative depictions of their misdeeds.

The program has been so successful in helping youth deal with trauma, and decreasing violence in the long run, that starting in October 2016, Soy Autor will be implemented in Cooke County Jail in Illinois. Cooke County is Chicago’s most populated detention center, housing over 9,000 inmates. As a pilot project, 60 maximum-security offenders awaiting trial will have access to the program, and will be working with both local and Salvadoran mentors during the workshop. In ConTexto’s press release, Jim Garbarino, a professor specializing in childhood trauma and violence, said that “Writing about their lives and entering into a dialogue about what they write is one of the most important ways available to help children process trauma.” Once the program starts, Soy Autor will have travelled from the “murder capital of the world” to the “murder capital of the USA,” Garbarino said. Soy Autor will hopefully create a lasting impact on two populations that have resorted to violence as a healing instrument for harbored traumas.

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-ALEJANDRA MEJÍA, DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEXTOS

*For more information about ConTextos, visit www.contextos.org