Utilizing Community Practice Experiences to Build Self-Efficacy in Future Human Service Professionals

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Abstract

Students come to human services education hoping to help people and can be disillusioned when they begin to grasp the enormity of social structures and their effects on poverty, the issues people face in their neighborhoods and communities, the poor quality of schools, the lack of employment opportunities, and poor access to health care. These can weigh heavily on students who need to build their own self-efficacy before they enter the world as human service professionals. Teaching them to work in communities as partners participating in community development can help them to build the self-efficacy they need to work toward social change in spite of the weight of social problems. Engaging in community development activities that lead to community action can help students see themselves and community members as partners, cooperating from a strengths perspective, with a common stake in the outcome of projects.

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Literature Review

Students enter the field of human services because they have an interest in helping others. They are often energetic and full of an idealism that leads them to believe they can make a difference. The most energetic and idealistic of them want to change the world. As educators of future human service professionals, we would like them to maintain that energy and belief in their ability to make a difference far beyond the walls of academia. However, the combination of the courses we teach on the structural causes of poverty, the problems people have in their neighborhoods and communities, the poor quality of schools, the lack of employment opportunities, and poor access to health care can weigh heavily on students who need to build their own self-efficacy before they enter the world as human service professionals. Once they grasp the enormity of the issues they face in the field, they often ask, "but what can I do?" Translated to mean what can I, just one person, do about this whole big mess?

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The student's self-efficacy, or the belief that they have the capacity to make a difference in the world, is critical to their future resiliency as human service professionals (Bandura, 1997). Human service professionals' confidence in their ability to work with others to reach goals effects the quality of services they deliver (Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, & Metrey, 2002; Nota, Ferrari, & Soresi, 2007; Reich, Bickman, & Heflinger, 2004). Community practice experiences working in partnership with others helps students see the possibilities of social change when people come together to work on social issues.

Professional Standards and Ethics

The National Organization for Human Services (NOHS; 2014) described the characteristics of a successful human service professional as including the understanding of human systems. Martin (2014) adds that human service professionals should have competencies to work with individuals and communities to deal with barriers to the quality of life. NOHS (2014) lists ethical standards for the human service professional that include: (a) responsibility to the community and society; (b) an awareness of sociopolitical issues that affect community members; (c) awareness of laws, regulations and legislation; (d) understanding the complex interaction between individuals, their families, and the communities in which they live; (e) acting as advocates; (f) planning and mobilizing to advocate for needs at the local community level; (g) being knowledgeable about the cultures and communities within which they practice, awareness of their own cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values, and the impact on their relationship with others. Community practice experiences outside the classroom can reinforce learning that happens inside the classroom and provide opportunities to interact with eco-systems, can provide practice for these standards, and can provide observing of the interactions of their own cultural backgrounds, beliefs and values with those of the community.

Community Practice Education

Through community practice, students can experience the interrelated nature of the individual and the ecological systems that interact to influence their lives (Brofenbrenner, 1979). They are introduced to the interaction of a broad range of client populations from individuals to families, elderly, kids, and people who are homeless. Cultural competence becomes a necessity rather than something to study in class. They learn about access to health care, the quality of

the schools, local law enforcement and juvenile justice. They identify community structures and institutions, networks, local policy processes and the influence of national policies on the community. Students can see eco-systems in action and come to understand the importance of social networks and social systems in community change (Neal & Christens, 2014; Neal, & Neal, 2013).

There are many ways that faculty and students can become partners in a community project. A widely used method is an asset-based approach to communities (Morse, 2011). Here, students are taught to resist the idea of being heroes, looking for problems to solve, or blaming-the-victim thinking that if only the people would behave right, their problems would be solved. Social change in communities is more likely to be achieved using an asset-based model (Kretzman & McKnight, 1996; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) by identifying and utilizing strengths and resiliency factors (Norman, 2000) and by becoming co-producers of knowledge and change along with the community (McNall, Reed, Brown & Allen, 2009; Newel & South, 2009). This approach allows students who are eager to become efficacious human services professionals to experience the eco-systems at play and identify resources for promoting the capacity of communities (Warner & Warner, 2011).

Case Example

One such example was an undergraduate research project implemented by an Elon University Human Service Studies student and faculty member that resulted in a community supported garden in a food insecure area. The garden was a result of community generated responses to survey questions. Community-based research blends well with an asset-based approach to build a project that has multiple uses and outcomes, one of which is social change (Stoecker, 2012). The sophomore, human services student was interested in designing a community-based research project that would result in a positive experience for the people from whom she collected data. She wanted to know more about people's attitude toward nutritious food, their perceptions of their right to easily access that food and their willingness to act on that right. This author, a Human Service Studies faculty member, had an ongoing community project that had involved students in the past and provided the right environment for her research.

To begin, the student set out to understand the importance of food in the lives of people—cultural practices, family interactions, emotional well-being, likes and dislikes, experiences with different food sources. She developed a

deeper understanding of the people in the community through discussions about something everyone loves. The student learned that there was much interest among the residents for creating a common vegetable garden. Community gardens are not only ways to alleviate the burden of food insecurity in communities, they are places were neighbors grow food together in a communal setting building their own community capacity through relationships (Comstock, et. al., 2010; Teig, et. al., 2009; Twiss, et.al., 2003). Community gardens are increasingly popular in urban settings and can serve to bring people together to work toward community change (Gray, Guzman, Glowa & Drevno, 2014). This project provided an ideal environment for this student and others to meet community members face to face and work alongside each other for a common purpose.

The research and resulting garden required two years of work and commitment on the part of the original student, the faculty member, community members and additional students. Initially, students and community members involved in the garden planning process were met with considerable resistance from local government since the garden was on city property. Issues surrounding the actual location of the garden, timing, and most importantly funding, slowed the process down. For example, the group had initially planned to have the garden beds constructed by late May to be ready in time for planting, but due to delays they were not ready until the end of July.

Additional students from human services classes got involved to help build the garden. They worked alongside the community members with augers, saws, hammers and nails. They handed out water and snacks, helped haul dirt, compost, and plants. Students experienced the whole community system. They attended planning meetings for the community garden with various community stakeholders, including city government officials and employees, members of the local university, the director and staff of the community center, and residents of the community.

The students who participated in these projects were able to interact with community members in such a way that the local residents acted as teachers and students, seeing their strengths rather than their problems. Seeing communities as groups of people with strengths led the students to dismantle the blanket assumption that people of color do not know about and are not interested in nutritious food, or growing and cooking vegetables. They found that there was a long history of people in the community who grew up on farms, worked on farms,

or had mostly vegetables to eat, already eating locally, all the things we thought we could "give" them when we entered the community.

Another benefit was that the local residents saw the strengths of the students. Students, having their own strengths, skills and abilities reflected back to them, developed confidence in their ability to effect social change. Future students were more willing to participate in the project having seen the positive experiences of past students. Building self-efficacy is critical to their success as future human services professionals (Bandura, 1997; Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, & Metrey, 2002; Nota, Ferrari, & Soresi, 2007; Reich, Bickman, & Heflinger, 2004).

Building ongoing community projects such as this provides opportunities for groups of students to participate over time. Lasting relationships are built between the faculty and community that ensure strong learning experiences. Once the garden was completed, sustaining its presence and success provided opportunities for new students to work with community residents to build relationships and plan new projects. For example, students helped establish a farmer's market, started a project to enable the market to accept SNAP or WIC credit, or provide vouchers and coupons to low-income people so that they can afford fresh, healthy food. One class even wrote a grant that was funded to hire a garden coordinator for the summer.

Relevance to the Field of Human Services

Through this community project opportunities were created for students to experience the importance of the competencies and ethical standards set by NOHS. Responsibility to the community, sociopolitical issues and institutions, advocacy, and cultural competence all came to play in this experience. Struggles with the city officials helped students to see the barriers that were present for people in the community, reducing the tendency to blame the victim. As co-producers of knowledge and change, both residents and students learned the art of working towards change requiring negotiation with each other and those in power. Enabling the students to see and experience the effects of ecological systems on the functioning of communities and the lives of the people within means that when they are human service professionals, they will have experience to draw on, an understanding of the humanity of every person, and the confidence that, along with others, they really can change the world.

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