

Discovering What's Most Important to Local Youth

INTERVIEW WITH CHERCHAELE SPELLEN

By EGC Applied Research & Consulting

Cherchaela Spellen is a Boston University Graduate School of Social Work student who interned at EGC Boston Education Collaborative in 2017-2018. We sat down with Cherchaela to hear her journey with the [Making Youth Voices Heard](#) initiative.

Tell me about your work in the Making Youth Voices Heard initiative. What was your role?

For Making Youth Voice Heard, I'm the Main Facilitator, as Ruth likes to call me. I meet with the students, and prep an agenda for the youth. But the youth truly have control over this program. It's what they would like their main focus to be, and how they want to get the results that they're looking for.

We started off the program by learning about Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). I love the fact that it focuses not only on research but also on action—what can we do with the data that we've gotten? What are the next steps?

Also what makes YPAR different from regular research is that it includes community members. Who knows best about the community but the members who are living in the community itself? We involved St. Stephens, because they work with youth in the Roxbury community. We also included youth from the Vibrant Boston after-school program, which is located in the Lennox Camden area.

Once the youth understood participatory action research, we asked them, "Ok, what issue do you think we should focus on in this community?"

They determined gun violence is a big issue. So we started mapping things out—we did the causes of gun violence, the effects of gun violence, on the youth and the community. With a flip chart and sticky notes, we just created a big issues map.

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Some of the questions that the youth asked were, “Why guns? Why do people choose to use guns as a way of making a point? Is it peer pressure? Why can’t they express themselves in another way? Is there a lack of resource in the community to show them how to deal with stress, or how to deal with conflict better?”

We started looking into that. But interestingly, three or four sessions later the youth were like, “We don’t think gun violence is the problem in our community anymore, we think it’s poverty.”

That threw me for a loop! I said, “We did all this work on gun violence! Look at this long process we had to go through, but you guys want to do poverty now?”

Others said, “Why can’t we do gun violence *and* poverty? and drugs? and gangs? and everything?” That was a good point. They wanted to touch on every aspect of the issue, which I like.

My consultant, Rachele Gardener, one of my professors at Boston College, suggested we create a survey about five issues that the youth feel are pressing on their hearts right now, so it’s not just gun violence. The youth chose gun violence, poverty, employment, education, and drugs.

Then we created a survey. The youth came up with questions. They’re going to take the survey themselves, and they may say, “this may be too long” or “maybe we should ask this question”. Then they’re going to pass it out to the youth who are living in the community.

Based on the youth who live in the community, because of their responses, we’ll determine what is the *greatest* issue for all the youth who live in Roxbury.

They’re calling themselves DELTA, which means “change”. They said they’re “Diverse, Excellent Leaders Taking Action.” They’re set, they’re ready. So it’s exciting!

What would you say is your greatest joy in the work you’ve been doing with Making Youth Voice Heard?

All I really want is to develop a relationship with them—just hear their side and be able to relate to them, show empathy towards them, and ask what I can do to help.

Easy—developing relationships with the youth. You know, I feel as if I probably just saw them on the street not knowing their story or getting to know them better, there's like judgements that we make in our heads about certain people.

But when you sit down and talk with these youth, you get to hear about all the trauma that they've been through, and how that's affected them, and how

What has been the biggest challenge for you?

I feel as if I'm stretched for time! I only get to meet them twice a week. They're probably stretched for time too, they have school going on, and other programs that they're involved in. But also, there's so much work that I could delve into. So it's kind of hard.

Tell me a little bit about the journey that led you to work with this particular group of youth? How did you end up here?

I met Brent when I first came to Boston. I did an open mic night for the youth in the community. I developed sort of a relationship with him at my church—Cross Town Church International also had a relationship with Brent. They knew about him and his after school program.

Then I applied to BC, I got in, and I had to get a field placement. I was talking to my pastor about it, pastor Kathleen Verna, she's amazing. She told me about Emmanuel Gospel Center and Ruth Wong. Ruth got connected to my field placement director, and they set everything up, and I was placed there.

What would you say has been the greatest lesson for you in the project so far? Or, what are you learning or noticing about the community, the youth, the potential for community for research?

I probably knew this, but I'm learning it more on a deeper level: sometimes when you don't have the resources that you need, it can be hard to get out of the situation or circumstances that you're in.

Back home (in St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands), I didn't really see a lot of communities in poverty. I didn't see a lot of kids who grew up raised by single mothers, and how that was affecting their lives.

They may act a certain way just to protect themselves.

Talking to people in this community is necessary for understanding what they need, what they have, what they don't have, and that they want something different for their lives, something different for their community.

Also, you have to look at things on the bigger scale. Don't just assume, "Maybe that person is being afflicted with some mental health issues", or "Maybe that person just experienced trauma." But what is their regular environment like? Are they given the support they need? Do they have access to resources? Do they know how to advocate for themselves? Are people listening to them--do they have a voice?

What is your prayer for the Lower Roxbury area of Boston and the teens you're working with?

For them to not lose hope. It's so hard not to, because you're just looking at today. You're just trying to get by day by day, and you're not really seeing changes happen right away.

But I think once there's hope, that's motivation enough for the people and youth that are living in that community to try to change their circumstances as much as they can.

There was a rally on Boston Common on Saturday about gun violence (March for our Lives). They want to see change, and they feel like their voice should be listened to, and their voice is enough for change to happen. I pray that people never lose hope in that community.