

Community Youth Development Service-Learning: Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive

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Abstract

As the demographics of the United States change, it is important for youth workers to be able to adapt. Most established forms of youth services model the norms and values of the dominant Western culture. To best engage with a complete spectrum of youth, it is vital to take their backgrounds into account. This means being trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and mindful of serving the whole community. This article demonstrates how these salient frameworks informed a partnership between service-learning university students and Puerto Rican youth who were displaced by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

Key words: trauma-informed, culturally responsive, community youth development, service-learning

Background and Introduction

In September 2017, the island of Puerto Rico was hammered by a double blow. Hurricane Irma swept through on September 5th and the especially lethal Hurricane Maria followed on the 20th. Power outages and water shortages persisted for over 8 months, homes were ravaged, and whole families were displaced.

Crisis, emotional and economic loss, and a sense of aloneness without respite, rescue, or adequate food and shelter led more than 135,000 Puerto Ricans to relocate to the mainland United States. To flee destroyed communities and the bleakness of their future, 11,200 residents relocated to New York State (Spector, 2018). For many the location they fled to was Rochester, New York. Rochester has long been home to a vibrant Puerto Rican community, with the second largest Puerto Rican population in New York State (Orr, Spector, & Murphy, 2017). Friends and family opened their arms to the new residents, providing a foundation for further community action.

The authors assert that a framework that combines trauma-informed and culturally responsive community youth development with service-learning offers youth development professionals a set of principles and practices to build upon the resiliency of young people. We call for opportunities for youth to become activists in their community rather than victims of their circumstances. The authors argue for the implementation of a community youth development empowerment-focused, service-learning model that is driven by youth, maximizes their assets, and engages them as experts on their own experiences.

In this paper we detail a spring 2018 service-learning partnership between a local comprehensive liberal arts college and a community-action agency that serves a bilingual charter school. This replicable model applies the concepts we present as a means to demonstrate a congruency between tried-and-true youth development concepts within a trauma-informed and culturally responsive context.

Hurricane Maria and the Traumatic Impact on Children

In 1998, the deadly Hurricane Georges swept across the islands of the Caribbean. Like Maria nearly 20 years later, Georges severely damaged Puerto Rico. Rubens, Felix, Vernberg, and Canino (2014) surveyed 905 youth, aged 11 to 17 years old to find how the hurricane affected them, and how distress often known as *ataques de nervios*, or “attack of the nerves” occurred

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in individuals. Ataques symptoms can be considered comparable to what the dominant scientific culture calls post-traumatic symptoms. According to Rubens et al. (2014) "the four categories of symptoms related to ataques are: emotional expressions (e.g., crying, feeling anxious and/or depressed), physical sensations (e.g., heart palpitations, stomach aches), changes in feelings of consciousness (e.g., dizziness), and altered actions (e.g., suicidal ideation/attempts, self-injurious behavior)" (p. 716). Other ataques symptoms included youth at risk of internalizing trauma following disasters. Internalizing can be thought of as being "stuck in one's own head" with depression or anxiety (Felix et al., 2011).

Another finding indicates that the largest factor in preventing ataques and post-traumatic symptoms is social support, in particular, the support of peers: "Friends may help normalize adolescents' emotional reactions and interpretations of disaster exposure and post-disaster disruptions by discussing their experiences; spending time with those familiar to the adolescent may also provide a sense that normal activity is resuming (Vernberg & Vogel, 1993)" (Rubens et al., 2014, p. 717). Getting out of one's head and observing that some familiar reminders of pre-disaster life remain can ease anxiety by demonstrating that the danger has now passed.

However, research indicates that not just anybody can help youth "get out of their head" and avoid internalizing their feelings. Rather, ataques and other symptoms are more likely to reduce if the youth's social supports are positive influences, and support their social and emotional development. Unfortunately, associating with peers who are experiencing maladjustment may increase the risk of violence exposure among youth, and potentially put them at a higher risk for experiencing ataques at some point in their life (Rubens et al., 2014).

The need for parental support cannot be underestimated. Parents who have low emotional availability or give the impression that the youth's concerns would be a burden on them become risk factors. When post-disaster circumstances put a strain on parents' availability, youth are left alone with their feelings of anxiety, depression, and uncertainty (McDermott & Cobham, 2012). Some of these effects are already being seen anecdotally in youth survivors of Hurricane Maria. "One of the big things we found is that children [in post-Maria Puerto Rico] were actively hiding their distress from their parents because they knew that their parents were stressed out. The children were actually saying: 'I didn't want to be a burden for my parents'" (McCausland, Gamboa, & Acevedo, 2018, para. 18).

Context and Cultural Adaptation

A youth's personality can be a strong protective factor, but the development of that personality cannot be separated from the context in which the youth was born and raised. Protective factors are found in environments where a youth has a strong social support network, whether it be with peers, family, or community.

The heritage of Puerto Rican youth is based upon a collectivist culture that often believes that what is best for the family and community is more important than what is best for the individual. The collectivist mindset holds strongly to notions of respect for older members of the group and more traditional gender roles (Lui, 2015). In times of stress and trauma, the collectivist mindset can serve as a great asset to people. This communal support network contributes to what has become known as the *healthy immigrant effect*. Many immigrant groups are able to make the initial moves to the United States without great mental difficulty due to the "effective use of personal and social resources, and coping mechanisms" (Lui, 2015, p. 407).

Unfortunately, circumstances can negatively impact a healthy immigrant effect. As the United States becomes increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse, the environments that youth interact with have been slow to adapt in response. Rather, immigrants and native minority groups have historically been guided through official and unofficial policy to adapt their ways to the dominant Western culture. A growing body of evidence stresses the deleterious effects these policies cause, especially on the well-being of youth (Sundar, Danseco, Kelly, & Cuning, 2012; Walter & Grant, 2011; Souto-Manning & Hanson-Mitchell, 2009). These policies and other factors harm the processes of healthy youth development. This is especially true for the displaced survivors of Hurricane Maria. Natural disasters provide an unexpected forced impetus for migration, which can fracture collectivist groups in ways other migration patterns do not.

Related to the healthy immigrant effect is what is known as the *immigrant paradox*, wherein "foreign-born ethnic minority groups and immigrant groups who are less acculturated to the American mainstream are less likely to have poorer mental health outcomes than their native-born and more acculturated counterparts" (Lui, 2015, p. 406). The theory to explain this paradox is that the less acculturated people are to mainstream American culture, the greater the benefits of communal support. This is because the mainstream American culture is one that emphasizes individuality to a much larger degree than collectivist cultures do. Consequently, an

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individual having difficulties is less likely to seek community support the more acculturated to the mainstream American culture they are.

While Puerto Rican youth fleeing Hurricane Maria are resiliently attempting to heal and adjust, they are also being challenged to adapt into a new culture. "Cultural adaptation refers to the processes through which individuals become proficient in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a given culture" (Acevedo-Polakovich et al., 2014, p. 204). Schools, hospitals, social service agencies, and even well-intentioned youth service providers often unintentionally socialize youth into the dominant cultural context.

The potential meta-message is that the youth's heritage culture is inferior to the dominant culture, and therefore any enacting of the heritage culture is shameful (Souto-Manning & Hanson-Mitchell, 2009). Meanwhile back at home and in the community, reminders of cultural roots and rituals often create tension as the youth navigates a fragmented understanding of their new world while being reminded to not neglect their heritage culture as well. This identity conflict can cause numerous problems for developing youth including negative self-concept (Souto-Manning & Hanson-Mitchell, 2009). The youth is torn and the healthy immigrant effect eroded.

Intentional honoring of a youth's cultural heritage is especially important for youth workers to keep in mind. Given that youth acculturate faster, they will take on the new values as the older generations sometimes will not, causing acculturation mismatch in the family and intergenerational cultural conflict (Lui, 2015). This mismatch and intergenerational cultural conflict pushes youth further away from their community, and therefore further away from the strengths and resources inherent in collectivist cultures. This pushback experience is a particularly damaging one for youth who have experienced a natural disaster like Hurricane Maria, given the tremendous loss of cultural identity, place, social location, and sense of community.

Youth development professionals have a crucial responsibility to be trauma-informed, welcoming, and culturally-accepting. Safe havens and programs that provide opportunities for youth to gain a sense of belonging, usefulness, influence, competency, and power serve as a place of respite and resource for youth who have experienced displacement.

Community Youth Development

A community youth development (CYD) framework combines the asset model of positive youth development with community development principles and practices such as planning, decision-making, and program delivery. "While encouraging the gifts and talents of individual young people, CYD places equal focus on the investment of these assets in the community. Individual youth and adults, organizations, and communities all benefit when youth are engaged as full and active participants" (Ungar, Langlois, & Hum, 2008, p. 195). Community youth development asserts that youth are to be engaged as leaders, empowered to be actors in their solutions, and supported in their activism through youth-adult partnerships.

In the belief that "context is a critical factor that must be developed to promote positive youth outcomes," community youth development starts with an acknowledgement of the different environments a youth inhabits (Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel 2001, p. 43). These include their family, their school, their neighborhood, and the various organizations youth are a part of. In short, their individual cultures and the collective community. Understanding how youth and community relate, the CYD practitioner then partners with youth to affect these environments, influence a shared community vision, enrich community resources, and address community assets and interests. CYD practitioners thread the spaces between youth and organizations, knitting cultures and communities more tightly together.

Trauma-informed and Culturally-Responsive Community Youth Development

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions, n.d., para. 1).

Hurricane Maria's impact upon children and their family's psychological and physical well-being could certainly be considered "an exceptional experience in which a powerful and dangerous event overwhelms a person's capacity to cope" (Rice & Groves, 2005, p. 3). Youth who have been impacted by the hurricane may experience changes in their awareness, affect, and actions (Saxe, Ellis, & Kaplow, 2007). After exposure to a traumatizing experience, young people often shift to survival mode as they become hyper-aware of key stimuli in their environment such as a change in weather, sensing nervousness from their parents, and changes in schedules and

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plans. A young person's affect and actions may mirror the same intense emotion and behavior that served as coping strategies during the trauma experience (Saxe et al., 2007).

The principles of trauma-informed youth development remind youth workers of the importance of holistically understanding trauma's impact on young people. Trauma-informed practice guides youth workers to provide a safe, supportive, and stabilizing environment for young people to process:

- The event - (What happened?)
- The experience - (How does a youth make meaning of the circumstance?)
- The effect - (How does this event and experience impact the young person?)

Similarly, culturally responsive community youth development requires consciousness in reason and intent. Intentionality begins with a willingness of the youth worker to engage in critical self-awareness and self-reflection. Culturally responsive professionals explore their own worldviews, values and mindset, examine personal cultural expressions and expectations, and understand their determination of what is and what is not culturally appropriate. Without a practice of culturally responsive self-awareness, professionals may inadvertently react towards youth based upon ill-informed preconceived notions and unconscious assumptions (Terrance, Watkins, & Jimerson, 2018; Walter & Grant, 2011; Watkins & Braun, 2005; Williams, 2001).

One consistent theme that emerges in culturally responsive youth work and CYD literature is the importance of positive youth–adult and youth–youth relationships (Gelman, 2004, Sundar et al., 2012). A focus on the quality of communication, empathy, and understanding is imperative to relationship-building. Furthermore, a culturally responsive approach based upon a foundation of trust can facilitate dialogue about systemic reasons behind social injustices, such as racial profiling and acts of discrimination. While honoring instead of attempting to subdue the heritage cultures of youth, these approaches offer youth a context, mindset, and skillset to safely interact with the institutions of the dominant culture.

Once a youth worker has properly considered the importance of being trauma-informed and culturally responsive, they can incorporate a CYD framework into their service-learning to make theory actionable.

Community Youth Development Service-Learning

Service-learning is experiential education that puts theory into action (Simons & Cleary, 2006; Watkins & Braun, 2005; Watkins, Charlesworth, & House, 2007). In optimal circumstances, service-learning brings together programs and community resources to achieve mutually beneficial collective impact (Keen & Hall, 2009; Samuelson, Smith, Stevenson, & Ryan, 2013).

Watkins, Hayes, and Sarrubi (2015) incorporate tenets of community youth development into what they call the Six Requirements (Six R's) of Service-Learning. The Six R's and CYD's community-building focus provide a structure to align the three distinct concepts discussed thus far in this article: (a) trauma-informed youth development, (b) culturally responsive community youth engagement, and (c) opportunities for youth activism and action. What comes out of this, when done correctly, is a mutually beneficial partnership. The Six R's framework includes:

1. **Rigorous Learning:** An intensity of purpose and an investment of resources to deepen the learning experience.
2. **Relevant and Responsive Service:** The input of service partners is required, and youth-adult partners are active participants in each phase of the decision-making, project design, implementation, and evaluation.
3. **Reciprocity and Relationship-building:** Core elements of high impact practices that promote equality, shared power, and mutual respect. Interpersonal relationships solidify opportunities for personal and professional growth and intergroup community-building.
4. **Reflection:** Structured, ongoing and multi-dimensional for the discovery and assessment of one's passion, purpose, and prejudices and how these influence one's practice.
5. **Risk and Reality Assessments:** Service partners test assumptions, work through differences, and understand institutional cultures that impede or assist with the service experience.
6. **Recognition and Celebration:** Each phase of the service-learning experience provides an opportunity to pause from the responsibilities of project completion to salute and affirm individual and collective contributions (Watkins, 2011; Watkins et al., 2015).

The tenets of trauma-informed, culturally responsive community youth development are aligned with the Six R's of Service-Learning to round out the importance of a youth-driven, community-based, and resiliency-focused philosophy, as well as principles and practices of positive youth development and civic engagement.

We now demonstrate how all of these frameworks were put into practice in a service-learning environment.

Community Youth Development Service-Learning in Action

Following Hurricane Maria, 559 youth moved from Puerto Rico to Rochester, New York (Keegan, 2018), often in “step-wise fashion” of waves of migration, with first arrivals attempting to make room for other family members (Matlow & Romero, 2016). This transition pattern became a source of multiple traumas for young people: the initial trauma of the hurricane disaster; the tearing away from home community; uncertainties; anticipation of waiting to be reunited with loved ones; and the reality of starting over in a new neighborhood, social setting, and school.

Led by the Ibero-American Action League, Rochester’s Puerto Rican community mobilized to provide support and services. Since 2017, Ibero has served over 3,000 survivors of the hurricane including many of the 559 youth (Keegan, 2018).

Ibero-American Action League’s Department of Youth Services, with its bilingual staff, partners with Eugenio María de Hostos Charter School to provide culturally responsive youth development services to middle school students through its ASPIRA leadership program designed for Latinx youth. The social and emotional well-being of the Eugenio María de Hostos students impacted in some degree by Hurricane Maria became a particular concern of Ibero and Eugenio María de Hostos. Attendance and academic achievement were negatively impacted as students voiced fears, anxiety, and a sense of powerlessness, many of the symptoms of *ataques de nervios* (personal communication with Eugenio María de Hostos Charter School Vice-Principal and Ibero-American Action League program director, December, 2017).

As the Ibero-American Action League and Eugenio María de Hostos strategized academic support and family resources *for* the students, the Ibero staff reached out to Nazareth College’s Community Youth Development program to establish resiliency-focused service-learning *with* the sixth grade students. The Six R’s framework guided a semester-long project that ended in a “Celebration of Resiliency” dinner for 200 families impacted by Hurricane Maria. In the section that follows we note where exactly the Six R’s play a part in this positive experience.

Impact of the Six R's of Service-Learning

Rigorous Learning

Eugenio María de Hostos students studied natural disasters as a part of their core curriculum. During their class experiences, the sixth graders were provided designated time and a safe space to make the connections with their teachers' lessons and their personal experiences. Simultaneously, CYD college students were learning the principles of community youth development and the requisite strategies to encourage youth voice and choice (rigorous learning). Together, the 65 Eugenio María de Hostos students and their 23 college partners shared their mutual learning when the college students attended Eugenio María de Hostos six times during the semester.

Relevant and Responsive Service

In response to their understanding of the community's post-hurricane situation, as well as the community's strengths, relevant and responsive service was defined and driven by Eugenio María de Hostos students. The sixth graders wanted to celebrate their Latinx culture through a sharing of food, games, music, and dance as a respite from the hardships experienced by family and friends. Said one Eugenio María de Hostos teacher, "Students wanted families to have a night where they felt welcomed in their new community, free from the worry of their situation for one evening" (email correspondence with Eugenio María de Hostos teacher, January 2019).

Together Eugenio María de Hostos and Community Youth Development students wrote invitations, created colorful decorations of the Puerto Rican flag, and determined the evening's agenda. Ibero-American Action League staff arranged for Caribbean food, dancers, music, and a colorfully decorated school gymnasium. The sixth graders wrote and read poems to express their feelings about the impact of Maria on their everyday realities. The Nazareth College students sought and secured financial support through various campus organizations. Two hundred people who had been affected by the hurricane enjoyed the 3-hour event.

Reflection

One of our goals was to focus upon self-awareness, cultural introspection, and examination of personal comfort. To that end, college students, agency staff, and school personnel shared "heart-to-heart" reflections about their transformative experiences. Discussions covered where vulnerabilities and experiences of awkwardness led into deep sharing about the type of respect and humility necessary to be youth-focused and not self-centered. The safe space provided

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through the shared reflective process encouraged all to move beyond polite conversation and into authentic examination of risk aversion, performance anxiety, fears of cultural bias, and awkwardness around personal cultural backgrounds. The students learned from the community partners how their sense of entitlement and need to “help” and “make a difference” could unintentionally promote cultural biases. A theme of, “But I never had to think about my culture—it just is” was an initial collective thought as the college students deconstructed terms such as unearned privilege, structures of oppression, and implicit bias. One student lamented in his reflection that he would never intentionally be “rude” or “hurtful” yet he finally recognized “his whiteness as real.”

Additionally, the college students wrote reflective papers throughout the semester that illustrated their growth process. The journals showed some common themes including a sense of nervousness and uncertainty felt early on. This was a new environment for many of the students, which led one student to indicate in her reflective journal that she felt “slightly overwhelmed and a little bit scatterbrained.” Said another CYD student:

I was a little nervous before the [first] trip. I have a tendency to expect the worst things that could happen in a situation, especially when the situation is an unfamiliar one. While this can help put the things that actually happen in a more positive perspective, it can also create a lot of assumptions. One of the assumptions I made was that this service-learning experience would be awkward, that I wouldn't have anything in common with the students, that I would run out of things to talk about, and that we wouldn't have enough time to complete all the activities. The first three assumptions I made were proven wrong within the first few minutes of meeting the students.

To further reflective practices, each time that the sixth graders and college students met, a check-in and check-out were a part of their established rituals. To bring a sense of closure to each meeting the college students facilitated a reflection of lessons learned called “What? So what? Now what? Next what?” This process provided the small task groups an opportunity to learn with each other and plan for the next meeting.

Recognition and Celebration

Recognition and celebration of small successes and group process, rather than being sporadic events, were an infused philosophy that guided the entire service-learning partnership. EMHCS students were recognized as experts of their community by insuring their input in the design, implementation, and evaluation of service-learning sessions and special events. Differences and commonalities of cultural backgrounds between all students were celebrated through family heritage activities about family history, food, and place of family origin. Each session included a “high five time” to recognize positive group dynamic and task completion. A favorite celebration event was exploring the “ups and downs” of college student life as the EMHCS students visited the Nazareth College’s dorms, classrooms, athletic facilities, and library. The agency staff and school personnel were recognized at an end of the semester celebration for their mentorship, with the ASPIRA program coordinator receiving a President’s Excellence in Civic Engagement Service-Learning Community Partner Award from Nazareth College.

Risk and Reality Assessments

Youths and adults struggled with the reality of grand program ideas with limited funding, public relations in both Spanish and English, food menus that followed Health Department codes, and facilities arrangements that would meet fire codes. Risk and reality assessments were a major process within the Community Youth Development classroom after each meeting with the Eugenio María de Hostos students and teachers. Program planning changes, sufficient funding for supplies, challenges with transportation, and marketing strategies were no longer examples written in textbooks, but became the “lessons of the day.”

Reciprocity and Relationship-Building

Lastly, through reciprocity and relationship-building, the service-learning program enhanced a sense of mattering and mastery for both sixth-grade and college students. Through the semester-long give-and-take of ideas, an understanding of the impact of the hurricane, and appropriate personal sharing, a sense of a community of belonging developed for all students. College students increased their understanding of CYD through their self-awareness reflections, and the Eugenio María de Hostos students demonstrated increased ability to work effectively in groups, enhanced social awareness skills through partnerships with adults, and increased active participation in their academic lessons. Social and emotional learning assessment scores indicated a 55% increase in proficiency for the students, and teachers reported a decrease of

behavioral management concerns within their classrooms (S. Nater, personal communication, May 2018). Furthermore, Eugenio María de Hostos administrators reported that the sixth graders could “now see themselves as college students” and have a new “sense of possibility for their futures” (J. Harris, personal communication May 2018).

Discussion

The significance of this case has been the intentionality with which our service-learning focused upon incorporating culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices within a community youth development framework. The Six R’s came alive through a process of earnest listening to the voices of sixth graders, an acknowledgement of their sense of urgency, an appreciation of their resiliency, and a commitment to serve their goals for their community. Community youth development principles guided by service-learning facilitated opportunities for youth to achieve asset-building (Search Institute, 2018), social and emotional learning (CASEL, 2017), and a stake in their community (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006).

In their work with the Puerto Rican youth, Ibero has begun measuring changes in the social and emotional learning levels of youth. Nazareth College and Ibero have committed to continue service-learning with EMHCS going forward; our intention is to coordinate on social and emotional learning assessments that measure gains both for the sixth graders and for the college students. This could lead to establishing replicable assessment tools that could measure future cases like ours.

No matter what further work is done or assessments put in place, it is vital to maintain the emphasis on flexibility that is indelible to both cultural responsiveness and youth development. In order to build upon this practice, we have found that the guiding philosophy and methodology must be grounded in the cultures of the community partners. To not honor the youth and their community as experts would remove the very feature that makes the whole practice adaptable for different environments.

Youth from more and more cultures are attempting to coexist in our schools and communities. The case example shown in this paper has demonstrated the imperative for youth workers to be culturally responsive. And while trauma is not a new phenomenon or happening in any greater degree than before, the effect it has on youth is finally getting the recognition due it. In a changing country, CYD’s Six R’s of service-learning offers a vital framework to facilitate youth engagement in communities.

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