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Service Learning: A Catalyst to Social Justice

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This qualitative study examines a campus-based service learning project at a public university (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This project involved three levels of intervention (i.e., individual, cross-disciplinary, and university policies), among three types of participants (i.e., *counselor trainees*, *international students*, and *university administrators*).

Counselor Trainees, Service Learning, and Social Justice

One of the most critical purposes of multicultural training is to enhance counselor trainees' multicultural competence and drive for social justice (Bell, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2008; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). Hence, trainees are in need of service learning projects to enhance knowledge and awareness of social justice, as traditional multicultural training confined to classroom teaching is often insulated from actual exposure to diverse cultures (Neville et al., 1996). Furthermore, a content analysis of syllabi from 55 APA-accredited programs has revealed that current training completely lacks education on social justice (Priester, 2001). Thus, deprived of actual exposure to cultural diversity, classroom teaching only gives abstract knowledge without sensitivity to social justice issues (Carter, 2001). While counselors and trainees are encouraged to become advocates for social change (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006), they are given little information on how to do so. Service learning is an alternative to

traditional multicultural teaching as it directly serves the needs of culturally diverse individuals in order to make counselor trainees effective agents in social change. Specifically, service learning activities are intended to empower racial/ethnic minorities and international students, bring multicultural awareness to trainees, and encourage administrators to renovate university policies. The project in this study attempted to achieve these goals while combining both classroom instruction and community service.

University Administrators and Social Justice

Social justice involves various levels, from individuals to organizations, institutions, and even societal structures. Institutionalized discrimination refers to “actions, practices and policies embedded in the organization that have negative impacts on individuals and groups that have socially specific characteristics” (McNamee & Miller, 2004, p. 156). In a campus community, administrators make policies to set an overall university direction. Without actual experience serving marginalized and oppressed groups, such as international students, it is near impossible for administrators to design an accommodating and welcoming environment, and an oasis for marginalized individuals suffering from institutional discrimination. Thus, it was important for this campus-based service learning study to recruit university administrators, i.e., an assistant director in graduate studies, an assistant director of diversity center, an associate director of international studies, an assistant professor in counseling psychology, and a director of ombudsman center.

The Roles of International Students in This Study

Oppression is a result of individual discrimination and stereotyping, and societal systematic structures (Young, 1990). Oppressed and isolated, international students often powerlessly suffer exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and even violence, though their degrees and sorts vary (Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000). International students undergo visible and invisible stereotyping, unfair assumptions, and the university’s structural limitations and policies. Both counselor trainees and university administrators in this study served international students who have difficulties in language and adjustment (Burnes, & Manese, 2008). This project included the voices of the oppressed international students for three reasons. One, oppressed voices help communities and universities to empathically understand them (Rappaport, 2000). Two, oppressed voices encourage those in power (i.e., psychologists and/or administrators) to amplify their voice for others to learn of their needs, wishes, strengths, and visions (Goodman et al. 2004, p. 803). Three, oppressed voices help create a comprehensive, multidimensional, and multilevel project for university administrators to deeply interact with international students through activities and exchange of opinions.

Campus-Based Service Learning Study

Our campus-based study was a 6-week program that matched international students one-to-one with counselor trainees or university administrators. The goal of the service learning project was to explore the effects of the project on counseling

psychology trainees, international students, and university administrators. Though university administrators and counselor trainees were involved in this project, counselor trainees did not conduct psychotherapy or develop short-term and potentially problematic therapeutic relationships; nor did university administrators give special treatment to international students. Instead, their social support consisted of sensitive listening and building resource-networks (e.g., developing new relationships on campus) with international students.

The study asked four psychologists specialized in international student issues to provide counselor trainees and university administrators with approximately five hours of training on multicultural sensitivity, cross-cultural differences on self-expression and body language, and how to communicate through language barriers. Thus, this training enabled the counselor trainees and administrators to demonstrate to the international students that regardless of cultural, ethnic, and language differences, counselor trainees cared enough to collaborate and help international students rebuild active new lives in the U.S. In other words, the trainees and administrators were trained so that international students' struggles were no longer invisible or tolerable.

Method

Participants

Service-learning participants. We recruited thirteen ($n = 13$) counselor trainees and five ($n = 5$) administrators at a public university. Among these trainees, about 72% of these students were 30 years of age or under, ranging between 23 and 42. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the sample were female and 35% were male. Among these five university administrators, we recruited an assistant director in graduate studies, an assistant director of diversity center, an associate director of international studies, an assistant professor in counseling psychology, and a director of ombudsman center. Their age ranged between 32 and 63; three were female and two were male.

Service-learning recipients (international students). We also recruited 18 international students to be served by trainees and administrators. Among these international students, about 60% of these students were 30 years of age or under, ranging between 20 and 35. Fifty percent (50%) of the sample were female and 50% were male.

Procedure

During the first two weeks, counselor trainees, university administrators, and international students gathered one hour per week to introduce themselves, exchange family and cultural backgrounds, attend seminars, meet each other's friends and families, participate in sport events, and watch the internet news of international students' countries. During the third and fourth meetings, university administrators and counselor trainees were asked to be with "international students" for "one day" from morning until night, eating authentic international food (e.g., Korean Kimchi), embedded in a non-English environment, and interacting with international communities. During the last two weeks, trainees and administrators individually and deeply discussed with international students their needs and concerns.

Every week, counselor trainees, university administrators, and international students independently wrote extensive notes and reflections on their involvement in the

project, such as descriptions of the activities, characteristics of participants with whom the writer interacted, accounts of personal reactions to activities, and interactions with other participants. After six weeks of interactions, the project team began to work on this manuscript by meeting to identify common, salient themes among notes and reflections by counselor trainees, international students, and university administrators; the team reviewed themes proffered by these three types of participants.

Results

Counselor trainees gave three major themes: (1) privilege, (2) emotional feeling, and (3) advocacy of social justice. University administrators presented three major themes: (1) deeper understanding of international students, (2) initiating new policies, and (3) noting an overall excellence in the diversity of students. International students produced two major themes: (1) social injustice and (2) resilience. The following three sections present the individual themes of each group of participants and describe their reactions to the themes. For the sake of participants' confidentiality, names and potentially identifying details were changed. The pseudonyms provide continuity throughout this report, as sometimes the same participant appears in different thematic sections.

Importantly, this is a qualitative study of campus-based service learning project. Addressing psychologists working toward change in communities, Goodman et al. (2004) propose that rather than pretending objectivity, they should simply recognize each of the selves that emerge over the course of the work (p. 800). Following this advice, the following paragraphs embrace the subjectivity of participants' respective viewpoints.

Themes Among Counselor Trainees

General consensus among counselor trainees was that service learning strongly empowered them with meaningful knowledge of social justice issues and sensitive awareness of injustice. Counselor trainees' interactions with international students they have never met before heightened their awareness of themselves and others. Many trainees discussed their previously unnoticed privileges in housing, finance, and education, and deeply felt the struggles and challenges of international students' lives. As a result, counselor trainees became highly motivated to advocate for social justice.

Theme one: Privilege. Many trainees had never thought of their "privileges" until they met these international students. For example, Mary, a White counselor trainee said,

I didn't know financing could be so challenging to international students. When Joe, my international partner in this project, told me that he had to work and earn lot of money so he could come to the U.S. to study and pay his full tuition, I could not imagine how I could have earned such huge amount of money.

Another trainee also mentioned that until the project, he took many things for granted, such as health insurance. He believed that the university should automatically cover all students' health insurance at a very low premium, and was surprised that international students had to pay a much higher premium for insurance just because they are non-citizens.

Nick talked about invisible privilege. His international partner, Jack, a dark-skinned male, is from Ethiopia; one day, Jack got lost downtown and asked a woman for directions in ungrammatical English, and the woman mistook Jack for a robber. This sad story reminded Nick's experience of his study abroad in Japan. With poor Japanese, Nick asked a Japanese female about directions to the train station. Surprisingly, that Japanese female happily took Nick to the station and enjoyed speaking English with him.

Trainees, in general, noticed themselves as persons of privilege across multiple domains. They were mostly middle-class, European Americans with college degrees working toward graduate degrees, and had not been in a foreign country. They were at home in the U.S., with solid and stable relationships. No international student had such privileges, and so the trainees often feared being unable to properly assist the students; feeling unable to help students cope with their injustices and difficulties. Despite their privileges and fears, however, these trainees did interact with international students and helped them by appreciating the cultural differences among them.

Theme two: Emotional feeling. Many counselor trainees were deeply moved as they learned that international students have to manage their limited resources (e.g., money, recreation) as they struggle with studies. Max, a student from Libya and his family of seven live in a tiny two-bedroom apartment. Despite his government's subsidy, Max needed to carefully watch and maintain "every single penny" to support his family. His counselor trainee partner, Young, described feeling shocked and dismayed when she saw that Max's kids had to all sleep in the living room, and that everyone was confined to the use of one bathroom.

Theme three: Advocacy of social justice. Many trainees expressed having newfound motivation to become agents for social change; they noticed stereotyping and discrimination at all levels, from individual to systemic. To effectively overhaul racism, they realized that it is critical to have system-level interventions. A trainee, Roger, noted that the process of social change is similar to whole-body healing in that it takes holistic readjustment of the body system as well as the reduction of physical and psychological symptoms.

Another trainee said that working with international students was the tip of the iceberg when it comes to social justice advocacy, and that social justice work should expand to various other oppressed groups, such as people with disabilities and those living in poverty. Other trainees expressed their eagerness to integrate their learning from this campus service learning to their counseling experiences. Furthermore, some trainees stressed the importance of 5-hour training, appreciating the integration of didactic training into real-life interactions.

Themes Among University Administrators

Many university administrators found service learning personally and professionally fulfilling. The Assistant Director at Diversity Center confessed, "Working with international students, I was forced to deeply examine myself thinking that I was quite familiar with them, and I gained insights and values as I found my own biases."

Theme one: Deeper understanding of international students. Service learning deepened administrators' knowledge of international students and their problems. Personal interactions with international students challenged administrators to face up to the tragic limitations of campus services and assistance to these struggling students.

Additionally, some expressed feeling powerless in the face of obstacles they could not overcome; such as limits in funding. The Associate Director of International Studies wrote, “Sometimes we are restricted by limited federal funding and university regulations. So many times I had to sadly decline students’ requests, being in dilemma of whom I should help first.”

Theme two: Initiating new policies. Many administrators recognized the urgency of initiating new policies to serve international students, (e.g., in housing and the accommodation of newcomers). After learning of the stressful new life of a Turkish student, Linda, the Assistant Director of Graduate Studies decided to add more information and resources for international students when offering them admissions.

Many administrators also recognized that systemic policies could have tremendous negative impacts on individuals, and university organizations must be scrutinized against domination, privilege, and oppression, as inequity among students cannot be solved by simple redistribution of resources. Jessica, an assistant professor in counseling psychology, reflected that the processes causing unequal distribution should be examined and changed, such as the systemic marginalization of international students from full participation in university living.

Theme three: Excellence among diverse students. Administrators appreciated students’ excellence according to their unique achievement, without imposing one uniform Western standard of evaluation. For example, without fluency in English conversation, international students could uniquely enrich classroom discussion. In addition, meaningful diverse thoughts from different cultures are as critical as fluent self-expression, and an inclusive excellence begins in a university environment that is welcoming and accommodating to all students.

Harry, Director of Ombudsman Center, said, “We need to take good care of *all* students by highlighting each student’s special and unique contribution to our university. Here, everyone is a winner. As director of Ombudsman Center, I applaud this project that enhances my abilities to resolve conflicts between international students and U.S. students and faculty. So many times we have conflicts because we don’t see the others’ unique vision of the world.”

Amanda, Assistant Director of Diversity Center, stressed the close relation between inclusive excellence and multicultural service. She believed that culturally sensitive counselors should empower international students’ self-esteem and cultural identity which would in turn widen and deepen U.S. students’ worldview. “We are a mosaic world,” she wrote, “and we definitely need international students’ points of view to enlighten our university.”

Themes Among International Students

Theme one: Social injustice. Arriving in the U.S., many international students have lives that are completely different from their homeland, and learn daily to cope with the difficulties of their new lives. George, a student from India, speaks English with an accent, and when he openly expresses his feelings, he tends to arouse misunderstanding from his accent and his lively and passionate attitude and body language. George noted that in the past when he got too excited, he had trouble controlling the volume of his voice, and people would often get frightened and asked if he was angry. Additionally, he

remarked how some U.S. citizens regard all Indians as poverty-stricken and disease-riddled, and as a result ignored India as historic and cultured.

Dealing with the issues of international students affects everyone. Regarding distribution of resources on campus, the students with the least amount of money are typically ignored the most. George saw this situation as a problem of the U.S. educational system, and found that international students suffer the worst because they are far less able than U.S. students to access resources. George was upset that he was still on a waiting list for a student apartment six months after arriving in the U.S.

Another student, Andrea, from Egypt, expressed similar frustration about the unfriendly reactions she receives from wearing her veil. Once she was asked about the 9/11 Tragedy and Muslim terrorism, but she had arrived in U.S. recently and did not know much about what had happened. She felt that she was asked these questions because she wore a veil. Additionally, Andrea received no guidance from staff or faculty about where to request student housing, supposedly assigned on “first come, first served” basis, and faced many unforeseen obstacles as a result. The university *said* everyone is equally important, but she felt that the international students were always the last group to receive information.

Theme two: Resilience. Many international students reflected on how much harder they had to work for the same grades as their U.S. counterparts. Henry said, “Professors see no distinction in grading, though we just arrived here with language barriers. We were expected to perform as well as other students.” Many students had to write and re-write their term papers to meet professors’ expectations, but as Henry said, “It’s elating to see professors’ positive comments. All tears and sweats turn sweet.” Some international students appreciated our service learning project in which they practiced English and had a chance to cultivate cross-cultural friendship. April, a student from Taiwan, said that at first she was concerned about interacting with American students, worrying they would laugh at her English, appearance, and behaviors. But after spending time with her U.S. partner (i.e., counselor trainee in the study), April realized that her partner seemed to enjoy being with her, and she became more confident and comfortable as a result. April and her partner even went to a Chinese restaurant for Dim Sum and a grocery store for Chinese food.

Franklin, another international student, also mentioned the importance of resilience. He said that his persistence had resulted in his good grades and smooth adjustment. Franklin and many other international students demonstrated an inspiring resilience. Having had to change much to adjust to their U.S. life, they regained their original strengths with resilience, determined not simply to survive, but to thrive against various adversities.

Discussion

Development of a University with a Social Justice Framework

This interdisciplinary and multilevel service learning project has made two accomplishments towards developing social justice: one, it stimulated counselor trainees to be agents of social justice, and two, it stimulated university administrators to initiate new university policies to enhance well-being of marginalized students and protect their rights.

Literature has been stressing the importance of working toward social justice, but it “has not resulted in much discussion about what social justice work actually looks like or what kinds of principles and struggles such work entails” (Goodman et al., 2004, p. 794). This study did not mean to suggest that service learning *directly* improves social justice for international students, but that social justice is the driving force behind trainees and university administrators to serve marginalized students. Thus, service learning can be said to be a concrete means toward social justice at multiple levels, for nothing is more effective in this regard than personal interactions with marginalized students as a means of service-learning (Weah et al., 2000).

Service learning combines didactic learning and practical service, and consists of six components of social justice work that Goodman et al. (2004) identifies as, “(a) ongoing self-examination, (b) sharing power, (c) giving voice, (d) facilitating consciousness raising, (e) building on strengths, and (f) leaving clients with the tools for social change” (p. 789). These components are vital to learning how to serve international students, and are important for service learners to know. In interacting with these international students, counselor trainees would try to bring the principles of counseling (e.g., listening, empathy) at the individual level up to the larger and more systemic level by suggesting change in university policies, hoping that the university would abolish restrictions to international students.

Vera and Speight (2003) address the need for counselors and psychologists to adjust their roles in working with diverse people, such as international students, suggesting that true multiculturally sensitive therapy and social justice advocacy includes greater variety of services beyond therapy (e.g., outreach to people, helping them access services they need, identifying free services and resources, advocacy, and psycho-educational interventions). In line with this advice by Goodman et al. (2004) and Vera and Speight (2003), counselor trainees in the present study presented a list of proposals to student organizations and had a meeting with administrators who had participated in the service learning.

Working on social justice also requires being aware of one’s own biases which can influence professional actions, thoughts, and feelings toward people in racial dynamics and interpersonal interactions (Douce, 2004; Fouad et al., 2006; Sue & Sue, 2008). And so, before the project began, counselor trainees and university administrators wrote down concerns about meeting international students, such as (a) I am anxious about making connections with a total stranger, (b) international students of different cultures misperceive me as an evaluator (most administrators had this concern), and (c) being unfamiliar with different cultures and languages of international students makes me less able to understand their struggles.

Counselor trainees’ concerns were often centered on cultural privileges and differences between themselves and international students. Administrators were more concerned with the lack of resources available to resolve international students’ difficulties. Though these concerns may have stunted initial cross-cultural interactions, participants agreed that togetherness and collaboration were *the* great means to overcoming isolation. International students also noticed that trainees and administrators wanted to show that, despite differences in backgrounds, they cared about their unnoticed adversities.

Suggestions for Social Justice Changes to Counselors, Psychologists, Students, and Administrators

Thanks to this interdisciplinary service learning, university administrators who participated in the program asked counselor trainees for a list of future outreach areas to international students. The list significantly combined four aspects of social justice work including (a) suggestions by Goodman et al. (2004), and (b) Vera and Speight (2003), (c) the 5-hour pre-service learning training on working with international students, and (d) trainees' personal experiences. Three suggestions may help counselors, psychologists, graduate students, and university administrators make initial contacts with international students.

First, service-learning providers should advocate for all marginalized populations. Those who are marginalized lack access to resources because of systemic oppressions but not because of ability. It is the job of service-learning providers to educate the whole society about this aspect of social injustice. *Second*, service-learning providers should be wary of the "system" and its negative impact on international students. The more international students understand policies and restrictions, the less they will feel inadequate, as many resources and supports go according to nationality, not competence. *Third*, service-learning providers should not put themselves beyond their expertise. The American Psychological Association (2006) asks the question: "Should graduate students, predoctoral interns, and postdoctoral fellows be allowed to participate in volunteer services before obtaining their licenses to practice psychology?" (p. 520). The answer depends on the type of volunteer work. We are firmly convinced that untrained graduate students or inexperienced counselors or psychologists must not conduct psychotherapy with people affected by critical life changes (e.g., international people who moved to a different country for new schooling).

Conclusion

In this campus-based service learning project, counselor trainees and university administrators personally interacted with international students. Though trainees and administrators at times felt helpless, guilty, privileged, and sad, every participant tried their best to show true caring to international students. Some international students were relaxed enough to reveal their most embarrassing moments in the classroom, others told stories of injustices they suffered. Tears and laughter were shared between trainees, administrators, and international students.

As both trainees and administrators learned more deeply to value cultural differences, as well as their ethical, personal, and community responsibilities, they also began to develop a sensitivity that will profoundly affect their work and practice. Counselor trainees learned to apply the motivation ignited by this project to work with underserved and marginalized populations, to serve as agents of social justice, and to provide appropriate mental health resources to those who often do not have access to them. For university administrators, this powerful experience resulted in several positive outcomes. First of all, the university became committed to developing new policies that respect international students' backgrounds and lifestyles. Next, the university decided to sponsor international activities to promote healthy and positive dialogues between international students and U.S. students. Additionally, the university committed to

encouraging campus organizations to promote awareness and support of international people. Finally, working with faculty and staff, the university has become dedicated to diversity education and inclusiveness in order to celebrate each student's unique success.

After all, justice is fairness, a social arrangement that satisfies everyone involved. Such a just society prevails as a community of amicable empathy, and such is precisely the concern of counseling psychology. Thus, social justice is most effectively worked out by counselors who must in turn be trained as sensitive agents of social justice (Burnes & Manese, 2008; Toporek et al., 2006). The present study showed that "service learning" is the pedagogical means most direct, actual, and practical, designed by psychologists to train counselors as agents of/for social justice. Additionally, the training spreads to university administrators to implement a just society on campus, an educative seedbed of social justice. Naturally, a program of service learning and its practice to social justice should be proposed, implemented, and scientifically studied/evaluated in the pedagogical milieu of a university campus. The present qualitative study of "service learning as catalyst to social justice" in a university campus is to date the first of its kind. By publicizing this report, it is sincerely hoped to serve as a trailblazer to spread service-learning social justice as a wildfire all over our community at large, turning it into a just society where the marginalized minority populations—international students, those disabled, LGBT individuals, seniors, and powerless others—are no longer unjustly deprived of their fair share of success.

In sum, the present study blazes the trail of conducting a social justice study at varied levels, both individual and systemic, to diverse participants, counselor trainees, international students, and university administrators, to make individual and systemic transformations. The results described demonstrate that service learning has achieved positive outcomes among counselor trainees and university policies. We hope that the initial step this study has taken is a critical jump-start at appreciating social justice and initiating a systemic transformation of society toward it.

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