

**ENRICHING SCHOOL CONNECTION AND LEARNING IN AFRICAN
AMERICAN URBAN YOUTH: THE IMPACT OF A SERVICE LEARNING
FEASIBILITY PROJECT IN INNER CITY PHILADELPHIA**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the researcher describes the impact of an inner city service-learning pilot study conducted in the city of Philadelphia. African American youth were taught the principles of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) as a part of their science and service learning classes as a way to improve their understanding of ecology, environment, and health. Students then worked closely with teachers to develop informative IPM presentations which they disseminated to school peers and residents in the surrounding community. It was hypothesized that compared to matched controls, students participating in the SL project would report (1) feeling more committed to their school, (2) greater recognition from their teachers, (3) greater pro-social commitment, and (4) less social anxiety. The vast majority of service-learning youth expressed interest in getting more involved with their school and communities in the future. Moreover, students in the service-learning group also reported a higher degree of parental involvement with the schools than students in the control group.

Key Words: African American youth, service learning, social anxiety, school connection

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers have identified civic engagement as a critical element of positive youth development. Given the turmoil and stress that exists among certain minority groups, particular attention has been given to minority populations in low-income marginalized communities. Some researchers have identified certain predictors as beneficiaries for youth in these communities such as civic engagement and community involvement. Greater involvement in the community will lead to outcomes such as higher self esteem and more meaningful connections with positive individuals in the community. In light of these positive factors, some researchers recognize youth as being part of a social context which as numerous factors which may keep them disconnected from the community. Focusing on this disconnection and the implications for greater social involvement we can begin to better assist youth to become more engaged. This is especially important for young minority youth who are often times not part of the social and emotional fabric of their own communities. Few studies to date have focused on the connection of how low-income minority youth and their engagement may assist in their positive development and attachment to the greater community. It is suggested in this paper that through experiences such as service learning perhaps these young people may begin to feel a greater connection with peers, school teachers and community members.

Marginalized African American Communities

There is a plethora of research which documents the challenges which have created the inseparable issues between social conditions and wealth in inner city marginalized African American communities. (Jarkowsky, 1997; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Park 1926). During the early 1970s African American

communities experienced the plight of losing low-skill manufacturing jobs to suburban areas (Kasarda, 1988).

These catastrophic events caused a shift to a highly skilled labor force producing a large concentration of poor individuals across many US inner cities. This further deepened the political and social upheavals which were happening within many communities. Families began to experience a surge of issues due to the declining workforce such as decreased monthly income and the need to work several low paying jobs. In addition, economic migration caused stable middle class families to move out to the suburbs further deepening the rift in the inner cities. Family owned businesses which were the cornerstone of the community were moving to the outskirts of the city making them inaccessible to inner city residents. All of these issues combined created a new face for the African American inner city family, one in which their social and economic well being were being severely compromised and widening the gap of geographic and racial segregation.

The new inner city created a number of social problems, such as continual joblessness, inequitable educational opportunities, dependency on the social system and social restlessness. Although some theorists may argue that this has caused a pattern of deviant social norms and values inherent within the inner city population (Mead, 1986; Murray, 1984), others believe these are institutional behaviors adapted into the culture that have allowed the urban poor to cope with their living conditions (Coulton & Poudy, 1992). Social exclusion, political bureaucracy, and racial inequality together created a system which helped fuel the behaviors, beliefs and movements of the urban poor African American individual and community. Despite these issues, some of the most

marginalized individuals in these inner city communities have found a structure to survive.

Adaptation within the inner city became a way of life for the young and old. Men and women alike had to create a network within their lives to keep them connected to the social networks of the greater society. Churches, schools and civic organizations served as essential institutions in this web of resources for the severely marginalized family. They created social programs, opportunities and informational networks which kept people informed and connected because, “the desolation of social impoverishment compounds the deprivation of economic impoverishment” (Garbarino, 1985, p. 135).

Social capital had taken on a new form of life by giving support to the urban poor resident and helping to reinforce positive behaviors and norms for the entire community. This lifeline of support helped to establish employment networks, homework help lines, food assistance programs, clothing drives, educational scholarships and job training. Furthermore, it helped to boost behaviors and attitudes necessary to move ahead in life. This foundation has helped establish actions and behaviors in which many of the marginalized African American poor have found necessary to survive in the inner city community. Despite their spatial segregation, the urban poor created a network of trust and social obligations useful for their everyday existence. African American families in poverty come from a historical and cultural place that have allowed them to create a community both active and able in working to meet its own needs (Robin, 1997).

RESILENCY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Due to the various inconsistencies in their lives, African American urban poor youth have developed coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with their daily struggles

(Annunziata, 2006; Fitzpatrick, Piko, Wright & LaGory, 2005; Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000; McGee, Davis, Brisbane, Collins, Nuriddin, Irving, Mutakkabir, & Martin, 2001). These coping strategies have proven essential for their personal, social and emotional well being and as noted by the social activist Dubois provides a foundation for “young civic leaders and stewards in *our* communities”. Community activism and civic leadership have been a constant force in the African American community despite the economic and social welfare of its citizens. Many of these experiences happened in the black church which served as the pillar for community involvement, family connectedness and social connection (Rosemary, 2000). While some scientists would argue that these experiences are not enough to keep urban poor youth engaged, Calhoun-Brown (1996) argue they have provided a foundation for social integration and civic involvement for many African American youth. Mohamed & Wheeler (2001) believe, “particularly for youths who are struggling with issues of identity formation and the differences engendered by race, class, gender, and sexuality, civic activism provides a safe and positive forum in which to work on or through these issues.

Flanagan and Faison (2001) argue that despite the involvement of ethnic minority youth, many of these young people remain disengaged from traditional youth development opportunities. In a 2001 article about youth citizenship, the two authors conclude that there were very few accounts and processes by which ethnic minority groups, “develop an affection for the polity and become engaged citizens” (p.5). Hart (2005) and Ginwright & James (2002), consider marginalized youth on the fringes of society, yet engaged within contexts which have developed according to the social and ecological contexts from which they arise. For these marginalized young people, youth

leadership and civic activism, it seems, can be successfully combined into an effective strategy for achieving youth development outcomes.” African American urban youths, especially those from marginalized low-income communities have an ability to bring distinct vision to social programs and activities, especially those from marginalized low-income communities (Berjano, 2005; Delgado, 2005; Scales, Foster, Mannes, Horst, Pinto & Rutherford, 2005; Mahiri, 2004). It is from this vision that many youth programs are developing within the inner cities. For instance, in Chicago, a youth development civic program was developed using the social norms of the young people such as rap songs, stepping¹, and spoken word.

African American Youth and Service Learning

While service learning holds out promise as a pedagogical approach, the vast majority of studies have included predominately White, middle class youth, who reside in suburban areas, thereby limiting generalization to the general population (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). Recently, scholars and urban education reformists, have suggested that service learning be used as a way to connect urban students to their immediate community to improve educational achievement and social connectedness (Ginsberg, Shapiro, & Brown, 2004; Sirianni and Friedland 2001; Warren, 2005). Service learning experiences from an urban youth perspective has the advantage of showing the connections that can be made between urban youth and their own communities. It also provides another layer to the service learning field of the benefits gained by urban youth and communities when issues are addressed by individuals who live in and understand the cultural, political, and social nuances within these communities being served (Pickron-Davis, 1999). For

¹ Stepping is a form of rhythmic dance which originated in the gold mines of South Africa to assist miners in keeping the tempo of the laborious tasks. It has been incorporated into several forms of dance throughout the US and continues to be an integral part of the black fraternity and sorority systems.

example, youths who engage in service learning activities demonstrate increased social bonds and school connectedness, increases in prosocial behavior, and declines in inappropriate (i.e., delinquent) behavior (Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999).

Specifically, there is a priori reason to believe that African American urban youth can benefit from the opportunities for empowerment and involvement that well-done service-learning provides. Because service-learning is designed to address needs in communities, youth can build on their existing community knowledge, experience, and contact to feel empowered within and connected to their communities. Indeed, a number of leading theorists and researchers concerned with the social welfare of African American youth are calling for in-depth research relating to the context of marginalized black communities (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Brown, 2004; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Obidah & Howard, 2005).

Urban Service Learning

In the few service learning studies conducted in urban locales, the youth residing there have typically been the recipients and supposed beneficiaries of the projects imported from suburban schools (See, for example, Moore and Sandholtz's 1999 article on Designing Successful Service Learning Projects for Urban Schools). *Outsiders* are typically brought into urban communities and presented as experts who attempt to *understand* and *fix* the identified community problem. Paradoxically, these experts have often never been to African American communities before and are frequently ill-prepared to deal with the issues, environment, and challenges residing there (Wade, 2000). This approach of bringing outsiders into local communities has been described as an ill-advised and unfortunate side of service-learning (Boyle-Baise, 1999; Butin, 2003; Steinke, Fitch, Johnson & Waldstein, 2002; Wade, 2000). The researcher's contention is

that service learning should be shaped by practitioners and researchers to develop projects that use the experience and knowledge of endogenous African American youth and community stakeholders to address local community issues, needs, and problems of social justice and community development (Wade, 2000). Well constructed service learning in urban schools and communities could provide youth with opportunities for empowerment and involvement that would build on their community knowledge, experience, and contacts to work in a collaborative way on issues relevant to their own community. For example, Youniss and Yates (1999) found that inner-city African American youth in Washington, DC demonstrated a number of positive outcomes when learning and service opportunities were strategically combined and grounded within their own communities. Youth have an opportunity to develop stronger and more meaningful relationships with teachers in their schools and with adults living in the local community. Additionally, the urban service learning experience could connect metropolitan university students with their communities and possibly give them a sense of *giving back* to their own neighborhoods. Realizing there is a vital need to create culturally sensitive and engaging academic environments for African American youth, a research project was created in a Southwest Philadelphia middle school. The program was designed with a threefold purpose to assist both students and teachers in meeting the immediate needs of their community (e.g. environmental awareness, health awareness, physical safety), to better prepare students to pass state assessment tests and to build an academic setting that would incorporate the unique experiences of the youth and their community.

DATA AND METHODS

The data was collected as part of the Integrated Pest Management Service Learning Project funded by the Environmental Protection Agency's Urban Ecology Initiative Program. Surveys were collected by a team of three researchers in May and June 2005. The experimental group was given the survey after a scheduled IPM activity. Students in the control group were given the survey during their homeroom period because all the students were in the same schedule block. Students were given one hour to complete the 52 question survey. The sample consists of 23 African-American middle school students from a Title 1 resource poor urban middle school in West Philadelphia. Twelve students were randomly selected to (4 females, 8 males) participate in the IPM service-learning project. Eleven students (5 females and 6 males) matched on age, grade and socioeconomic background served as controls. The average age of the sample size was 12, with a range of 11-14 years of age.

Experimental and Control Groups

The school principal identified a cohort of 6 teachers from the 5th, 7th, and 8th science classes (2 teachers from each grade level) in the school. Each of these teachers had classes with an average size of 25 students, had previous training in service learning² and focused on environmental science in their class room instruction. From these classes, 40 students were randomly selected by the school principal. The class lists were separated into boys and girls to ensure that there was gender balance in each of the groups. A non-reponse of eight and nine parental/guardian permission slips resulted in only 12 students participating in the service learning program and 11 in the control group.

² Service learning training was provided by the school district as part of professional development days for teachers in the school district.

The IPM program provides a basis for a service learning project which would (a) challenge African American urban youth to address a topic relevant to their community and (c) increase communities with increased knowledge and awareness of and IPM approaches to maintain and solve chronic environmental issues. The study itself provides a unique opportunity to assess a number of social contexts and relationships among youth and their immediate school surroundings.

While the sample consists of neighborhoods representative in other marginalized African American communities, the data are not without limitations. The sample consists of African American marginalized urban poor youth from one census tract in the West Philadelphia area making the scope of the generalizability limited. The researcher believes the inclusion of only African Americans from this background is warranted because they are largest majority ethnic group living in urban poor communities (Jarkowsky, 1997). Another limitation of this study is that in contrast to other studies, there is a small sample size limiting the ability to generalize to other urban poor communities and ethnic populations.

Measures

The Communities that Care Youth Survey (Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano & Baglioni, 2002), is a self-report measure of an array of risk and protective factors (e.g. school, family, peer, individuals) that predict youth health and behavior outcomes. Each of the 31 risk and protective scales have demonstrated adequate internal consistency and construct validity for the scores across males and females, of various ages, and from ethnic minority groups, including African-Americans (Arthur, et al., 2002; Glasser, Van Horn, Arthur, Hawkins, Catalano, 2005). In this paper, the researcher was only interested in three of the scales. The commitment to school scale includes six items (“How

interesting are most of your courses to you? How important do you think the things you are learning in school are going to be for your later life?") The recognition scale includes four items ("My teachers notice when I am doing a good job and let me know about it."). The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency. The opportunities for prosocial involvement scale includes five items ("Teachers ask me to work on special classroom projects. There are lots of chances of students in my school to talk to teachers one on one."). The scale demonstrated reasonable internal consistency. Respondents indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a five point Likert type scale.

The Social Anxiety Scale for Children Revised (La Greca & Lopez, 1988) measures children's subjective experience of social anxiety. It contains 18 descriptive self-statements and four filler items reflecting activity references ("I like to read") or social preferences ("I like to play with other kids".) Each item is rated on a 5-point scale according to how much an item is true for the respondent (1 = not at all, 5 = all the time). Internal consistency and construct validity for the scores have been supported in prior studies (Ginsburg, La Greca, Silverman, 1998; La Greca & Lopez, 1988). In this study, the scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency.

The Service Attitude Measure (SAM Webster & Worrell, in press) consists of eight items assessing adolescents' global attitudes toward service and learning. Questions assess adolescents beliefs about (a) helping others in the community, (b) adults engaging in service projects in their communities and in the world, (c) youth and adults working together on service learning projects, (d) adults helping youth to be more engaged civically, and (e) youth engaging in community service even without adult

support. SAM questions are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*).

The experimental group has 75 students whose teachers had previous training in service learning and the control group has 70 students whose teacher did not have previous training in service learning. A small sample of 12 students and 11 students is drawn from the first and the second population respectively. Four variables are measured to compare the performance of the experimental group to the performance of the control group. Among these variables are: feeling connected to school, social anxiety, greater recognition from teachers, and prosocial commitment.

Generally speaking, when given two populations, we have two hypotheses to explore. First is the null hypothesis that two populations from which the two sample means originate have the same mean ($H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$). If this is the case, the two sample means should be close together and the observed difference between the two sample means should be small. If the observed difference between the two sample means is in fact small, the difference is deemed not significant and is attributed to chance or random sampling fluctuations. The second hypothesis to be explored is that the two samples are drawn from populations that have different means ($H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$). If this alternative hypothesis is true, the two sample means should be far apart and the observed difference between the two sample means should be large. If the observed difference between the two sample means is in fact large, the difference is deemed a significant difference.

The standard procedure is to test the validity of the null hypothesis utilizing the information from the two samples. On the basis of the evidence produced by the two sample means, we will either reject the null hypothesis or reserve judgment.

A normal distribution test is used to test the difference between the two means by estimating the z value. However, when the sample sizes are very small (less than 30), instead of a normal distribution, a t -distribution with $(n_1 + n_2 - 2)$ degrees of freedom. The difference between the means of the two samples is regarded as significant at the 0.5 level or 0.1 level when the observed absolute value of the t-value exceeds the critical value of $t_{.025}$ or $t_{.05}$ respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nearly all of the students in both groups were African American ³(92%). The average age of the students was 12.5 years and in grade seven. There were no significant differences between groups on any demographic variables. Across the entire sample, students supported a moderate prosocial orientation (M=15.70). Students generally reported feeling well connected to school (M=23.11) with a moderate feeling about recognition from teachers (M=12.21). All the students experienced a relatively high association with social anxiety (M=54.7).

All of the means were in the predicted direction (except for social anxiety). However, a series of independent t tests revealed that none of the group differences were statically significant. Using Cohen's *d*: it was determined that the effect sizes were in the medium range for two variables (commitment to school and social anxiety) and one effect approached the medium range (prosocial involvement). Mean scores on the dependent measures from the Communities That Care and Social Anxiety Scale are presented in Table 1.

³ One of the students identified as being biracial (one black parent and one white parent).

Table 1.

Mean Scores for IPM Project Youth (n=12) and Matched Controls (n=11)

Variables	IPM Youth			Controls			$t_{.025} \cong 1.960$
	X_1	S_2	CV_1	X_2	S_2	CV_2	$t - value$
Commitment to School	23.83	1.59	6.67%	22.40	2.88	12.85%	1.492
Recognition	12.42	2.02	16.62%	12.00	1.63	13.58%	0.456
Prosocial Commitment	16.00	1.81	11.31%	15.40	1.89	12.27%	0.778
Social Anxiety	55.83	3.67	6.57%	52.90	4.51	8.52%	1.716

Since the actual value of t for all the four variables is less than the critical value of $t_{.025}^{(1960)}$ the difference between the means of the two groups of students is not regarded as significant at the 0.5 level. In other words, we fail to reject our null hypothesis.

However, the difference between the means of the two groups is significant for social anxiety at the 0.1 level. It is important to mention that the results of this study cannot be generalized and apply only to the two samples under consideration. Although, we did not do an exhaustive study, the coefficient of variation indicates that the variability among students in the experiment group is less than the variability in the control group. This

suggests that a more robust study involving large sample size is needed to further assess the impact of service learning on students.

The first construct examined was whether youth felt more connected to school as a result of their participation in the IPM service learning program. We were interested to see if the students who were a part of the service learning group would feel a closer attachment to their peers and teachers and feel like school was engaging and important. The results indicate that there was not a significant difference ($M = 23.83, p = .16$) between service learning activities and school connection. The control group had a $M=23.83$ and a $SD=2.88$ indicating that they were less inclined to feel connected to school (e.g. sports, clubs) and activities outside the classroom. Youth engagement with this particular population did not seem to impact their attitudes towards their friends, peers, classroom teachers and administrators

The second construct social anxiety was used to examine if the service learning students' level of social anxiety would decrease as a result of their participation in the project. This was not confirmed ($M = 55.83; SD= 2.02$) indicating that students who were part of the IPM program showed greater signs of social anxiety than those in the control group. The hypothesis that students' social anxiety would decrease from participation in the service learning program was not confirmed indicating that students who were part of the IPM program showed greater signs of social anxiety than those in the control group. Given the small sample size and the limiting factors of the study probably contributed to the indicated results.

Greater recognition from teachers did not change given the students' participation in the service learning project. The hypothesis that the IPM Service Learning program

would increase students' interaction with peers was not significant ($M = 12.42, p = .59$). In the control group, students' reported a mean score of ($M = 12.00$) and $SD = 1.63$ indicating that both they and the intervention group felt they had about the same number of opportunities and chances from teachers. These included both classroom opportunities and extracurricular activities over the course of the academic year.

The final variable analyzed was prosocial commitment. The hypothesis that the IPM service learning program students' prosocial behavior would increase over time was not confirmed. Although the effect of the intervention was not significant the results reflected movement in the desired direction ($M = 16.00; SD = 1.81$).

Overall, findings of the study did not reveal a significant difference between those students who were participants in the IPM group than those in the control group. Given the small sample size, we can not make generalizations about the results, but rather make suggestions as to next steps for future studies.

The findings are likely related to several factors, including the intervention design, the outcomes studied, and the length of time required to affect the African American adolescents' lives in this community. Given the nature of the projects the students undertook and the length of the service learning program it would be expected to see positive results among students. The activities were designed to affect the connection African American students have among peers and their school as well as prosocial behaviors within their school community. Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee (2006) state that intervention projects, especially those designed for the African American student should have a focus on the identity of the student and include activities which assist in building

group identity at the start of the project. Thus, immediate effects on these constructs (school connection, peer interaction, prosocial behavior) were expected and evident.

Similarly, the level of prosocial behavior for the intervention group also made sense given the fact that students were required to begin thinking about change within their school community from the beginning of the project. Later on they actually applied the skills and knowledge gained through the project within their school and greater community. Given the content presented at the beginning of the project along with the African American business mentors and lessons related to African American communities, youths were exposed to the reality of social change and making a difference within their own communities. The students were taught to see the importance of helping those who are immediately around them and the value this behavior can have on themselves and the greater society at large. Thus, an immediate effect was expected and evident for prosocial behavior for the intervention group.

The inverse relationship between social anxiety and the service learning group was not expected, however in retrospect it makes theoretical sense. Limited research on African American youth and anxiety suggests that it may manifest itself different among these populations and especially those from inner cities marginalized background (Lambert, Cooley, Campbell, Benoit, Stansbury, 2004; Lambert, McCreary, Preston, Schidmt, Joiner, Ialongo, 2004). The activities of the IPM service learning participants, such as walking around with clipboards and protective helmets to monitor pest was seen as odd by the other students. In some instances, the IPM group was mocked during their weekly meetings and school activities⁴.

⁴ Information collected during the face-to-face interviews with participants in the IPM service learning program.

These results are also consistent with the findings of prior research examining the relationship of African American students' and their connection to school and social anxiety when participating in a service learning program (Crystal & DeBell, 2002). This literature suggests that the more the students engage in service learning activities the more they feel connected to their teachers, administrators, and peers, but are also more likely to show signs of social anxiety. Because school connectedness is especially salient during adolescence, (Goodenow, 1993), it is particularly important to help students feel that they belong to the school and believe themselves to be welcomed, respected, and valued by other school members so their motivation to achieve remains high.

As stated previously, intervention participants' school connectedness, prosocial behavior and school recognition moderately improved as expected. These findings suggest that participants recognized they were part of a larger community and its successes, issues and challenges which impacted everyone. More importantly, the service learning program provided a template for creating an integrated work environment in an inner city school. The subject matter of IPM gave students an avenue to learn a new topic, readily apply the theory and science in their everyday lives and see tangible results. The African American youth who were engaged not only felt connected to school, but also to the activities which focused on social problems within their own community. Not only were students engaged, but they also had the chance to develop deeper relationships with peers and teachers and had a physical space to focus on issues they deemed as relevant. This framework provided students with a social network of peers, community, members, and teachers who would play a role in both their academic and social development.

CONCLUSION

The researcher undertook a small service learning pilot study in an urban school to examine its effectiveness in enhancing student connections to their schools and communities, commitment to civic participation, and social comfort and competence. Results revealed that students in the service learning condition did not differ from controls on any of the measures of connectedness, commitment, or social competence. It is important to note, however, that means for three of the four variables examined in the study were in the anticipated direction. Perhaps the most parsimonious explanation for the finding is the lack of statistical power resulting from the small sample size ($N = 23$). On the other hand, when simply asked if participation in service learning was a good experience, all the students reported feeling quite positively about it and expressed interest in having more opportunities to work collaboratively within their communities. Therefore, there is some evidence that service learning programs may yield positive results with urban youth when they are connected to local communities.

Far too often, service learning projects have brought exogenous “experts” into urban African American communities to solve problems and lend a hand to “those in need”. This creates a dangerous dynamic where urban African American youth and communities may come to believe they cannot solve their own problems, and outsiders may see the youth and communities as helpless and needy. Therefore, service learning projects need to be designed where urban youth and communities work together to solve their own problems.

Despite the small sample size in this study, the results could have a positive impact on future studies with low-income African American youth. Perhaps greater

attention will be given to studies which include the community, the child, and the family. Results from a feasibility study such as this, could help support future service learning studies and literature related to African American marginalized youth in urban areas. Greater understanding of specific programs and their relationship to youth and community may contribute to improving the social and economic well being of youth in these impoverished areas.

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