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Experiences in Service Learning Among Counselor Education Students

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Abstract

Service learning has been identified as an effective strategy to help prepare student counselors. More specifically, service learning in counselor education can be a viable tool in fostering connections, increasing student's skills and knowledge, and fostering counseling self-efficacy. This article will present results from a qualitative study exploring the experiences of counseling students participating in a service learning project. Implications for the profession are discussed.

The implementation of service learning in higher education has sparked the interest of administration and faculty due to the positive impact it has on students (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler, 2010). Research supports the benefits of participation in service learning on academic performance, personal values, efficacy, social activism, civic engagement and overall self-efficacy (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler, 2010; Levensque-Bristol, & Stanek, 2009; Stewart, 2009). In addition, research supports that participation in service learning promotes self-determination (Levensque-Bristol & Stanek, 2009).

Due to the positive findings, a significant increase in service learning has developed in higher education settings within the last decade. Service learning provides a twofold benefit for the student and the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Student learning is fostered and civic, advocacy, social, and personal responsibilities are promoted via service learning participation (Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005; Murray, Pope, & Rowell, 2010). According to Bringle and Hatcher (1996) service learning in higher education consists of an educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that is aligned with course objectives and meets community

needs. The educational experience provides an opportunity for further understanding of the course content and at times practical application. Service learning provides a view into the profession and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Service Learning and Counselor Education

Service learning can serve as an avenue for counseling students to tie classroom objectives to practical application while serving the needs of the community. In the field of counseling, students often participate in service learning in the forms of practicum and internships towards the end of their training. However, minimal opportunities for service are offered pre-practicum. In counselor education, pre-practicum service learning can enhance specific knowledge, provide insight into the counseling profession, promote awareness, lessen anxiety, and increase counseling self-efficacy (Baggerly, 2006; Barbee, Scherer, & Combs, 2003; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; Murray, et al., 2010). The field of counseling and its major professional organization, the American Counseling Association (ACA), promotes counselors to adopt a socially active role. However, despite this promotion some counseling professionals continue to feel uncomfortable doing so (Sexton & Whiston, 1998). Service learning, in which the focus is typically being socially active, can aid in the preparation of students to take on such roles.

Service learning has showed promise in counselor education programs in helping students decrease anxieties and promote counseling self-efficacy (Arnold & McMurtery, 2011; Barbee et al, 2003; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). Jett and Delgado-Romero (2009) found that pre-practicum service learning aided the professional development in student counselors. A less prescribed method of service learning was required of the students; students were allowed to choose a site based on their interest. Each site appeared to have a variety of activities that students were allowed to participate in including shadowing counselors, consulting with other professionals, co-facilitating educational groups, observing counseling sessions, and conducting recreational activities. Qualitative measures were used to understand the participants' experiences. Findings suggested that involvement in service learning provided opportunities to become engaged in counseling roles and environments that they would not have had the opportunity to do so at a pre-practicum level of training. Service learning also provided an avenue for professional networking. The authors suggested that pre-practicum service learning could also be a viable tool to aid students in decision making in regards to their career and specific interests.

Similarly, Arnold and McMurtery (2011) found positive relationships between service learning, counseling skills, and introspection. The study population included students enrolled in a master's degree program in mental health and/or school counseling. As a course assignment, students were required to participate in a service learning project at a local community agency. In collaboration with the institutions' Center for Civic and Community Engagement, local community agencies were identified. Through this process, a single agency was selected to work with. Students worked together as a group in completing their service learning projects. A qualitative measure was used to examine themes identified through student reflective journals. Themes that emerged from pre

service learning experiences included anxiety and resistance. Post service learning experience reflections indicated less anxiety and increased introspection. Students also indicated that their clinical skills and knowledge were enhanced.

Barbee et al. (2003) suggested that students' counseling self-efficacy increased post service learning participation. No specific information regarding the service learning experiences was provided. A quantitative method was used to measure counseling self-efficacy and anxiety pre and post service learning experiences. The major finding of their study supported previous research (Melchert, Hays, Wiljanen, & Kolocek, 1996) that there is a positive correlation between counselor training/development and counseling self-efficacy.

Service Learning and Specific Counseling Competencies

Research conducted by Murray et al. (2010) supported the benefit of service learning in aiding in the development of advocacy competencies. Their research used a service learning advocacy project that was prescribed at the beginning of the course via the course syllabus. Using suggestions regarding this assignment from previous students, the authors provided more direction regarding the project which included aid from the faculty. The findings of this research indicated that there was a high value for student learning and serving the community. In addition, their research found that students were able to gain a better understanding of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies. This supports Myers et al.'s (2002) notion that advocacy is pertinent to the counseling profession. They concluded that advocacy not only promotes the profession but overall social activism. Amongst other roles within the counseling profession, it seems as though advocating for a student/client requires knowledge and competence in order to promote advocacy for students/clients in particular populations. For school counselors, understanding advocacy is imperative in serving their students, restructuring school environments, and the overall promotion of positive youth development (Akas & Galassi, 2004). The ACA Advocacy Competencies provides a framework for counselors to stand by when attempting to advocate for the profession and their student(s)/client(s) (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). Due to the need for advocacy in the counseling profession, it is imperative for counselors to gain an understanding of the advocacy competencies. Service learning can be an avenue to promote such competence early on in the counseling curriculum.

Participation in service learning activities has also shown to be effective in the development of multicultural competencies (Arnold & McMurtery, 2011; Baggerly, 2006; Burnett et al., 2004). According to the ACA (2005), counselors are expected to be multiculturally competent in their work. Burnett et al. (2004) examined students' experiences in a graduate counselor education class. Students were required to participate in weekly community service learning projects at a local community agency that had already been approved by the instructor. The agencies selected were based on each having a cultural population different from the typical graduate student population at the university and having an identified need that could be met through service learning. Students engaged in roles as collaborators rather than as counselors. Students were required to keep journals throughout the experience. The authors found that service

learning provided opportunities for students to increase awareness, examine biases, connect students to communities, and enhance multicultural counseling knowledge.

The present study attempts to add to the literature regarding service learning in counselor education. In particular, it will provide a look in the experiences of pre-practicum service learning among counseling students in a CACREP program with a prescribed group service learning project focusing on working with children, adolescents, and their families.

Present Study

Method

Participants. For this study, a total of 16 student participants enrolled in a counselor education pre-practicum course were recruited for participation. The course was chosen due to it being a pre-practicum course and having a service learning component. Of the 16 student participants, 14 were female, and 2 were male. The study population was split in half (50%) between school counseling and community counseling students. Student participants were all pre-practicum students, and most students (75%) had completed between 16-30 hours of a 54 hour program. The ethnic makeup was primarily students of Hispanic descent with 2 who identified themselves as non-Hispanic. The students' ages ranged from 23-56. No data was collected regarding socioeconomic status.

Procedures. Students were provided with a syllabus which included the service learning project as a requirement at the beginning of the semester. Students were then asked to participate in the current study and informed consent was obtained. Students' service learning requirement was aligned to the course objectives. The service learning requirement was directive in nature, meaning students were assigned a specific class project. In the case that the student was not able to participate in the specified project, they were to speak with the instructor to make alternate arrangements. The designated project consisted of the development and facilitation of a wellness fair for children and their families. Students were required to develop activities for children/adolescents and their families that focused on socio-emotional wellness. Emotional wellness includes how one feels, thinks, and copes with life. Social wellness is about having satisfactory interpersonal relationships and positive interactions with others. Specific topics of activities included: stress management, family cohesion, coping skills, positive relationships, respect, and self-esteem. Students were also involved in the planning and organization of the event. Students worked collaboratively in setting up the facilities, organization of activities, marketing the event, securing donations for supplies, and promotion of the fair. All activities students developed were approved by the instructor. Each activity identified the rationale, goals, objectives, and procedures. Students were able to use class time to discuss the event throughout the semester. The event took place on a Saturday outside of class near the end of the semester.

Measures. A qualitative approach was used to examine emerging themes identified through reflections in student journal entries. Specifically, data were analyzed following a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Text data was initially examined by noting themes, emphases, and recurrences in the journal entry margins following guidelines provided by Corbin and Strauss (1990).

This phase reflected repeated coding, comparing, and disaggregating, which were followed by re-aggregating data according to thematic categories that emerged. When no new categories emerged, it was determined that saturation had been attained. A benefit of using a qualitative approach is that it provides a richer perspective of one's beliefs and attitudes.

Results

Excerpts from student journal entries provided pertinent reflections on their experiences. Themes were highlighted, which focused on the impact their participation had on their practical and clinical application and skills, overall beliefs and attitudes working with children and families, and their counseling attitudes and beliefs of self and profession. Core themes and statements were categorized and cross analyzed. Six core themes emerged:

- Connection to community
- Class cohesion
- Counseling skills
- Flexibility
- Program development
- Insight into profession.

Connection to community. A number of students indicated that the service learning project helped them have a better understanding of their community.

The event helped me see firsthand the population that I eventually would be working with.

Class cohesion. Several of the students reported that the project helped them become closer to one another. Several excerpts that spoke to this theme were:

I liked the feeling of togetherness the class had. Anything anyone needed help with others were willing to help with.

It was a great experience because I was able to get to know my counseling classmates a little more.

The communication was great with the other members of the counseling program.

I could see that there was a lot creativity and dedication in the counseling program which made me feel very comfortable and proud to be part of the whole experience.

I really enjoyed the day and feel as if I made new friends.

Counseling skills. Students felt as if the service learning event would be an avenue for them to practice their skills. Several students shared how they were able to do so and expressed various feelings regarding this.

...Otherwise a good learning experience as I need to sharpen my skills in dealing with children.

I took honor in my work as I assisted in the preparation... I think the main reason for this is because I am so anxious to utilize my skills with parents and children in the community.

Flexibility. The service learning project appeared to provide an opportunity for students to understand the importance of flexibility and developmental considerations.

It was interesting adjusting the activity to fit those who were in high school.

I had not anticipated on teens approaching my table and I was not sure how I would alter my activity to fit them, as the book was very pre-school.

My partner was a bit nervous working with the adolescents for the activity was really geared for children, but I was able to accommodate the activity to their age level.

The kids had to write in the wings who or what lifts them up. Sometimes my partner and I had to reword it to "what makes you happy." So we had to meet the child at his or her developmental level.

Program development. Many students remarked on learning about the logistics it takes to implement a community event. They were fortunate for this.

I was able to see that so many things happen behind the scenes when putting an event together.

I especially learned a lot on how to set up an event like this one, along with the components that create such an event. I feel this will be very beneficial to me in my professional career.

Insight into profession. Students reflected on how the service learning project was a great learning experience. Many shared specifics as to how it provided insight into the counseling profession.

What I took from this experience are several activities that I would use in my school.

Just seeing the activities available at the different tables felt like an educational and enriching experience.

As XX and I applied the technique, I realized I would like nothing more than to work with her age group.

Study Limitations, Implications, and Further Research

As with all studies, this study had limitations. The low number of study participants could be seen as a limitation. Another limitation includes controlling for extraneous variables which would include concurrent training/opportunities for development. It is also important to note that the primary researcher was also the course instructor. Instructor's biases could have influenced interpretation. However, steps were taken to minimize this which included reflections not being linked to specific students and the use of a secondary source.

This research supports previous findings that service learning shows promise in counselor education. Integrating service learning in pre-practicum courses can provide students with a practical understanding of application and increase their understanding of course objectives. Service learning can also provide counseling students opportunities to explore their perception, attitudes, and beliefs regarding practical counseling issues early in their coursework. Doing so would provide an opportunity for faculty to intervene and help remediate any potential issues that may arise. Interestingly, this study supported the notion that service learning created connectedness and cohesion among students. Research supports that social integration or “connectedness” to peers and faculty, supports retention among college students (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Service learning where students can work together as a group can create opportunities to develop close relationships among students and also aid in future collaboration.

Further research that examines types of service learning projects in counselor education would be meaningful. Such research can provide recommendations for faculty in their implementation of service learning in their courses. Mixed-methods inquiry would provide insight into specific criteria such as counseling self-efficacy, counseling skills, as well as knowledge gained in specific domains. Perspectives from instructors and other stakeholders in service learning would also be worthwhile to provide feedback to aid in the development of such projects.

Conclusion

Pre-practicum service learning could serve as a student’s initial training and/or introduction to the counseling profession. Service learning in counselor education can be a powerful tool in the development of counseling skills and knowledge as well as fostering connections among peers, faculty, and the community. Service learning also promotes humanistic counseling skills, provides an understanding of practical application, and overall preparation of competent counseling professionals. Overall, students appear to benefit from involvement in service learning projects. Thus, incorporation of such assignments within the counseling curriculum pre-practicum would be beneficial in the training of counseling professionals.

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