

# Chapter 40

## Social Ecology of Engaged Learning: Contextualizing Service- Learning With Youth

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents a community-university partnership model of service-learning with urban, low income, middle school youth of color focused on promoting agency and efficacy through an All Star Anti-violence Youth Summit. The summit combined basketball and small group activities to define, analyze, and address the issue of gun violence in the community. The approach is intergenerational and intercultural, and was implemented through a semester long Civic Engagement service-learning class. The diverse group of students at a large, urban, public University applied the concepts of critical service-learning, British Social Action, positive youth development, and civic engagement.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a community-university partnership model of service-learning with urban, low-income, middle school youth of color focused on promoting agency and efficacy. The model is intergenerational and intercultural, incorporates service-learning, and is mindful of the socially marginalized status of the youth and the learning needs of multicultural, urban, public university students ranging in age from 18-55 years.

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Applying the concepts of critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) and sociological and behavioral science theories as they apply to youth development and civic engagement (Arches, 2013; Arches & Fleming, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Delgado & Staples, 2007; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2007; Mills, 1970; Stoecker & Beckman, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978), this model was embedded in a semester-long Civic Engagement class project.

## **The Partnership: Contextualizing Youth Development**

The partnership involved sixty-five public school youth in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, the majority of whom were students of color, along with an ethnically, racially, and age diverse group of University of Massachusetts Boston students (hereafter, University students), the University Athletics Department, the Massachusetts attorney general's office, and a small nonprofit, the 3Point Foundation, with programs combining athletics and academics for urban middle school youth. The purpose of the partnership was to put together an All Star Anti-violence Youth Summit to discuss what could be done to reduce gun violence. The content was structured in part to address the anti-violence health standards in the public school curricular frameworks, and was carried out through an All Star Anti-violence Youth Summit held at the University of Massachusetts Boston in Spring 2016.

Embedded into an undergraduate Civic Engagement course covering knowledge, skills and values of civic engagement, civic learning, and civic action, University students read material on social justice, community building, civic engagement, and participatory methods of engaging with diverse communities. The University students worked as partners in a project that was designed to address gun violence, and to promote efficacy and agency while striving to create a *space* where youth are respected, valued as partners, and are active participants in decision-making (Bolzan & Gale, 2012; Ginwright, Noguerra, & Cammarota, 2006; Hammond, 2015). The guiding tenets of the partnership were based on positive youth development, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), and British Social Action which stress a strength-based approach, supporting youth voice as independent learners, providing opportunities and structures for meaningful participation, and respect for local knowledge (Downs, et al., 2009; Hammond, 2015; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2011).

Recognizing and building on strengths, the University students fostered opportunities for learning in a safe environment, with connections to a diverse group of supportive adults. The University students approached the youth as partners in a collaborative effort. They were not there serving the youth, as might have been the case in more traditional service-learning, but rather as partners there to listen, develop relationships, analyze conditions, reflect on learning, and facilitate a process of youth led social change. They applied the theories of positive youth development, social change, civic engagement, and social justice (Stoecker, 2016) that they were learning in class. Their focus was on flattening unequal power relationships, understanding root causes of issues, and developing authentic relationships to facilitate a process of youth defined social change. The interactions with the youth were based on the groupwork practice of creating an *interrupted space* (Bolzan & Gale, 2012; Hammond, 2015) where power dynamics based on marginalized identities are set aside and youth define and determine the work as they generate knowledge in a setting that is collaborative and respectful. The youth voice and their empowerment were paramount as the University students facilitated groups where the youth were developing critical thinking and analytical skills as the basis for action (Bolzan & Gale, 2012; Arches, 2012; Mitchell, 2008).

In a parallel process to what the University students were doing with the youth, the professor modeled the theories and practices in the classroom for students to develop their own knowledge, civic engage-

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