How Service Learning Addresses the Mental Health Needs of

Students in Urban Schools

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Abstract

Service learning promotes social-emotional and academic development through active engagement in community activities. It empowers students to think beyond themselves and to develop a commitment to serve others. In so doing, service learning builds connections with school and community that are critically important in urban settings. This paper links key components of effective mental health programs in urban schools with service learning.

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The 2002 U.S. Census defined "urban" as a densely populated area with a high degree of economic and social interaction. Given that definition, urban not only refers to a city location but also to a cultural context. Urban life incorporates people of different races, languages, beliefs, values, customs, and economic levels, all living together in close proximity. It is the diversity and complexity of urban culture that both enriches and challenges urban education.

The mental health needs of students, which reflect life in complex settings, are evident in the troubling issues that arise in urban schools—e.g., emotional upset, substance abuse, truancy, violence, and academic failure. Mental health services in schools should extend beyond individual counseling to incorporate a wide range of programs that promote social-emotional learning, foster resiliency, address student disengagement, and connect schools with communities. Rather than the traditional one-to-one intervention model, emerging trends in mental health services involve comprehensive efforts in strengthening schools and communities to optimize student learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2005).

Service learning is a natural opportunity to enhance mental health in urban schools (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). In today's economic climate, resources may be limited to support mental health programs. Service learning is a cost-effective strategy to provide social-emotional learning experiences while fostering academic development. As a positive, strength-based intervention, service learning incorporates all the

programmatic components of comprehensive school-based mental health services identified by Adelman and Taylor (2005):

- To promote social-emotional development, prevent mental health and psychosocial problems, and enhance resiliency,

- To intervene early after the onset of learning, behavior, or emotional problems,

- To build the capacity of all school staff to promote healthy development,

- To address systemic matters that affect mental health, such as bullying, alienation, and disengagement,

- To draw on empirical evidence in developing school-community interventions to address barriers to learning and foster positive development.

These components are common to quality service-learning programs. In service learning, the act of serving itself conveys a sense of caring. High expectations are communicated when students take on service projects to respond to genuine community needs. Students participate in meaningful ways when they assume ownership of both the service and learning aspects of their projects. Through service learning, students experience real world applications of a variety of skills for social-emotional growth as well as academic development (Fredericks, 2003).

<center>Service Learning Overview</center>

Service learning is curriculum-based service. It ties community service to academic and/or social-emotional learning goals. Service learning should be employed by school counselors because it yields so many benefits simultaneously. This "value added" approach assists multiple constituencies from both schools and communities and delivers multiple benefits to each.

Service learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through cycles of action and reflection as students work with others in applying their knowledge to solve a community problem and, at the same time, reflect upon their experience to gain a deeper understanding of complex issues for themselves. Reflection turns service into learning. Eyler and Giles (1999) cited three reasons why service-learning contributes to students' understanding and ability to apply knowledge: (1) deeper learning results because students are more engaged and curious about issues they experience in the community; (2) students find that they can better 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.

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:

- Students learn through participation in organized experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated with school and community;

- The program is integrated into the academic curriculum with time to process those experiences;

- Students are given opportunities to use their knowledge and skills in real-life situations in communities; and

- Learning is extended beyond the classroom into the community, which fosters the development of a sense of caring.

Service learning is a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between students and the community resulting in mutual benefits. Community can be broadly defined to include settings and situations within or outside of the school walls. Service learning:

- provides authentic academic, social, and emotional learning contexts;

- helps students succeed academically;

- fosters positive school climates;

- increases community support for schools; and

- encourages strong ties to school, community, and society at large.

Thus, service learning integrates the work of teachers and school counselors. Service learning, as an intervention that can be both remedial or preventive and individual or systemic, can enable school counselors to align their efforts with educational reforms and expand their role by addressing the social and emotional needs of students within the academic mission of schools. By integrating academic, social, and emotional goals, service learning can reshape mental health practices in schools.

Mental Health in Urban Schools

Mental health initiatives in schools should include programs focused on social-emotional learning to increase protective buffers and foster resiliency (Adelman & Taylor, 2005). However, social and emotional learning programs are often not assigned a top priority in urban schools because of the pervasive and pressing issue of academic failure. Although teachers, school administrators, and parents value social and emotional competence, they often express concern that focusing on social-emotional development will diminish academic achievement. Yet, considerable evidence indicates

just the opposite effect—that social-emotional competence actually promotes resiliency and enables academic learning (Bear, Manning, & Izard, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, &Walberg, 2004).

Counseling in schools has shifted its focus from a responsive services approach to one that is integrally tied to student achievement (Stone & Dahir, 2006). Stone and Dahir suggested that the purpose of a counseling program in a school setting is to impart specific skills and to facilitate learning in a proactive and preventive manner to help all students achieve school success through social-emotional and academic development experiences. School counselors should now shift from the traditional, individual remediation model to a proactive counseling model that emphasizes skill building rather than deficit reduction (Galassi & Akos, 2004). Service learning is a valuable strategy to achieve K—12 mental health programs goals while providing an opportunity to work closely with teachers to address the academic achievement gaps in urban schools (Stott & Jackson, 2005; Wilczenski & Schumacher, 2006). Because of its positive effects on social and emotional development, service learning benefits all students, but may especially increase the engagement and motivation of students at risk for school failure. Peterson and Seligman (2004) specifically recommended service learning as an intervention to promote positive social and emotional outcomes.

Service learning is a strength-based approach, and as such, it focuses thinking on interventions that can capitalize on students' strengths. In addition to documenting the academic benefits of service learning, Billig's literature reviews (2000, 2002, 2003, 2004) revealed accumulating support for the social and emotional benefits as well. These benefits also extend to children and adolescents typically referred for mental

health services at school; for example, students with disabilities and those at risk for behavior and academic problems (Brigman & Molina, 1999; Kraft & Wheeler, 2003; Muscott, 2000; Piliavin, 2003; Shoultz, Miller, & Ness, 2001). Students who feel isolated, incompetent, and powerless in traditional classroom settings find a purpose to schooling in that they can learn and contribute in meaningful ways through service (Bullock & Fitzsimons-Lovett, 1997; Fitzsimons-Lovett, 1997; Ioele & Dolan, 1993).

Despite the potential benefits of service learning for students with mental health issues, they are often the recipients of service but seldom involved as service providers. Muscott (2001) offered several reasons why students with social, emotional and behavioral impairments are rarely engaged as providers of service to others. First of all, the field of education has historically focused programming on the disability itself, emphasizing the remediation of the students' weaknesses rather than the enhancement of each student's strengths. There is a pessimistic view that children and adolescents with social, emotional, and behavioral impairments have little, if anything, positive to offer others. A pragmatic concern is that students with these disabilities lack the requisite skills. Another concern is that students with social, emotional, and behavioral impairments lack the motivation and desire to perform acts of generosity for others.

<div align="center">Service-Learning Mental Health Interventions</div>

Group Therapy

There is a strong basis for employing service learning as a social-emotional intervention. For students with mental health problems, Kraft and Wheeler (2003) used service learning as a type of "group therapy" similar to cognitive behavior modification. In that context, service learning was expanded beyond academic goals to include

therapeutic components and reflective activities that stimulated the students' positive beliefs about themselves.

Anger Management

As an alternative to conducting groups focused on anger management, service-learning opportunities could be arranged to teach empathy, social skills, as well as emotional and behavioral regulation while addressing academic goals at the same time. Elias and colleagues (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003) described just such a program as a service-learning alternative to an anger management program. Virtually the same activities included in an anger management program that the students resisted, were taught in the context of a Newspaper Club—listening, interacting with others, negotiating calmly, problem solving, in which the children participated enthusiastically. The students served the school and community by keeping them informed of current events through their newspaper. It is easy to see the potential ties to the academic curriculum in terms of writing skills, social studies, and math.

Fostering Community

Consider the following example (see author note): Service learning was employed as an intervention for eight sixth-grade middle school students at risk for academic failure due to social and emotional adjustment difficulties. Teachers and administrators labeled the students as "behavior problems." Data showed that this group of students averaged three discipline referrals per week to the principal's office. Because of these referrals, instructional time was reduced dramatically.

A service-learning program was initiated with all sixth grade students in which students focused their attention on various school good deed projects to benefit the

school, including playground clean-up, recycling bottles and cans, and decorating bulletin boards. These "good deeds" were ideas generated by students to improve school appearance, to be a part of the academic curriculum, and not to be considered as a punishment for inappropriate behavior. The school counselors and teachers collaborated to integrate academic lessons with the projects. In math class, for example, the students calculated the cost of cleanup activities and bottle recycling. Writing assignments included research papers on environmental issues and the importance of recycling. The eight "behavior problem" students were given the responsibility as leaders for collaborative teams of students on the service-learning projects. These students also took the lead in planning holiday decorations for the main office. After three months time, the students reduced the number of discipline referrals to a total of three! For the entire class, attendance increased, tardiness decreased, and the students reported that they liked school much better.

By participating in this service-learning project, these so labeled "behavior problem" students became much more motivated toward school and felt more involved in the life of the school in a meaningful way. The project certainly can be said to have given these students a "purpose" for school. Also evident is the connection of academics with real life skills and situations. It is a wonderful illustration of simultaneously addressing specific emotional and social needs of students while teaching academic skills. This service-learning project was an authentic one that conveyed a sense of purpose in helping with a real need in the school community. Acting as helpers was an especially important aspect of this project because the students involved in service learning were often not trusted with responsibility. Rather

than focusing on the students' personal and social deficits, service learning involved them in a task with so many dimensions that it became easy to find ways to capitalize on their strengths.

Reinforcing Pro-social Behaviors

Another example of a service-learning project that school counselors could employ might be to enlist students with social and emotional difficulties to assist with an orientation program to welcome younger students transitioning from the elementary to middle school. The older students would plan the entire orientation, including an explanation of the school's core values of respect, responsibility, caring, trust, and family, and a demonstration of the expected behaviors. Those students could design posters and perform skits to convey messages about positive school climate to incoming students. Students also might develop a handbook for the new students. This activity would reinforce the codes of conduct for students who experience difficulty following school rules. The project can simultaneously address the specific needs of the older students in terms of social interaction and emotional regulation while teaching the school's core values. Academic goals could be addressed through the various components of the service project. Concrete applications of academic skills can help students see the relevance of their classroom work in real life. Writing skills could be addressed through poster-making and a preparing a handbook. For math assignments, students could calculate the cost of the project or collect and analyze data about the orientation program's effectiveness. Such an orientation program is an authentic task that can convey a sense of purpose in helping with a real need in the school community. Rather than focusing on the children's social and emotional deficits, this type of service

project involves students in a task with so many dimensions that it is easy to find ways to accommodate for students with special needs and focus on their strengths. Students get a deeper sense of the purpose of school values when they themselves experience those core values through their work. The following are examples of prompts for student reflection about their experiences:

- Describe the most caring thing you have ever done. Describe how you felt before and after.

- What is the most important thing about this project that you have discovered so far? Why is this important to you?

- Do members of your school community show you they care about you? If so, explain how. If not, explain why you feel this way.

- How do you feel about your contributions to the orientation project? Do you feel good about accomplishing this? Explain why or why not.

- Evaluate your performance so far in this project. What have you done really well? What do you think you could have done better?

- Describe your feelings about the orientation project so far. Is it worthwhile? Why or why not? What do you like most about it? What do you wish could be different?

- Is it important to serve your community? Why or why not?

- Consider your work on the orientation project so far. How have you used math, reading, and writing skills to helping new students learn about your school?

       The documented benefits of service learning found with the general population of students support an optimistic view that the same benefits will accrue to students with

mental health problems. Placing students with mental health concerns in special

education and continuing to counsel them at school in traditional ways has not been

effective. Service learning is an ideal alternative for students with social, emotional, and

behavioral impairments to get involved in their community, demonstrate their knowledge

in practical situations, and experience a sense of accomplishment and pride.

<div align="center">Service Learning in Urban Schools</div>

Service learning is also compatible with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)

recommendations for creating personalized, equitable, intellectual challenging academic

environments. Many urban school districts are moving toward a "small school" concept

(see http://www.essentialschools.org/). The CES common principles

(http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/ssp/ssp.html) are a set of essential

elements focused on the purpose and practice of schooling that support:

- Personalized instruction to address individual needs and interests;

- Small settings where teachers and students know each other and work in an
  atmosphere of trust and high expectations;

- Multiple assessments of performance on authentic tasks;

- Democratic and equitable school policies and practices; and

- Close community partnerships.

In complex urban settings, tensions may arise from cultural conflicts and intolerance

of diversity. However, one of the most consistent outcomes of service learning is a

reduction of negative stereotypes and an increase in acceptance of diversity (Eyler &

Giles, 1999). Service learning can give students the opportunity to be involved in

complex urban communities and to grapple with situations that may challenge their

fundamental assumptions about the world. Service learning should incorporate

opportunities for intentional reflection upon social justice issues and the welfare of those

who are served. In this way, service learning supports the ethical goals of character

education (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003; Schaffer, Berman, Pickeral, & Holman,

2001) by providing situations where helping and collaboration, as well as sensitivity to

culture and social justice issues, become integral parts of the educative process. There

is a connection and synergy in combining service learning and character education.

Service learning develops character by seamlessly weaving civility, ethics, and social

responsibility into the school culture and curriculum.

Conclusion

Urgent challenges confront urban schools and communities. In this era of budget

cuts and high stakes testing, already under-resourced schools may be forced to make

difficult choices in curricular and personnel matters. Many urban school-based mental

health professionals are overwhelmed with referrals for individual counseling. School

counselors need to move beyond trying to solve problems one-by-one to dealing with

larger issues. Service learning is a cost effective alternative that fosters student

engagement and is likely to produce gains in social, emotional, and academic learning.

Service learning is a sound practice for meeting urban challenges because it

integrally links the work of teachers and school counselors in promoting mental health.

In contrast to other academic enrichment or remedial curricula, career development

initiatives, and social-emotional interventions, which are often fragmented,

decontextualized efforts, service learning seamlessly integrates those programs to

address mental health issues within the academic mainstream. Growing evidence from

several disciplines and across a variety of settings indicates the positive effects of service learning in three areas addressed in the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2003):

- Academic development – Students who participate in service learning are more engaged with their school work and more motivated to learn;

- Career development – Through service learning, students gain greater insight into various occupations, career pathways, and workplace literacy.

- Personal/social development – Service learning has a positive impact on students' interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and ability to relate to culturally diverse groups.

There is a caveat: Service learning is not a panacea for all the ills facing urban students, schools, and communities. Urban issues are extremely complex and no single educational program could possibly address all of them. It is important for school counselors to be critical consumers of such claims. Further research is needed to determine when, for whom, and why service learning produces positive social-emotional outcomes. Those studies have the potential to establish service learning as a key component of the work of school counselors.

Speculation about counseling and mental health services in schools for the 21st century indicates that it will be based in positive psychology and characterized by strong school-community partnerships, emphasizing ecological, proactive, and systemic practice in order to promote resiliency and build competencies for all children (Adelman & Taylor, 2001). Service learning can enable those new professional roles and functions.

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