Chapter Five

Social Work Practice: Nurturing Beginning Practice Skills while Mobilizing Partnerships between Youth Development Agencies and Social Work Education

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As social work education wrestles with its responsibility to educate students about the human service demands of the twenty-first century, a more explicit link between education and practice is required in the early and formative years of students' social work education. This chapter describes how the application of classroom learning, guided by service-learning experiences based in youth development agencies, enhances student understanding of the history, as well as the premises, principles, and practices, of the profession of social work.

The youth development model was established within the context of settlement house social work with youth. Today, this model remains an untapped resource for social work education. The authors suggest that embedding youth development premises, principles, and practices within a service-learning component of an "Introduction to Social Work" course helps students make the connection between social work's rich service history and the reality of current service provision within youth development agencies. A growing number of social work educators have voiced concern about the youth development model's lack of representation in social work education (Barton, Watkins, and Jajoura 1998; Morrison, Alcorn, and Nelum 1997; Watkins and Iverson 1997; Watkins, Morrison, and McCarthy 1999). On the other side of the social work education's "town-gown" equation, youth development professionals urge social work education to move beyond the treatment-oriented, problem-centered knowledge, skills, and values that are contradictory to the "assets-based" and "preparation for adulthood" model of youth development (Watkins 2000, 2006). Service-learning partnerships between youth development professionals and social work educators confront these issues by providing forums to share expertise, receive information with which to examine current practice, and shape human service delivery systems related to best practices with diverse youth populations (Greene 1996). Service-learning

tnerships between social work educators and youth development agencies
also very timely because the service activities respond to the youth de-
opment agencies' shrinking resources while simultaneously providing
ning that is strengths focused, culturally competent, community based,
, most importantly, youth centered (Watkins 2006).

tecent reports indicate that the need for youth development services is in-
ising while agency funding is diminishing (McLaughlin 2000; National
earch Council and Institute of Medicine 2002). Contemporary settlement
ses and other community-based agencies, such as Boys and Girls Clubs,
Brothers/Big Sisters, YMCAs and YWCAs, and Girls, Inc., have in-
sed their efforts to provide effective emotional, physical, and academic
port and supervision to more children and adolescents as parents, schools,
communities are less available to fulfill their roles as nurturers in healthy
th development (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1995;
gado 2004; DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund 1996; Hechinger 1992;
ry 2000; Watkins 2000). F. Hechinger's words of more than a decade ago
inue to ring true as the poverty rate for children in our country remains
mingly high: "Youth service organizations are assuming a crucial new
for children and youth at high risk, and that role is to supplement in-
plete or inadequate families and families who are simply too poor to pro-
for their children's needs" (1992, 191).

his chapter discusses the viability of a service-learning partnership be-
en a youth-development-grounded, century-old settlement house and an
roduction to Social Work" course taught at Nazareth College of
nester, New York. This partnership illustrates the ways in which youth de-
pment agencies can provide undergraduate social work students with ser-
-learning opportunities, facilitating knowledge and skill development in
areas of youth empowerment, advocacy, and community involvement
d 2001; Jarman-Rohde et al. 1997; Libby, Rosen, and Sedonaen 2005).
discussion also explores the concept of youth development and the oper-
al mechanics of initiating and sustaining service-learning partnerships
sed on achieving course objectives within an "Introduction to Social
k" course. Service and social work learning opportunities, as well as ex-
es of the impact of youth development service-learning partnerships on
nt learning outcomes, are highlighted.

THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT MODEL
AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

eoretical congruency exists within the literature on resiliency and the
ises of youth development, the history of the social work profession, the

youth services provided within a settlement house, and the objectives of an "Introduction to Social Work" course.

The youth development model offers a framework for social workers to be-
lieve in, think about, and practice the core tenets of strengths-based micro,
mezzo, and macro social work practice with youth. The youth development
model advocates a set of premises, principles, and practices to "prepare a
child" (Pittman 1996). According to K. Pittman, "We must change how we
look at youth and expect young people to be not just problem free, but fully
prepared. To be fully prepared, young people need people, places, possibili-
ties, preparation, practices, participation, permission, promotion, and per-
spective. And that equals power" (1996, 7).

The youth development model does not operate in a vacuum. The model
takes into account the existence of adversities and developmental challenges
that may impact children in different ways in many circumstances. At the
same time, the youth development model suggests building on the competen-
cies of youth and "emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the sup-
posed incapacitates of young people—including those from the most disad-
vantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories" (Damon
2004, 16). While taking into account the varied circumstances that may be
present in the lives of youngsters, youth development focuses on the achieve-
ment of positive youth outcomes. Positive youth outcomes have been defined
as psychosocial and competency-based outcomes (Academy for Educational
Development/Center for Youth Development and Policy Research 1996).
Psychosocial outcomes include a sense of safety and protection, a sense of
self-worth or positive self-concept, mastery, autonomy, a sense of belonging,
spirituality, and self-awareness. *Competency-based outcomes* include per-
sonal competency or efficacy, physical health, mental health, cultural and so-
cial competence, and employability. Moreover, healthy development out-
comes have been articulated as the Forty Developmental Assets (Search
Institute 1995), assets critical to preparing young people for adulthood. Thus,
social work grounded in the youth development model offers relationship-
building, programmatic, and policy-development opportunities to

- build on youth competencies
- prepare youth for adulthood
- promote holistic mastery-building and relationship-enhancing opportuni-
  ties to increase the number of positive youth outcomes (Bloomberg et al.
  2003; Catalano et al. 2004), which in turn minimize the "rotten" outcomes
  (Dryfoos 1990)

The rationale for youth development services is deeply reflective of the
values of the social work profession and its methods; it therefore reinforces

the focus of the "Introduction to Social Work" course. During this introduction to the social work profession, students learn the core, contemporary social work knowledge, values, and skills. In addition, students are expected to acquire a basic understanding of fundamental professional principles, including the meaning and relevance of concepts like cultural competency, empowerment, and social justice. Furthermore, students are introduced to systems thinking and the strengths perspective and are expected to acquire a beginning-level ability to apply this knowledge. Thus, the intended student learning outcomes of the "Introduction to Social Work" course are supported by the underlying premises, principles, and practices of youth development:

- Youth development is all inclusive; its philosophy embraces difference. Youth development approaches and strategies embrace all youth, including those who have not chosen healthy behaviors.
- Youth development operates within the total environment of the individual, emphasizing a holistic approach to change. Youth development approaches engage youth, families, community-based organizations, government, and others in the community as full partners, working together to make a difference.
- Youth development links individuals with resources. Youth development approaches recognize that all youth need opportunities in order to acquire and sustain healthy behavior and attitudes.
- Youth development capitalizes on the hope and belief that all people have the potential to change and grow. Youth development approaches support the long-term sustained efforts vital to the development of behavioral change toward healthy lifestyle choices (Partners for Children 2000, 9–10).

In summary, the youth development model supports many connections to social work, primarily its ecological and strengths perspective approaches, through a belief in the resiliency and potential of the youthful spirit: "Youth development happens everywhere. The process is enduring, comprehensive, and engages youth. All youth are developing; all youth have strengths; all youth have needs; all youth can contribute to their communities; all youth are valued" (Pittman as cited by Partners for Children 2000, 15).

FRAMEWORK FOR SERVICE-LEARNING INTEGRATION

The "Introduction to Social Work" course is a prerequisite for all other social work courses within the baccalaureate social work curriculum. It has historically provided students with the foundation needed to understand and fulfill

virtually all of the Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* and baccalaureate program objectives through other coursework.

The placement of a service-learning opportunity within this "prefieldwork" social work course enables students to experience and integrate the basic principles of the social work profession. As a result, student exposure to social work's settlement house tradition grounded in the principles of youth development became the focus of the service-learning opportunity. The impetus for the academic service-learning experience was a series of collaborative, community-based events sponsored by the Nazareth College Office of Multicultural Affairs, Nazareth College's Center for Service-Learning, the college's Department of Social Work, and the community-based settlement house. These events celebrated the legacy of settlement house work in the Rochester area. As a result of these activities, the faculty who taught the "Introduction to Social Work" course, funded by Nazareth College's Center for Service-Learning, committed to a three-year service-learning partnership with an after-school youth education/employment program conducted by the settlement house.

Three action steps were used to build partnerships among the faculty members, agency staff, students, and the service recipients—the youth. These action steps included

- developing the partnership
- integrating the experience into course content
- adding a macro-level dimension to the course

Developing the Partnership

To develop the partnership, an initial focus was matching the agency's strengths and the academic institution's requirements, using the expertise of the faculty and the settlement house staff. This matching process produced an interdependent synergy to achieve mutually determined interests, capacities, and needs. The faculty engaged agency representatives in the design of the course's service-learning requirements in order to

- establish commonalities between the outcomes of social work education and the youth development mission statement of the agency
- achieve a collective agreement on the guiding conceptual framework (i.e., the congruency between youth development principles and the empowerment/strengths perspective)
- redefine individual institutional boundaries to incorporate the scope of partnership

- achieve mutual agreement on outcomes, goals, resources, and methods of operation congruent with the requirements of the "Introduction to Social Work" course, while honoring the mission of the agency and the integrity of the youth development model of service delivery
- help students translate social work concepts, such as psychosocial assessments, resistant clients, coping strategies, and other case-management strategies, into youth development opportunities for relationship building, youth-adult partnerships, and asset-based advocacy, with youth as resources, not recipients of service (Watkins and Braun 2005; Watkins 1998)

Integrating the Experience into Course Content

A second action step was the incorporation of youth development premises, principles, and practices within student learning outcomes and course learning objectives. The service-learning activities were embedded in the "Introduction to Social Work" course to demonstrate to students the connection between settlement house–based youth development and the history of social work practice. Therefore, the practices of youth development infused within service-learning activities, combined with the "Introduction to Social Work" course outcomes, provided the structure, coherence, and congruency for the relationship among the youth development agency, Nazareth College's Department of Social Work, and the college's Center for Service-Learning.

The knowledge, skills, and values of youth development were integrated within the "Introduction to Social Work" course objectives in the following manner:

- Generalist social work practice skills (interpersonal, groups, community organization, research) and curriculum content were based on the strengths-oriented, youth development, and developmental asset-based frameworks.
- The integration of the theory-based social work curriculum, combined with the realities of youth development agencies' daily operations and the youth members' well-being and social functioning, provided a coherent educational approach to teaching generalist practice skills.
- Critical thinking skills were important competencies as students applied theory to youth situations.
- Opportunities for increased appreciation and application of skills related to person-in-environment, cultural competency, and social and economic justice were infused into students' educational skill-building experiences.
- Relevant and appropriate individual and social group work services to youth were offered through respectful, collaborative, mutual relationship-

building between youngsters and social workers, rather than problem-focused treatment interventions.
- Advocacy knowledge and skills were taught to promote policy and legislative change within community-based, family-centered, youth-focused systems and institutions.
- The values and ethics of the youth development and generalist social work professions were transmitted (Watkins 1998).

Successfully integrating the experience into course content is a critical action step because students must understand that the service-learning experiences are intentionally designed to reflect the practice strategies derived from the daily realities and unique culture of the youth development agency while simultaneously integrating academic requirements. Frequently, students will ask, "How is playing basketball really a form of social work?" Another common lament is, "The kids won't sit and listen to me as I try to counsel them." The "unruly" behavior of youth who may or may not show up for a group activity may initially create confusion for "Introduction to Social Work" students who are intent on "assessing" and "helping" young people.

With intentionally designed service-learning activities to illuminate the strengths of youth, the connection between the social work concepts of "resiliency" and the "strengths perspective" and the youth development conceptual framework facilitate the students' achievement of the "aha" experience. The most common area of professional growth and personal development relates to the students' reaction to youth behavior. Students' interpretation of youth's "inappropriate and unruly behavior" becomes a teachable moment to examine the connection between the students' personal premises, principles, and practices and the role of a strengths-based social worker.

Adding a Macro Dimension

A third action step is to design service-learning activities that involve faculty, students, and agency staff with administrative macro-oriented projects that exist within the agency, in addition to "fun with a purpose," guidance-oriented activities provided for youth. Community-based, macro-oriented, service-learning activities facilitate students' initial understanding of the profession's historical and contemporary philosophy and knowledge, value, and skill base. Service learning enriches student ability in these areas through technical assistance, research, and community-outreach opportunities. Such research and outreach opportunities include assistance with program development and evaluation, grant writing, and community outreach. This array of

macro service-learning experiences positively challenges students and provides faculty the possibility of research and service activities.

SERVICE-LEARNING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

With background clarification and planning between agency staff, faculty, and students completed, the students committed to a ten-week, two-hour contract with the after-school education/employment program. The time commitment also included assignments for the course, planning and participating in a variety of activities, writing a reflective journal, and participating in reflective classroom discussions.

At the start of the partnership, an identified and significant need among the youth participants was the influence of a relationship with a "caring adult." The social work students served as caring adults, offering relationship-building skills, asset strengthening, mentoring, role modeling, goal development, and plain old fun. Activities engaged in by social work students and youth included the development and presentation of "dream boards." In this relationship-building activity, both teens and social work students visually depicted their hopes and aspirations for the future on poster board. Completed dream boards were presented to one another and displayed.

Social work students and youth also attended community and campus events together. These events included a citywide youth summit. In addition, students and youth collaboratively planned campus tours, pizza parties on campus, and the viewing of on-campus theater performances or similar extracurricular events. During one semester, social work students created a video entitled "A Day in the Life of a College Student" for the teens.

Students and teens also collaboratively planned many other diverse activities in response to teen interests, such as mock job interviews, academic or other "awards" ceremonies or celebrations for teens, a "night out" at a teen night club, and multicultural dinners. In addition, social work students consistently provided mentoring and homework tutoring when needed.

SERVICE-LEARNING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

A variety of youth competency-building and student learning outcomes are achieved through this type of partnership. Settlement house staff indicated that the service-learning component of the class not only exposed youth to positive adults (the social work students) but also stimulated interest in career and college exploration. The experience supported the sharing of important

support and information regarding education and career choices, as well as hopefulness about the future among all participants.

Without a doubt, the students' participation in this service-learning activity brought course objectives "to life." Students, in their reflective discussion and writing, reported a variety of types of learning. Many students described their firsthand glimpse into a life outside of the familiar. Some students indicated that the experience represented their first exposure to the challenges of youth and families struggling with poverty and inadequate educational and social welfare programs. Many students began to understand the operation of a multifaceted neighborhood service center. Some students described their revisiting of the challenges of adolescence. For example, some students who initially identified with the youth attending the settlement house reported surprise at the generational differences they discovered.

Most significantly, many students began to assess their own values, fears of diverse populations and urban settings, and desire to pursue the field of social work. For some, the experience bolstered self-confidence and enabled self-discovery of varied talents and skills. Many students indicated that they were proud of themselves for overcoming their initial concerns and fears about youth who reside in urban neighborhoods or in a city. Student reflections suggested that many students would be more likely, in the future, to pursue similar educational or career experiences. Some students noted that the experience "opened their eyes" to their own relationship-building, organizational, or other skills, as well as stimulated their interest in potentially working with teens again in the future.

Student learning and revelations were most eloquently and honestly shared in reflective journals. The following samples are organized by course objective.

Demonstrate and Understand the History and Evolution of the Social Work Profession

As noted, students were exposed to a multipurpose, neighborhood-based, service-delivery setting. In addition to participating in the after-school program, the students learned the overall function of the settlement setting. Students had an opportunity to witness the manner in which modern settlement work has come a long way since the days of Jane Addams and Hull House.

Identify At-Risk Populations, as well as Their Strengths, Challenges, and Service/Advocacy Needs

Through service learning at the settlement house, social work students also began to gain a clear understanding of the concept of the "person-in-environment."

The students began to hypothesize about which youth were choosing healthy behaviors and which were not. They began to recognize how nonproductive choices could be directly related to a lack of support from family or community and to poverty. The social work students began to understand the importance of professional advocacy and community intervention to improve and develop long-term effective partnerships to enhance the potential of youth from underserved neighborhoods. The settlement house "opened its door" for social work students to develop practice skills in working with culturally diverse populations, which broaden their views of social work practice to include an awareness of the interconnectedness of other systems impacting the lives of youth. As one student reflected, the settlement house "provides many services to the Rochester community. The XYZ program in particular has helped to get children off the street and provide them with an afternoon activity as well as tutoring. I think that [the education/employment program] is a benefit to the community; however, more planning and organization [is] needed to occur to make it much more dynamic."

Identify Personal and Professional Values and the Relevance of Self-Awareness to Social Work

In each written student reflection, students were encouraged to "dig deeply" into their personal belief systems as they discuss their experiences at the settlement house. The first student reflection assignment was especially designed to encourage students to articulate their assumptions and concerns to establish a baseline of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Emerging from the first reflection papers were themes about their personal values.

- "Due to stereotypes, I have to admit that I was a little intimidated. The kids are great. The energy and laughter helped move the group along."
- "Being from Rochester, I have heard many things about the children at [this settlement house]. I hope that by working with them I can prove the negative sayings to be false and confirm the positives."
- "Both sets of students (settlement house and Nazareth) are able to experience a truly human and honest contact. I feel that all the students can gain a better understanding of people and better understand their differences and similarities, which will impact on their lives forever."
- "Approaching the [settlement house], I was a bit reserved and nervous about meeting 'city kids.' My preconceived notions of kids living in the projects were that they were angry and lived a life of crime. Therefore, they were probably cold and hard and would probably see us as imposing on

their lives. . . . I found myself absorbing everything that was taking place and hoped that my prejudice was not showing."

Make an Informed Decision Regarding Social Work as an Educational and Career Focus

As noted, the service-learning component of the "Introduction to Social Work" course provides the student with an opportunity to prepare for field practicum. There are often few possibilities early in the social work curriculum for students to connect with an agency to begin their micro/mezzo/macro practice skill development. Because of this "beginning" experience, the student can explore his or her own direction and focus, asking, Do I truly want to be a social worker? or Do I want to work with youth? The service-learning experience can solidify the student's desire to enter the field of social work and offer him or her the chance to make an enlightened decision about a career choice based on increased self-knowledge and understanding of the profession. In this case, student reflection entries indicated that the service-learning opportunity did, indeed, provide preprofessional experiences.

- "The experience helped me explore my use of self as a social worker."
- "I think it's a great experience and one that will help me in my decision of whether to go on to graduate school for social work or school psychology."
- "If I do decide to become a social worker, then this will help me to not judge people before I meet them so I can get to know them first."
- "I learned that you have to be ready for change and be flexible to new ideas. I did a lot of reflective and critical thinking. The service-learning project helped to relate the textbook to reality."

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE ON IMPACTS IN AN "INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL WORK" COURSE

Multiple additional potential student learning outcomes may result from youth development service-learning experiences. In general, students have an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency with generalist practice knowledge, values, and skills in community-based, grassroots, youth development settings. That is, while students are learning about the history of the social work profession and the range of practice arenas, they also have the opportunity to see firsthand the challenges of the implementation of youth development principles (and their connection to the strengths perspective) across various

fields of social work practice (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, school social work, community mental health practice with youth). For example, students learn quickly about the potential tension between social work practice from a youth development model as they are introduced to problem-based social work interventions in the "Introduction to Social Work" class. As one student succinctly stated, "I am amazed at the differences in the way that other professionals think about and treat kids—I never thought that youth development meant anything more than playing with kids, until we heard about the settlement house's staff's meeting with Joey's teacher and school counselor. I could hear the difference in their approach with him—now I get it [the youth development model]."

Other potential impacts of a youth development service-learning project include students' increased proficiency in applying youth development principles and social work practice intervention in the following areas:

- social work practice with individuals, as well as group skills relevant to the biopsychosocial developmental stages of youth
- understanding the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual/affection orientation, and social and economic justice principles in the provision of services to a diverse population of youth
- understanding community-based, family-centered, youth-focused systems interactions
- principles of client-centered, asset-based outcomes measurements and practice evaluation tools that reflect indicators of healthy development rather than decreases in social problems
- increased self-awareness and constructive and ethical use of self, as well as the application of structured supervision in social work practice with youth from diverse backgrounds
- the historical placement of settlement house group work as one foundation of social work practice (Watkins 1998)

In their reflection papers, students indicated that they were able to work with such general social work concepts and engage in more sophisticated discussions related to self-awareness, particularly their own attitudes and values. Furthermore, students indicated that the service-learning experience facilitated an opportunity to "step out of their comfort areas." In addition, students gained new information and experiences, facilitating enlightened decisions regarding career choices.

A less anticipated impact emerges when instructors journey along with the students as they become more self-aware and honest with themselves. The in-

structor may experience validation when students become more able to identify negative value judgments and share how beliefs and attitudes are beginning to change as a result of the service-learning experience. The instructor may find his or her own skills challenged in the course of "starting where the student is" developmentally and responding sensitively to student fears and concerns regarding urban settings and residents. The instructor's relationship-building skills may be challenged as students initially express high levels of fear, anxiety, and even anger regarding the service-learning requirement.

CONCLUSION

Youth development agencies continue to respond to the human service needs of millions of vulnerable families and youth who reside in many of our country's most underresourced neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the youth development model and traditional youth development agencies are typically overlooked and underrepresented in social work education. Service-learning opportunities provide a bridge of resources between these agencies and social work education.

It is our contention that social work education would benefit from the inclusion of community-based youth development agencies as partners in social work education. Many of the core services conducted by youth development agencies are congruent with the knowledge, skills, and value requirements of generalist social work practice and the principles of undergraduate social work education. Such partnerships would facilitate the achievement of academic outcomes for baccalaureate social work students, as well as enhance teaching, research, and service collaborations between youth development agencies and social work programs.

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