

**Developing School Counseling Students' Social Justice  
Orientation Through Service Learning**

Melissa S. Ockerman and Erin C. M. Mason

DePaul University

### **Abstract**

Counselor educators must examine the quality and intentionality of coursework and field experiences offered to their students as the role of school counselors continues to transform. The emphasis in the field on school counselors as social justice agents and advocates should be reflected in school counselor training programs. The authors present a two-course sequence using pre-practicum service learning as a valuable program component for assisting school counseling students to develop a social justice orientation.

## **Developing School Counseling Students' Social Justice**

### **Orientation Through Service Learning**

From its inception, the profession of school counseling has consistently responded to changes in economic, political, educational and societal movements (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Gysbers, 2001; Herr, 2002; Paisely & Borders, 1995). While the profession's ability to do so has led to its survival, role consistency and practices remain varied and inconsistent. Furthermore, the disparities across states and districts in school counselor job descriptions and school counseling preparation programs have propagated an ambiguous identity. Given this historical context, current professional school counselors and those who prepare them need to respond to the contemporary changes within the profession and lingering identity confusion so that all school counseling practitioners go about their work with a clear and unified purpose. In this article, the authors present a model of a two-course sequence of school counseling courses that are built upon service learning, as an active learning experience through which students deepen their understanding of a social justice orientation.

At a Midwest urban university, counselor educators revised their master's level school counseling curriculum to promote role clarity, with specific emphasis on the escalating need for a social justice orientation and collaborative, equitable practices. In this vein, faculty reconstructed two pre-clinical courses designed to place pre-service school counseling students in community schools through service-learning opportunities. The rationale, goals and subsequent assignments of these courses are discussed below. Additionally, the authors promote service learning and pre-clinical experiential opportunities as core underpinnings of school counseling curriculum so as

to foster a clear and consistent social justice orientation for professional school counselors.

### **Social Justice Orientation in School Counseling**

Recent changes in the field have transformed the roles and responsibilities of school counselors to now include those of leader, advocate and change agent (Amatea & Clark, 2005; ASCA, 2003; Baker, Robichaud, Westforth Dietrich, Wells, & Schreck, 2009; Bemak, 2000; Dahir & Stone, 2009; Dollarhide, 2003; Paisley, Ziomek-Daigle, Getch, & Bailey, 2006; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Together these roles depict a professional with a social justice orientation. In accordance with this role, a school counselor now regularly assesses and is knowledgeable of school and student issues, maintains and involves a collaborative network of stakeholders and intervenes at various levels to promote justice, equity, and access, and works to close achievement gaps. A professional with this mode of operating is theoretically in day-to day practice different from school counselors of the past who traditionally served students in a one-to-one fashion from their offices. The recent transformations in the role of the professional school counselor require practitioners to perform in significantly more visible and active roles than were historically the norm.

This social justice orientation to school counseling calls for counselors to act upon, within and on behalf of the various social, political and academic arenas that affect the students they serve (Dahir & Stone 2009; Keys, Bemak, & Lockhard, 1998). A social justice orientation is one that intentionally considers multiple systems, forces of oppression, and the complexities that come with working with a variety of cultural identities (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009; Paisley & McMahon, 2001; Ratts, et al., 2007).

As Green, McCullom and Hays (2008) suggest, counselors with an advocacy orientation understand the many microsystems that impact a client's world and personal development. Furthermore, a school counselor who operates from a social justice framework conscientiously employs such professional guidelines as the American Counseling Association Multicultural Counseling Competencies the (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002), the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003) and the ASCA National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) For these school counselors, social justice is an ever-present goal and advocacy is a daily activity.

### **Training school counselors in a social justice orientation**

Because school counselors have moved from an ancillary, isolated position to one that is deliberately active and at the forefront of school improvement, school counselor training has consistently transformed as well. The role of school counselors, and counselors as a whole, as advocates and social justice agents continues to take prominence in the literature (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Ratts, et al., 2007; Trusty & Brown, 2005). As an illustration of this historical shift in focus in school counseling, Bemak and Chung (2008) discuss a movement from the "nice counselor syndrome" to a social justice orientation and offer a list of 16 recommendations for becoming "multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agent" (p. 378). They highlight the importance of using collaboration, incorporating data driven practices and having a vision .The *Transforming School Counseling Initiative* (TSCI) has been the primary guiding force in challenging counselor education programs to transform their processes of preparing school

counselors who are well equipped to address the changing academic, career and personal/social needs of an increasingly diverse k-12 student population (House & Martin, 1998; Martin, 2002). TSCI continues to provide the impetus, resources, training and networking for counselor education programs that are at various stages of transforming their school counseling programs. The overarching principles of a TSCI program include preparing school counselors in a social justice framework including skills in advocacy, using data to identify achievement and equity gaps, collaboration and teaming.

The authors of this article recognize the important position counselor educators have in providing school counseling students with the means to develop a mindset in which they "gain cultural consciousness" (Lewis & Hatch, 2008) required for competently serving their students and schools. In an effort to strengthen the social justice and advocacy focus of their own school counselor preparation program, the authors are currently undergoing the application process to become a TSCI companion program. As part of this process, the authors, with their advisory council, are examining ways in which to transform their training program to better align with the TSCI principles, the needs of the school community, the university's mission, and to produce more highly qualified school counselors with a strong social justice orientation. This exploration led to the need for school counseling students to experience schools' and students' needs in-vivo, and in conjunction with university courses, so as to bring the learning about social justice, quite literally, to life.

## **Service Learning in School Counselor Preparation**

According to Lewis and Hatch (2008), the success of a school counselor is the hallmark and result of a strong counselor educator program. In this important assertion, the authors highlight the ideal end goal for all school counselor education programs; positive impact on schools and communities. The choice of the word "actions" denotes the dynamic, active school counselor who has been described earlier in this article. It is then incumbent upon counselor educators to drive school counseling students to specific action, and in so doing, provide them with experiences that bring to life the issues of social justice and the necessary skills of advocacy in real world settings. Researchers suggest that practical field experiences can provide students with authentic opportunities to practice advocacy skills for clients and client groups (Aldarondo, 2007; Baggerly, 2006; Green, et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2007).

One practical experience venue to drive school counseling students to social justice action is service learning. Service learning presents itself as a critical catalyst for understanding the school counselor's role in social justice and advocacy. Specifically, the authors of this article are positioning pre-practicum/pre-internship service learning as especially valuable for students when done through established school partnerships, and in tandem with relevant coursework. Researchers on the topic suggest that service learning experiences help to strengthen relationships between universities and schools, provide valuable services, afford rich learning opportunities to students, increase multicultural competence, and more fully integrate theory into practice (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Mitchell, 2007).

Because the role of the school counselor has changed dramatically from such a reactive one to an intentionally active one, the training and preparation of school counseling students should also reflect an active approach. Therefore, service learning, as an active tool, and as it is incorporated in the courses described below, has become the foundation for the way the students in this particular program are trained to understand and address issues of social justice.

### **Course Development and Design**

Given the aforementioned emphasis on social justice advocacy (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Education Trust, 2003) and the subsequent call for school counselors to become community leaders knowledgeable of their school population and community (Bemak, 2000; Borders & Drury, 1992; Bryan, 2005), as university faculty responsible for preparing future school counselors, the authors redesigned two fundamental courses. Formerly, assignments and activities included in these school counseling courses were focused on analyzing hypothetical school scenarios. In reassessing the course objectives, the authors refocused the course objectives with an emphasis on professional identity; addressing issues of social justice while simultaneously creating meaningful opportunities within actual school buildings.

Specifically, the authors targeted two core school counseling courses, *Contextual Dimensions of School Counseling*, and *Delivery of a Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling Program*, which were prerequisites for practicum and internship. Previously, these courses were not taught sequentially and thus students from multiple entry points were enrolling in the courses at different times and thus were at varying developmental levels. In order to ensure continuity and flow of the two courses,

measures were taken to ensure students enrolled in the courses in succession. This process allowed for seamless progression of course content, course assignments, and cohesion between students' group work and school contact.

### **Contextual Dimensions of School Counseling**

Revised objectives of the first core course entitled, *Contextual Dimensions of School Counseling*, centered on familiarizing students with the profession's history and evolution as well as developing a sound understanding and application of the *American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model* and the *Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI)*. Specifically, the authors revised curricular content and instruction to emphasize TSCI's five core functions (Musheno & Talbert, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003): (a) Leadership (b) Advocacy; (c) Teaming and Collaboration; (d) Counseling and Coordination; and (e) Assessing and Using Data (Perusse & Goodnough, 2001; Sears, 1999). The development of these competencies was the cornerstone for three overarching goals of the course:

Goal 1: Development of leadership and social justice advocacy identity (Dahir & Stone, 2009)

Goal 2: Teaming and collaborating with university-school partnerships (Camizzi, Clark, Yacco & Goodman, 2009)

Goal 3: Understanding how to use and assess data; promoting accountability (Dahir & Stone, 2009)

### **Revised Course Assignments**

***Assignment 1: Developing and conducting a needs assessment.*** The major assignment in the first course, *Contextual Dimensions of School Counseling*, focused

on creating, administering and analyzing a needs assessment for a local urban school. In order to link with k-12 schools within the community, we worked with a University Service-Learning entity. Criteria for selecting schools included schools identified as "in need" (i.e., low socioeconomic status and low standardized state test scores). This stipulation was imperative as we actively endorsed the idea that the next generation of school counselors must play a pivotal role in addressing the pervasive achievement gap between low SES and minority youth and their more advantaged peers. Intentionally, we placed students in under-resourced and low-achieving schools to promote a social justice agenda, asking students to engage in critical analysis and to identify systemic barriers that perpetuated inequity (Dahir, 2009; Dahir & Stone, 2009; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). These initiatives aligned with Goal 1 (Development of Leadership and Social Justice Advocacy Identity).

Students self-selected into three different school groups and were given the task of teaming and collaborating (related to Goal 2: Teaming and Collaborating with University-School Partnerships) to create, administer and analyze a needs assessment for their assigned school. It was required that each member of the team (ranging from 6-8 students) visit the school during school hours to meet with the counselor, take a tour of the school, and gain a better understanding of issues the school identified as needing further exploration. Students obtained School Improvement Plans (SIP) and became familiar with identified school and district goals. Counselor educators underscored the importance of alignment and buy-in from school administration noting, "without the administrative understanding and subsequent sanctioning of the cooperative efforts

generated by the school counselor, the entire effort becomes marginalized and superfluous to the core of the mission of the school" (Bemak, 2000, p. 326).

Students worked collaboratively with the school counselor to design and administer their needs assessment, again promoting Goal 2 (Teaming and Collaborating). Thereafter, students analyzed and disaggregated the data generated from the needs assessments. Specifically, they identified key data indicative of institutional and environmental barriers that impeded students' achievement (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Education Trust, 2003). Students created graphs and tables to highlight key areas where school counselors could create interventions to address these needs. Subsequently, students created recommendations outlining counselor initiatives and interventions aligned with the ASCA National Standards and the competencies of TSCI (meeting Goal 3: Using and Assessing Data; Promoting Accountability). All data and recommendations were compiled into a professional binder and CD-Rom. Students delivered a final group PowerPoint presentation to the class highlighting their understanding of their selected school, its needs and their recommendations. The binder and CD-Rom were then given to the school counselor to review prior to the commencement of the following course. Students were graded on their ability to address areas of inequity (Goal 1: Development of Leadership and Social Justice Advocacy Identity), on their capacity for working together as a group and with their assigned school (Goal 2: Teaming and Collaborating with School Partnerships) and their success in identifying, analyzing relevant data elements and creating meaningful recommendations based upon them (Goal 3: Understanding How to Use and Assess Data; Promoting Accountability).

## **Delivery of Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling Programs**

The second course entitled, *Delivery of a Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling Program*, continued the work from the previous quarter. Objectives of this course centered on the three goals of the first course as well as two additional intended outcomes:

Goal 4: Understanding the components of and simultaneously creating a

Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling Program [CDSCP] (Gysbers, 2004; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2003).

Goal 5: Developing strong relationships with the families and community (Bemak, 2000; Bryan, 2005; Dryfoos, 1998).

### **Revised Course Assignments**

***Assignment 1: Creating a School Counseling Program.*** Student school groups remained consistent in the second course, *Delivery of a Comprehensive Developmental School Counseling Program*. All students were required to again visit their selected school during school hours to review the needs assessment completed in the preceding course with the school counselor and discuss thoughts, perspectives and recommendations regarding it (Goal 1: Teaming and Collaboration). Given these conversations and the data collected during the previous academic quarter, students designed a CDSCP complete with three classroom guidance activities (one from each of the ASCA domains: academic, career, and personal/social), a small group intervention, a school counseling calendar, and an Action Plan. It is important to note that all interventions created needed to link directly to a critical data element identified in the needs assessment (Goal 3: Using and Assessing Data, Promoting Accountability).

Furthermore, students designed evaluative forms for all recommended interventions, created a job description of the school counselors' role and an annual performance evaluation. Class discussions reiterated the ongoing expectation that the new generation of school counselors must legitimize their work through actively demonstrating how students are different based on their interventions (Dahir & Stone, 2009). As such, students designed pre- and post- tests and aligned their program objectives and desired outcomes with their school's mission and goals, again addressing the third overarching goal of the course (Using and Assessing Data; Promoting Accountability).

***Assignment 2: Understanding and garnering community support.***

Throughout the quarter, students were also required to visit a community agency within their assigned school community. The objectives of this assignment were three-fold in that students needed to: 1) identify community partners who could assist the school and support their counseling department initiatives, 2) be aware of the experience students and families may have utilizing these services, and 3) foster a better personal awareness of themselves and their expectations when working with community agencies within the school community. After visiting the community agency, students were required to complete a four to six page reflection paper about their experience visiting their school and community agency. They were asked to include their thoughts about the school/agency, preconceived notions they had prior to their arrival, their experiences with school/community personnel, their impressions of the buildings and their surrounding community, as well as any other observations they made. Furthermore, they needed to expand upon how these experiences shaped their view

about becoming a future school counselor, integrating their thoughts about identity, culture, socioeconomic status, resources (financial as well as human and social capital), and any other factors they deemed as relevant to shaping their unique point of view. Additionally, students discussed how, as a school counselor, they could utilize the community agency services for the betterment of the students and their families in their assigned school.

Class discussions in the second course centered upon the need to create a sense of community by providing valuable and accessible resources to students and families. Questions such as, "As a future school counselor, what did you learn from your experiences about serving as a liaison between school and community resources?" "How might these experiences shape your future actions as a school counselor?" and "How will you ensure your students, family and staff have adequate access to community resources?" helped to frame the discussion. Additionally, course discourse revolved around the need to coordinate efforts of community agencies, not-for-profits and mental health providers in order to develop preventative programs for students and their families and to dismantle traditional turf-wars between parties (Bemak, 2000) Faculty facilitated conversations around systemic barriers, inequities students had witnessed, social and human capital and implicit and explicit power differentials. Students were asked to reflect upon how these forces interacted with their future work as a school counselor. Faculty asked prompts during class such as, "In what ways did you observe students needs not being met?" "How was this influenced by (a) the school structure, (b) by the culture of the school?" "Did you perceive that the parents and students had a voice with policy and procedures in the school? Why or why not?" "What

is your role as a school counselor in helping to bridge this gap?" The reflection paper and subsequent class discussions helped to meet Goal 1: Development of Leadership and Social Justice Advocacy Identity; Goal 2: Teaming and Collaborating with School Partnerships and Goal 5: Developing strong relationships with the families and community of the course.

**Assignment 3: Connecting with parents and caregivers.** Students also developed a parent/caregiver newsletter that could be distributed to the parents/caregivers of students in their school. Both hard copies and electronic copies were made available to the school. In many cases, the parent newsletters were translated into Spanish as schools in the surrounding area served primarily native Spanish-speaking families.

This particular assignment again highlighted the need for students to connect beyond the school walls when creating a CDSCP. Research has shown that active family involvement promotes the achievement of students (Finn, 1998) and that school-family-community relationships are vital to the success of school counselors (Bryan, 2005). Information presented in the newsletter was to be determined in concert with the school counseling staff (Goal 2: Teaming and Collaborating) and by the identified needs as revealed through the needs assessment (Goal 3: Using and Assessing Data; Promoting Accountability). Topics varied according to school need and covered a broad range of subject matter including study skills tips, the college application process, free health fairs and community resources, and tips for grandparents as primary caretakers.

The quarter culminated with student group PowerPoint presentations highlighting the critical components of their final CDSCP. CDSCP binders and CD-ROMs were

again presented. Importantly, the school counselors whom they had been partnering with for two consecutive quarters were also invited to the last class session to view the final presentation and give critical feedback to the students.

### **Discussion**

Through a pre-practicum service learning experience via these two core courses, school counselors in training have the opportunity to develop a social justice identity before they enter a formal, longer term field placement. The service-learning component of these courses engages students in the real world context of schools so that they are able to deepen their understanding of power imbalances, inequities and institutionalized oppression. By interacting with injustices in an authentic way, students can begin the process of actualizing their social justice orientation in a manner that is meaningful for those in the environment. When students enter into long-term placements for internships, they then have previous knowledge and experience to draw from about how to identify and address equity and access discrepancies or the needs of underrepresented or oppressed populations in schools. One graduate school counseling student stated that:

Throughout the program we hear about underserved schools and the data that reflects low achievement scores. However, putting a face to these statistics and test scores was an eye opening experience that made our group project even more real. There were real students depending on the program that our group created. The visit to the school and seeing the kids put everything into perspective for me (personal communication, August 25, 2009).

Integral to the social justice orientation and the logistical development of service learning opportunities for students is collaboration and teaming, a hallmark principle of Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI). As such, creating courses such as those described by the authors has implications at both the student and counselor educator level. Counselor educators use collaboration and teaming to establish and maintain relationships with local schools in order to provide service-learning experiences for school counselors in training. In so doing, a network of support is developed for university students so that their needs for learning are addressed through the service learning experience. The support network also carries over to the local school so that the needs of their students are addressed through the service learning experience as well. Ultimately then, counselor educators play a role in modeling collaboration and teaming for their graduate students and highlight social justice as a parallel process and a social justice identity as a fundamental part of professional identity as a whole.

Additionally, it is important for counselor educators to provide experiential opportunities prior to students' clinical experiences (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Green et al, 2008). Through the revision of the core course curriculum discussed in this manuscript, master's level school counseling students were able to put into practice many of the skills they had learned and read about previously. Specifically, students collected and analyzed data in meaningful ways and then utilized this data to create need-based school counseling interventions. Furthermore, students learned to team and collaborate with each other and their school and community partners. Using the ASCA National Standards and tenets of TSCI, they created comprehensive

developmental school counseling programs and received feedback on their work not only from instructors and peers but also from members of the professional community.

As summarized by one of our students:

I feel like this course sequence was our training for our internship. It wraps up the program by bringing together everything that we learned in our theory, skills, and group courses. This sequence was by far the two best classes that the program offered. I feel that I am well prepared for my internship because of this course sequence (personal communication, August 25, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

University faculty responsible for preparing future school counselors must be vigilant about understanding the transformation of our profession, and actively working to incorporate these changes into the fabric of core school counseling courses and curriculum. Moving beyond theories and texts, counselor educators must reach out to their communities and create mutually beneficial partnerships amongst k-12 schools and contributing medical, social and not-for-profit entities. These efforts can then be translated into tangible and meaningful course assignments that promote the important competencies of leadership, advocacy, using and assessing data, teaming and collaboration and counseling (Perusse & Goodnough, 2001; Sears, 1999) and the development of a social justice orientation (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Keys, et al, 1998).

It is the hope of the authors that other counselor educators will promote service learning and pre-clinical experiential opportunities into their core curriculum. Preparing the future generation of school counselors to become social justice oriented, poised to address the inequities of our educational system through the use of data-driven

interventions, is imperative not only for the development of our students but for the longevity of our esteemed field.

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### **Biographical Statement**

Dr. Melissa S. Ockerman is an assistant professor in the counseling program at DePaul University. Her research interests include school counselor leadership and effective school counseling interventions and training.

Dr. Erin Mason is an assistant professor in the counseling program at DePaul University. Her research interests include leadership identity and development and comprehensive school counseling programs.