

Service Learning Integrated in Urban School Counselor Preparation

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Abstract

School counseling graduate students are preparing for a special relationship with the communities in which they serve, that is, to care for the personal, social, and educational well-being of children and adolescents. School counselor program faculty need to educate instill in their students a sense of their ethical responsibilities to those communities. Service learning can foster an ethic of care. This article describes how future school counselors are prepared through service-learning pre-practicum and practicum with the understandings, skills, and dispositions to support high needs urban secondary students through the complexity of the post-secondary planning process and the transition to a successful university experience.

Service Learning Integrated in Urban School Counselor Preparation

School counseling is essentially an ethic of care. During their graduate education, school counseling students prepare for a special relationship with the community, that is, to care for the personal, social, and educational well-being of children and adolescents. Therefore, it is imperative for school counselor program faculty to educate competent practitioners and to instill in them a sense of their ethical responsibilities to the community.

Service learning is a way to foster an ethic of care (Keller, Nelson, & Wick, 2003). Experience with service learning can lead school counseling students to a deeper intellectual interest and understanding of the nature of caring relationships. A care perspective forces students to consider the welfare of those for whom they are caring. In so doing, opportunities are created for understanding others and the context of their lives. Service learning can provide students with opportunities to reflect on the social injustices they encounter in the community and to inspire them to work for social change.

Service learning is an educational technique whereby service is tied to the academic curriculum. The most widely accepted definition of service learning is based upon the National and Community Service Act of 1990, and includes the following four dimensions:

1. Students learn through participation in organized experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated with school and community;
2. The program is integrated into the academic curriculum with time to process those experiences;

3. Students are given opportunities to use their knowledge and skills in real-life situations in communities; and
4. Learning is extended beyond the classroom into the community, which fosters the development of a sense of caring.

Sigmon (1994) clarified that original definition using the following typology, highlighting four variations in the relationship between service and learning: (1) service-LEARNING, where the emphasis is on learning objectives, as is the case for traditional school counseling practicum and internship; (2) SERVICE-learning that is service oriented, such as logging volunteer hours to obtain college credit; (3) service-learning with separate service and learning goals; and (4) SERVICE-LEARNING, where ideally, service and learning goals are of equal weight and enhance each other. Service learning is a dynamic reciprocal relationship between students and the community resulting in mutual benefits (Eyler, 2002; Jacoby, 1996).

Eyler and Giles (1999) cited three reasons why service learning contributes to understanding and application: (1) learning becomes more meaningful when students are more engaged and curious about issues they experience in the community; (2) students find that they can remember material that they learn within community contexts; and (3) learning is rooted in personal relationships and in doing work that makes a difference in people's lives.

Theoretical Foundations

Consistent with Dewey's educational and social philosophies (Dewey, 1933; 1938/1963) emphasizing experiential learning and citizenship, the components of service learning—active pedagogy, caring, community building—establish connections

between school and the real world. The educational benefit of linking theory with experience is well-founded. Piaget (1972) introduced the notion that abstract thought develops on the basis of interaction with the environment. Cognitive theory and research support the idea that learning should be situated in the context of practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Resnick, 1987). Constructivists argue that students acquire knowledge from the social context in which they experience that knowledge (Rogoff, 1984). Workplace learning developed as a field of study due to an increasing focus on adult students and the need to connect theory and practice as part of an educational experience (Smith, 2003).

Ethical Issues

Service learning raises ethical issues in using the community as a classroom (Chapdelaine, Ruiz, Warchal, & Wells, 2005; Quinn, Gamble, & Denham, 2001). For instance, Quinn et al. (2001) cautioned that care must be taken in assigning students to low income or minority communities so that poverty or race are not equated with social problems and do not stigmatize a community. In preparation for service-learning placements, students should explore their own preconceived notions about communities that may be different from their own and reflect upon how those notions would affect their interactions in those community contexts.

Goals

Kahne and Westheimer (1996) drew an important conceptual distinction in service-learning goals of charity versus change. *Charity* inculcates a sense of civic responsibility and fosters the development of altruism. On the other hand, *change* emphasizes the transformative potential of service learning (Elyer & Giles, 1999; Kahne

& Westheimer, 1996; Mezirow, 1994; 1996) because it involves systematic and critical analysis with the hope that students' values and beliefs will be transformed by their experiences. Transformation is the goal in applying a service-learning experience within school counselor education. Service learning gives students the opportunity to be involved in complex contexts and grapple with situations that may challenge their fundamental assumptions about social issues. Thinking is transformed when students confront a disorienting problem and critically examine the premises on which their perception of the problem depends. A new interpretation then becomes a guide for action.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Evidence from research in higher education indicates that service learning benefits students academically, socially, and psychologically (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001; Wutzdorff & Giles, 1999). Studies of service-learning outcomes have documented gains in students' self-esteem and sense of personal efficacy in promoting social change (Boss, 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1994). In addition, cognitive gains are reported, such as problem solving (Batchelder & Root, 1994), the ability to apply abstract concepts to real life issues (McCluskey-Fawcett & Green, 1992), and in increased motivation to learn (Berson & Younkin, 1998). Moreover, students are better able to empathize with individuals experiencing social problems (Nnakwe, 1999).

Faculty also benefit when they incorporate service-learning assignments in their courses. Instructors report that students who engage in service learning demonstrate greater motivation and greater skill in the analysis and application of course content

(Hesser, 1995) and, according to a survey conducted by RAND Corporation (Gray, et al., 1999), students enrolled in courses with a service-learning component rated those courses as “above average” more frequently (72% compared to 47%) than their peers who were not enrolled in such courses.

Communities benefit from service-learning partnerships with colleges and universities. Community programs obtain extra personnel and support. For example, an evaluation of the impact of service-learning by the Center for Human Resources (1999), noted that 300 projects from 17 sites provided over 150,000 hours of service. Over 90% of the participants expressed satisfaction with their community experience and felt that they were helpful to the community. Other possible benefits of collaborative efforts include grant proposals, research, and additional field-based training sites for students.

Applications in Graduate School

There are fewer reports of service-learning applications in graduate education than in undergraduate education; references can be found in school counseling (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Hayes, Dagley, & Horne, 1996), counseling (Woodard & Lin, 1999), school psychology (Wilczenski, Coomey, & Ball, 2004), social work (Kropf & Tracey, 2002), teaching (LeBaron & Scribner-MacLean, 1995), nursing (Narsavage, Lindell, Chen, Savrin, & Duffy, 2002), and medicine (Eckenfels, 1997). Those helping professions are beginning to incorporate service learning in their respective graduate training programs. Service learning also is employed as an approach to teaching and learning in psychology (Bringle & Duffy, 1998). The American Psychological Association (APA) now regularly holds sessions on service learning at its conferences and has developed a website for information on service learning at the graduate level (see

<http://www.apa.org/ed/slce/home.html>). Service learning in graduate education can augment programs of study in fundamental ways relevant to the values, attitudes, and ethics that are the basis of professional practice. Service learning is compatible with the school counseling training standards set forth by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP, 2001), and in achieving the professional competencies recently proposed by the American School Counselor Association (2007). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES, 1990) recommended that school counseling programs incorporate service learning into their curriculum by establishing partnerships between universities and public schools.

Traditional internships in school counseling are supervised experiences where students are expected to practice skills learned in their professional preparation courses. Interns take on the role and function of the school counselor as practiced within a particular training site. The essence of internship experiences is the interaction between an expert and novice practitioner. Interns gain knowledge concerning school counseling services and how they are delivered. Service learning, however, can offer a different perspective and level of involvement than that found in traditional internships. The unique field experiences available to students through service-learning activities address school/community relationships. Furthermore, multicultural education for school counseling graduate students centers on learning about cultural diversity, examining power relationships and inequality, and responding in a positive manner to socio-cultural differences in schools and communities. One of the most consistent outcomes of service learning is the reduction of negative stereotypes and an increase in the tolerance for diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Transition from Classroom to Pre-Practicum to Practicum and Internship

Field experiences in school counseling facilitate the transition from an identity as a student to that of a professional. As the first steps in an integrated and developmental sequence field experiences, pre-practicum and practicum expose graduate students to school policies and procedures early in their program of study and fosters skills in working with children, adolescents, and other professionals. Graduate professional education in school counseling should also provide students with opportunities to reflect on their actions in field placements with the ultimate goal of producing practitioners who reflect while in action. Service learning provides authentic situations where caring, helping, collaboration, and sensitivity to culture become integral parts of the process of becoming a professional school counselor. Incorporating service learning in pre-practicum and practicum experiences affords students time for self-reflection and, by means of community involvement, the opportunity to contextualize concepts studied in didactic classes. Thus, service-learning experiences can lay the foundation for the development of the real world skills students will need as school counselors.

Students enter school counseling programs with a variety of backgrounds in psychology, education, and other fields. Typically, the first course in the training sequence includes an introduction to roles, issues, and ethics in school counseling to assist students in establishing a new professional identity. Service-learning pre-practicum at this early stage can give students an opportunity to experience some of the issues that confront practitioners and communities. In particular, service learning can acquaint students with diverse community contexts. An added benefit of using service learning as a pre-practicum is that it allows faculty a chance to evaluate student

readiness for more advanced fieldwork and it allows students an opportunity to evaluate their own fit with the profession. After completing a service-learning pre-practicum, students may take the next steps to practicum and internship with a more realistic and contextualized view of school counseling practice.

Service-Learning Pre-Practicum and Practicum: Case Illustrations

A primary role for school counselors is to prepare high school students for post-secondary education—often that means help with the college application process. However, high school counselors cannot intervene to help their students once they graduate from high school and enter college. The transition from high school to college is a critical one because a new set of skills is required to negotiate a large college or university setting. Many college students are not successful in obtaining a degree (Gehrman, 2006). In addition to academic skills, students entering a college or university for the first time need to network with people who can support them during the critical first year.

Boston NET (Network for Educational Transitions) is a partnership between the Boston Public Schools and the University of Boston, a large urban public institution. The mission of Boston NET is for school counseling graduate students to provide assistance to high school students who chose to apply to the University and then to support those students as they negotiate their first year at the University.

As a pre-practicum assignment, graduate students enrolled in an introductory professional school counseling course engage in service learning through the NET project. Graduate students implement an educational persistence program designed to provide social, emotional, and academic support for first year undergraduate students

who graduated from high schools in Boston. School counseling graduate students have regular contact with the undergraduates for one-to-one interaction and assistance. Sometimes communication occurs via email, with cautions to students regarding confidentiality issues on the Internet. The goals of mentoring are to foster a sense of community among the undergraduates, to support them in making appropriate emotional adjustments to college life, and to advise them about seeking academic assistance when necessary. NET addresses an authentic need to assist undergraduates to have a successful first year at the University.

The NET service-learning project gives school counseling graduate students the opportunity to observe undergraduates and learn what they need to be successful in college. As part of their graduate course work, students research educational persistence and dropout prevention programs. They evaluate the effectiveness of the NET project along several dimensions; for example, by soliciting feedback and monitoring retention rates. To promote reflection, Kozol's (2005), *The Shame of the Nation*, and Suskind's (1998/2005), *A Hope in the Unseen*, are required readings in the course. Graduate students consider the issues of urban schooling presented by Kozol and Suskind, and reflect upon the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist for inner city high school students that contribute to college dropout.

This mentoring experience differs from other school counseling high school level practicum placements or internships because it extends the view of the school counselor-in-training to post-secondary education. Graduate students planning to work in K-8 settings also benefit from participation in this service-learning project by gaining a deeper understanding of the personal, social, career, and academic issues faced by

students when they first enter college. The knowledge they acquire through this service-learning activity will help them in their role as elementary level school counselors to start to prepare students at a young age for future post-secondary opportunities and challenges.

Following the pre-practicum, the school counseling students move to a 100-hour practicum in an urban high school in Boston. Their service and learning in that setting involves mentoring and preparing students in grades 9 through 12 for post-secondary education, especially those who have been accepted in a admission guaranteed program (AGP) offered by the University. High school students enrolled in AGP and are supported by school counseling graduate students to ensure that they meet the requirements for University admission. In that setting, the school counseling practicum students are closely supervised by University faculty who remain at the high school throughout the day while the graduate students are in attendance at the site. This unique supervisory model allows graduate students frequent access to University faculty for guidance in their work. University faculty are able to model professional conduct and implement best practices in school counseling at the practicum site.

The Boston NET pre-practicum and practicum in the school counselor curriculum at Boston attaches equal weight to the service and learning components of the community experience (Sigmon, 1994). High school and first-year undergraduate students benefit by having a personal, social, and educational support system. Graduate students benefit from exposure to post-secondary situations and community resources outside of their usual practices. They also provide valuable needed services while furthering their own professional development. Through the NET, school

counseling graduate students see both sides of the high school to college transition. Graduate students are called upon to use collaborative and interpersonal skills in a different way than is typically found in the classroom or internship. These are important early experiences to foster counseling skills and professional dispositions that are not available in traditional fieldwork.

Group support and self-reflection activities provide students with opportunities to create meaning of their situations, gain an appreciation of human interactions, and look beyond surface issues to appreciate the complexity of problems. Support/reflection meetings during classes and practicum seminars provide a forum for student interaction and reflection around the substantive issues raised by their service-learning experiences. When students are frustrated by their service experiences, they are learning something fundamental about the uncertainty and complexity of social issues as well as the challenges inherent in effecting social change. They come to realize that being committed to social justice and educational reform requires the ability to accept ambiguity and to critically examine the issues they face in human services.

The NET service-learning experiences expose graduate students to broader contexts of schooling that are not routinely available as a school counseling professional-in-training. This contextual understanding can foster a commitment to social justice that is critical if school counselors are to address the systemic problems facing urban schools today. Students also need opportunities to make sense of their experiences in a constructive way rather than simply internalizing externally derived knowledge offered by university faculty and field supervisors. Internships may consolidate a commitment to the profession of school counseling; service learning can

foster a broader commitment to the fields of education and counseling and to the community in which they will serve.

This NET Program pre-practicum and practicum service-learning opportunities are ideally suited for achieving school counseling training goals fostering interpersonal competence and sensitivity to diversity. Another significant benefit of the NET Program is realized by giving students an authentic role in the transition process as well as authentic opportunities for advocacy and leadership. Moreover, students' attempts to solve problems encountered in the NET project can foster new ways of thinking and acting, framing problems systemically rather than in terms of individual deficits.

"Eye-opening" is the most frequently repeated comment by school counseling students in describing their service-learning experiences. Students actually experience what they can only read about in traditional courses: "Now I see what the achievement and opportunity gaps really mean." "I will be working at the K-12 level, but now I have a better sense of how to prepare students to be successful in college." "Through my experience as a mentor, I came to understand the caring part of the counseling role."

Implications for School Counseling

Service learning is prevalent in public schools today (National Youth Leadership Council, 2006). School counselors who have experienced service learning during their own professional preparation will recognize its value and apply it to promote personal, social, career, and academic growth for students in K-12 settings (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). Service learning is a vehicle for implementing the American School Counselor Association National Model (ASCA, 2003; Stott & Jackson, 2006; Wilczenski & Schumacher, 2006). Service learning has the potential to truly enhance the education

of school counselors in a meaningful way. Unlike volunteerism, which emphasizes service, or internships, which emphasize learning, here the goals of community service and academic learning are equally important. Service learning delivers on curriculum objectives via community service.

School counseling is predicated on principles of social justice. Lee (2005) pointed out that urban school counselors must possess the understandings, skills, and dispositions to effectively address the social and structural impediments to educational success for urban youth. Because it connects the classroom and community, service learning is a strategy that allows graduate students to grapple with urban issues and take on caring roles that reflect a commitment to social justice, ensuring that all children, regardless of race/ethnicity or socio-economic status, have the opportunity to achieve to their fullest potential.

Service learning can be a model to advance school counselor education and a model for school change. Pedagogical strategies gleaned from adult transformative learning theory, such as involving students in journal writing and focus groups, can then provide the grist for reflection and challenges to the existing school structures. Pre-practicum and practicum in school counselor education are bridges between course work and internship. As they move into their advanced field placements, graduate students who participated in pre-practicum and practicum with a service-learning component have acquired a more comprehensive understanding of educational processes and have thought about social justice issues they encountered in the community. When students reflect upon their community experiences, they see the consequences of social injustice that may shatter their prior moral and intellectual

assumptions about the world. In so doing, they will begin their professional lives with a firm foundation as savvy, thoughtful, and responsive practitioners.

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