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Teaching Social Justice Through Service Learning

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One of the latest emphases in multicultural counselor education involves promoting social justice advocacy (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Although the American Counseling Association (ACA) created and endorsed a set of advocacy competencies (ACA Governing Council, 2003), there appears to be a deficiency in multicultural counselor course curriculum with regards to the promotion of social justice advocacy (Das, 1995; Henriksen & Trusty, 2005; Pack-Brown, Thomas, & Seymour, 2008; Smith-Adcock, Ropers-Huilman, & Choate, 2004; Sue & Sue, 1999). Additionally, Woodard and Lin (1999) noted that there are limited data available on service learning that promotes social justice advocacy in counselor education literature.

Lewis and Bradley (2000) expanded on the social justice advocacy movement by stating “advocacy is an important aspect of every counselor’s role. Regardless of the particular setting in which she or he works, each counselor is confronted again and again with issues that cannot be resolved simply through change within the individual” (p. 3). Lewis and Bradley’s notion suggested that a shift from a solely micro-system approach to counseling the client to a macro-system (create societal changes) approach was necessary to assist clients with their needs. According to Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, and Bryant (2007), the counselor’s role is shifting toward that of adviser, consultant, advocate, and change agent. With this in mind, counselors committed to social justice advocacy must develop new and creative skills in order to help eliminate the negative effects of social injustices. If this is indeed the case, counselor educators are charged with remaining at the forefront of the field in creatively challenging their students to step outside of their comfort zones and place themselves in an area of potential dissonance (Constantine et al., 2007). The service learning experience can be an important tool to foster student growth in social justice advocacy. The purpose of this article is to offer detailed options of

service learning activities that promote social justice advocacy among counseling students. This article suggests that the deficiency can be filled with a variety of experiential activities (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Henriksen, 2006; Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, & Ortega, 2005).

Social Justice Defined

Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust (2006) discussed the idea that the meaning of social justice is often based on the definition used to define social justice, differing perspectives of social justice, and the theory used to define social justice. Crethar, Torres Rivera, and Nash (2008) defined social justice counseling as “a unique and multifaceted approach to mental health care in which counselors strive to promote human development and the common good by addressing issues related to both individual and distributive justice” (p. 270). Gehart and Lucas (2007) stated that social justice advocacy from a clinical perspective involves “helping clients to address institutional and social barriers that impede their ability to achieve goals or access needed services” (p. 40). These definitions provide the basis for understanding social justice advocacy from the perspective of the authors and point to the need for counselor educators and students to become more involved in service learning activities.

Service Learning Defined

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) defined service learning as a “credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 112). Through service learning projects, students are able to gain knowledge about “the power dynamics behind the structural and institutional inequities that have been created around categories, such as gender, race/ethnicity, class, disability, age, and sexual orientation” (Prentice, 2007, p. 266).

Service Learning Activities for Promoting Social Justice Advocacy

Coleman (1998) stated “culturally neutral counseling does not exist” (p. 153). Counselors bring who they are to the counseling venue and this underlying drive encourages much of how the counseling relationship manifests. A well thought out multicultural counseling curricula can act as a fertile garden for cultivating knowledge, skills, an appreciation, and advocacy for potential clients who may experience a form of oppression within society. In their 1998 study on the perceptions of counselor trainees, Steward, Morales, and Bartell (1998) found that one-third of the students perceived that an only literature-based course on multiculturalism was “meaningless.” Utilizing a curriculum that provides an experiential bridge between theory and practice appears to be a necessity for not only making multicultural counseling courses meaningful, but also promoting social justice advocacy. Through our review of the literature, we encountered several intriguing variations for providing an experience-rich multicultural curriculum (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Burnett et al., 2004; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Henriksen, 2006;

Roysircar et al., 2005). The programs that follow provide particular opportunities for counseling students to experience their service learning activities within the milieu of social justice advocacy.

At this point, we think it important to delineate the difference between community service and service learning. According to Burnett et al. (2004), community service activities imply a “missionary ideology” of working *for* the community or agency (p. 181). Community service is volunteer work that aims to contribute to the welfare of others. On the other hand, Burnett, Long, and Horne (2005) went on to define service learning as

a form of experiential education that directly involves the participant in the phenomena being studied. The purpose of this method of instruction is to increase understanding of concepts studied in a classroom environment by providing students with opportunities for direct exposure to problems, issues, and strengths of communities. (p. 158)

Social learning, then, becomes more of an activity of working *with* an outside community or agency in providing services and solutions for remedying social injustices (Burnett et al., 2005). A shift in the paradigm of thought is required when considering community service (clear and obvious power differential) and service learning (collaborative and a symbiotic give and take).

Service learning activities help counseling students realize ACA’s advocacy competencies, as well as the counseling profession’s plight for incorporating social justice advocacy training. Shrewsbury (1993) made reference to marrying classroom knowledge gained within the multicultural curricula to the service learning activity as the way to best promote social justice advocacy. Shrewsbury pointed out that what occurs is “a dialogue aimed not at disproving another person’s perspective, but at a mutual exploration of explications of diverse experiences” (p. 7). What follows is a review of five creative methods designed to promote social justice advocacy via service learning activities.

Mentoring ESL Students (MESLS)

Roysircar et al. (2005) suggested graduate counseling students serve as mentors to English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Serving ESL students at the elementary and secondary school levels help counseling students gain direct experience in the multicultural needs of school-aged children of immigrant parents. ESL students experience unique challenges due to their attendance in schools that may be foreign to their native cultures (Vasquez & Vasquez, 2003).

Roysircar et al. (2005) offered several suggestions for counseling students when working as mentors for ESL students. One suggestion is for the counseling trainee and ESL student to do library or web searches on the student’s country of origin. This activity will enable the ESL student to learn about and teach the counseling student information about his or her cultural background. Such a gesture helps to increase the self-esteem of the ESL student, which is recognized and affirmed by the counseling student (Roysircar et al., 2005).

Another activity suggested by Roysircar et al. (2005) is for the counseling student to engage in conversations about festivals, historical events, foods, traditions, and familial rituals. Roysircar et al. (2005) described an example of such an activity offered

by a counseling student:

At the church service that R. [ESL student] attended on Ash Wednesday, prayer cards were given out. R. showed her card to me. The prayer on the card was in Spanish, and I [counseling student] asked R. to first read it and then translate it for me, which she did, teaching me some words in the process. I affirmed her faith in her religion, while thinking that I had not given much thought to my own. (p. 22)

This type of conversation can be extended to social justice advocacy by the counseling student mentor asking the ESL student mentee questions regarding what it is like for him or her experiencing a language barrier in their schools. After ensuring the ESL student's confidentiality, the counseling student mentor could share with the school's administration what he or she learned from the mentee regarding the mentee's concerns. A concern that may arise might pertain to the discriminatory issues the ESL student experienced due to not speaking fluent English.

For many counseling students, the MESLS service learning activity can serve as an initial opportunity to genuinely experience the ramifications of one's native language in a society where the dominant language may be different. Roysircar et al. (2005) provided the following quote from a counseling student's process notes:

Until you have examined your reactions and reflections about your own and others' cultures, it is easy to think you have no biases. Feeling cultureless has allowed me to go through life ignoring people's cultures. In these past few months, and in the process of trying to learn about my ESL student, I have learned a profound amount about myself. In one way or another, all of the readings, lectures, and articles came together as I reflected on my feelings and tried to understand what was happening during my interactions with my student. (p. 32)

To sum up the MESLS service learning activity, the counseling students could create end-of-course presentations of their ESL student mentees' experiences of attending schools where the dominant language is different than the ESL students' native languages. The counseling students could also include in their presentations how they advocated for their mentees' needs during their meetings with the school's administration.

Multicultural Learning Experience (MLE)

Introduced by Henriksen (2006), the Multicultural Learning Experience (MLE) is a social justice service learning activity that promotes knowledge construction and prejudice reduction. This activity first requires the counseling student to identify an agency that serves clients that are culturally different than the student. The agency must be approved by the instructor. After approval of the service learning site, the student is to conduct an interview with the director of the chosen organization and discuss the purpose of the organization and any concerns the agency may have for the population it serves.

Following the interview with the agency's director or supervisor, the counseling

student is to complete a minimum of four hours of collaborative, volunteer service with the agency. The service time at the agency must take place over two different days and must involve direct interactions with the population served by the organization. In addition to the four hours of direct service with the agency, the counseling student is to observe the usual operations of the agency, attend an orientation session with the organization, interview the agency's director, or a combination of these three activities. This additional requirement should take approximately two hours. The total amount of time spent at the agency should be a minimum of six hours.

To wrap up the MLE, the counseling students are to write a reaction paper about their experiences at their respective service learning sites. The reaction paper should show an integration of the concepts learned in the classroom setting (including readings, discussions, instruction, etc.) and the service learning site experience. Ultimately, the reaction paper should include a section that expresses the counseling students' transformed perceptions of social justice advocacy as a result of the MLE activity (Henriksen, 2006).

National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI)

The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI; 2010) is an international, non-profit, leadership training organization, started in 1984 to help eliminate racism and all other forms of prejudice and discrimination throughout the world. Gayles and Kelly (2007) suggested graduate students utilize this opportunity as a potential service learning experience. Currently NCBI is made up of more than 100 teams in cities, university campuses, and organizations from around the world. If there is a pre-existing NCBI chapter on your campus, then counseling students could join the chapter, take on leadership roles, participate in sponsored events, and write reaction papers about their experiences. If there is no chapter on your campus, navigating the easy to follow, step-by-step procedure on how to start an affiliate group on the NCBI website can also be a major project for a multicultural or social justice advocacy course activity. Once the new chapter is created, subsequent counseling students, who take the multicultural course, can maintain the chapter as their major assignment. Periodic reaction papers can assist in solidifying the experience as a social justice building activity.

A major component of NCBI's (2010) opportunities is providing workshops and training sessions. These sessions generally are geared toward educating and training those interested in leading an organization in a socially conscious fashion. Workshops can involve a variety of topics which include: Leadership for Diversity Institute, Welcoming Diversity/Prejudice Reduction Workshop, Welcoming Diversity Train-the-Trainer Leadership Clinic, Coalition Building Workshop, Controversial Issues Process, Controversial Issue Practicum, Controversial Issues Train-the-Trainer, Violence Prevention Workshop, and Violence Prevention Train-the-Trainer (NCBI, 2010).

Counseling students who utilize the NCBI (2010) model for satisfying their service learning social justice activity requirement can initiate or join an in-progress faction that either brings to awareness or is bringing about non-discriminatory changes on the campus, community, or international level. Through end of course presentations, counseling students could then report back to their classes their experiences within the NCBI organization and how specifically their membership or leadership contributed to bringing about social justice. Those classmates not associated with the NCBI

organization could learn how to promote social justice from an infrastructural level, via the class presentations of their peers.

School Counseling Service Learning Project

Service learning is a teaching method where guided or classroom learning is deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired. By definition service learning connects classroom content, literature, and skills to community needs. As a result of completing a service learning project students will learn to (a) apply academic, social and personal skills to improve the community; (b) make decisions that have real, not hypothetical, results; (c) grow as individuals, gain respect for peers, and increase civic participation; (d) gain a deeper understanding of self, the community, and society; and (e) develop as leaders who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team, and demonstrate their abilities through helping others (C. Parker, personal communication, October 19, 2010).

Through the process of service learning, students engage in activities that can involve one of three types. First, *Direct Service*: students' service directly affects and involves the recipients. The interactions are person-to-person and face-to-face, such as tutoring younger children or working with parents related to prevention or intervention to enhance academic success (C. Parker, personal communication, October 19, 2010). Through the provision of direct services, students also learn about the social justice needs of those they serve as it relates to education and can move from direct service to social justice advocacy. Second, *Indirect Service*: indirect activities do not involve service to individuals; however, these activities benefit the school, community or environment as a whole. One example might be conducting a workshop for faculty on classroom strategies designed to help students as they prepare for success in college (C. Parker, personal communication, October 19, 2010). Helping underrepresented students gain entrance into college helps to meet one of the many social justice needs of culturally diverse communities. Finally, *Research*: research activities involve students locating, gathering, and reporting on information in the public interest. For example, students may develop surveys or conduct formal studies, evaluations, experiments or interviews on leadership topics related to children, parents, teachers or other stakeholders (C. Parker, personal communication, October 19, 2010). The outcomes of the research can often lead to the identification of social justice issues that could then lead to direct social justice advocacy.

Service learning that includes a focus on social justice issues requires students to follow a process so that learning and social justice advocacy is maximized (C. Parker, personal communication, October 19, 2010). Steps involved in social justice learning include preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. *Preparation* involves identifying a need, investigating and analyzing it, and making a plan for action. The professor and student will work together to set the stage for learning and social action. *Action* is the direct result of preparation. The plan developed during preparation is carried out and is expected to involve no less than three hours of involvement. *Reflection* (in the form of a *journal*) is a vital and ongoing process in service learning that integrates learning and experience with personal growth and awareness. Using reflection, students consider *how the experience, knowledge and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their communities*; one entry per week is required. A reflection is a one page

double-spaced written comment that refers to the topic and expresses the student's thoughts about past experiences or insights that have new meaning based on what is being learned. Reflections are designed to help students make better discussions or improve relationships when working with people, in particular, those who are culturally diverse. Finally *Demonstration (Presenting/Evaluation)* provides evidence of what students have gained and accomplished through their community service learning involvement. Presenting will allow students to teach others and acknowledge what information and skills have been learned. The result of this activity is that students learn the importance of giving back to their communities and learn the meaning of social justice advocacy.

Social Action: A Mandate for Counselors (SAMC)

Rawlins (as cited in Henriksen, 2006) described an activity that is completed by both faculty and students. This collaboration exemplifies the pressing need for all mental health professionals and educators to embrace social justice promotion. SAMC differs from many traditional service learning activities in that it begins, as the first step, with students and faculty defining their roles in social justice advocacy. This involves pre-service time spent in the classroom, discussing the paradigm shift in thought regarding how counselors take a collaborative stance as advocates instead of volunteers (Henriksen, 2006).

The second step in the SAMC preprocess, as illustrated by Rawlins (as cited in Henriksen, 2006), includes the actual volunteer service provided by the students out in the selected community agencies. The unique element that distinguishes the SAMC project is that the counseling student creates his or her own activities within the pre-existing community agency. The final step of the SAMC requires students to reunite into a group counseling-type setting and discuss their service learning experiences with one another. With this step, each student is able to learn vicariously from one another's service learning experience, reflect upon how the experience may have transformed any attitudes toward oppressed groups in society, and process through what it means to become an advocate for social justice (Henriksen, 2006).

Implications for Counselor Educators and Counseling Students

The counselor's most important tool is the use of self (Corey, 1996). To that end, the multicultural service learning experience can assist to enhance a counseling student's self-esteem and increase social competence (Williams, 1990). The education of multiculturally sensitive counselors should include activities that generate an awareness of one's own assumptions when working with others from a different culture (Das, 1995). The service learning activity not only increases the counseling student's confidence when working with a client from a different culture, but can also help to generate a genuine concern for the client's welfare within the context of the oppressed. Counseling students who were trained under a strong multicultural program reported being more willing to recognize how cultural differences may have a bearing on their work (Parker, Moore, & Neimeyer, 1998).

According to Burnette et al. (2005), service learning for counseling students provides a meaningful experience that bridges educational theory with social justice

advocacy. Das (1995) stated that “each psychotherapy is thus a reflection of the culture that produces it” (p. 49). Taking into consideration the aforementioned push by ACA (2003) to promote advocacy competencies gleams a glimmer of hope that the counseling community will become a leader on the front towards eliminating social injustices. Tomorrow’s practicing counselors are in today’s counselor education programs. Experiences that require counseling students to submerge themselves into the communities and agencies that service the oppressed can help further along tomorrow’s leaders as social justice advocates.

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