Developing Self-Efficacy in MSW Students Through Service-Learning: Year 2

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Abstract

While social work education has rich historical roots in service-learning in the work of Jane Addams, this form of experiential education within master of social work curricula is relatively rare. Some have anecdotally described this approach as being interchangeable with the mandated field practicum. Proponents suggest that service-learning provides social work students with an alternative learning experience outside of the traditional classroom in which they can increase their perceived self-efficacy specifically in preparation for their professionally-focused field practicum. In this follow-up study in the second year of a service-learning course for MSW students, students who functioned as volunteers in a camp for burn-injured children were compared to a group of their cohorts who were simultaneously enrolled in classroom courses. All students were administered the Social Work Self Efficacy Scale, the Self Efficacy Scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale pre and post. Results indicate that both groups of students increased their self-efficacy suggesting that a service-learning approach may be a viable educational alternative for building perceived self-efficacy in social work students.

Developing Self-Efficacy Through Service-Learning: Year 2

The field of social work education has a rich legacy in community service in the work of social work pioneer and Nobel laureate, Jane Addams. Addams' philosophy exemplified the notion of "learning by doing" through community-centered practice as embodied in her hallmark work, Chicago's Hull House. Goldstein (2001), a contemporary voice in social work education, asserts that experiential education, with its foundation in the democratic and humanistic theories of Dewey, Friere, Foucault, and Gardener, "returns us to the roots of social work in Addams' terms" (p. 134). Service-learning, as a model of experiential education that has been gaining in popularity across a variety of primarily non-social work domains in higher education in recent decades, can be viewed as an obvious heir to Addams' vision.

The National and Community Service Act of 1990 describes service-learning as participatory learning through organized service experiences that addresses community needs by way of a collaborative process between the school and community. Research has linked service-learning to the development and enhancement of civic responsibility, moral development, and academic performance among participating students (Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, & Lenk, 1998). Other studies have provided evidence of increased self-esteem and cultural awareness (Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000), improved sense of empowerment (Giles & Eyler, 1994), enhanced self-confidence (Forte, 1997), improved problem-solving skills (Zlotkowski, 1996), increased motivation to learn (Berson & Younkin, 1998), and improved communication skills (Tucker et al., 1998). Ironically, while these areas of research are highly relevant to social work education, much of the research has been conducted with courses unrelated to social work and have included such disciplines as business (Zlotkowski, 1996), political science (Markus et al., 1993), sociology (Morton & Troppe, 1996), and communications (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994).

Within the current social work education field, however, service-learning is anecdotally viewed by social work educators as interchangeable with the field practicum, a pivotal, experientially based, and mandated model for professional training and development. Field placements typically occur in a variety of social work settings as a way to integrate academic coursework with practice skill development. However, it has been posited that while the field practicum offers a rich and integrative process of learning, it is a different learning experience than service learning (Kropf & Tracey, 2000). The field practicum is primarily focused on the student's specific skill development as a practitioner, and the overarching goal for students in field placement is to focus on the student's professional skill development coupled with the enhancement of their professional social work identity (Bogo & Vayda, 1998). The field agency provides a laboratory for the student's learning and while there may be overlaps and benefits derived by the community, these are secondary to student learning needs. The organization becomes the vehicle to assist the student in this process and it occurs under the watchful supervision of an experienced social worker. While community service may be part of the tasks performed, reciprocity with the community and the implicit lessons of civic responsibility is not the specific goal even if it is a possible by-product (Nnakwe, 1999). In fact, it is more common to hear complaints from field instructors that students come to their placements unprepared for professional practice. Some researchers have even suggested that service learning courses can better prepare Master's level students for their practicum "jobs" (Kropf & Tracey, 2000).

In contrast to the traditional field practicum, a service-learning course focuses on linking students with activities that are meant to enhance the community irrespective of role-based learning needs on the part of the student. As such, conceptually, service-learning may hold a particular familiarity for social workers, as many of the learning situations are compatible with social work practice. However, while the learning focus in traditional classroom coursework typically involves

competency acquisition through extrinsic learning processes, in service-learning, the learning is more intrinsic to the personal development of the student based on a model of structured, intentional reflection (Ikeda, 2000). Service-learning emphasizes self-awareness as students may be called upon to function in unfamiliar ways and under challenging circumstances even with the inherent compatibility of the experience with social work values. As such, the tasks in a service-learning course are focused on the process of a student's participation as a community member rather than as a social work service provider. This can even mean that a social work student may likely end up functioning in a non-traditional social work setting, putting greater emphasis on adjusting to the social and cultural milieu of the community setting. Researchers have indicated that this non-traditional experience creates an opportunity to enhance social awareness and intensify empathy development in social work students (Weah et al., 2000), key factors that underlie successful social work practice.

Service-learning research in social work, particularly on the Master's level, has been very scant despite recent research that has highlighted benefits that could potentially inform and enhance social work practice. One of the few service-learning studies with MSW students observes that students who take part in service-learning activities are more likely to perceive themselves as competent in carrying out policy-related tasks such as organizing groups, implementing change, and creating information (Rocha, 2000). In another study with MSW students, students who volunteered in a service-learning course demonstrated a significant increase in perceived self-efficacy related to social work practice skills and tasks following participation (Williams, King, & Koob, 2002).

Self-Efficacy Research

The construct of perceived self-efficacy is widely used to link experience with behavioral change (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Self-efficacy, defined as a situation-specific belief held by individuals about their ability and competency to perform and complete a given

task (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1986, 1997), is fostered in a variety of educational settings. There is a predictive element involved in self-efficacy, an expectation of a positive outcome based on a sense of perceived competency (Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, & Metrey, 2002). This suggests that students who perceive themselves as capable will subsequently attempt, perform, and complete tasks better than those who perceive themselves as less capable.

In social work education, self-efficacy is highly associated with the valued goal of self-awareness that is often fostered in experiential educational activities both in and out of the classroom setting. This construct, as it is emphasized in social work, is an understanding of one's impact on others as well as an accurate self-perception of abilities and limitations. Gibbs and Gambrill (1999) give voice to a common refrain in the social work field as they stress the importance of self-knowledge described as a "knowledge of [one's] personal strengths and limitations that influence how one approaches problem solving and decision making" (p. 11). Perceived self-efficacy is a related concept and is a particular form of self-assessment (Holden et al., 2002). In a previously mentioned study with MSW students (Williams et al., 2002), students who participated in the service-learning course exhibited a statistically significant increase in perceived self-efficacy related to social work practice skills and tasks.

Research Questions

The purpose of this follow-up study is to explore the effects of a service-learning course on the perceived self-efficacy of MSW students in year two of the course. The following questions are addressed:

1.   What are the effects of a service-learning course on the perceived self-efficacy of master of social work students who participated in it?

2.   What are the effects of traditional classroom courses on the perceived self-efficacy of master of social work student cohorts who participated in them simultaneously?

3.   What are the contrasts between the two groups?

Method

The Camp

Camps for burn-injured children are creative programs that have emerged over the last 20 years. The camps were originally developed to address psychosocial needs in a safe, normalizing and activity-focused environment and currently over 40 camps exist in the US with more in Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. These camps ideally offer the children and youth who attend the opportunity to develop supportive relationships with adults and other campers who are familiar and comfortable with burn injuries. Some of these adults may be burn-injured themselves and many are connected with the fire service. While there are philosophical differences among burn camps, one value that is shared universally is the importance of community (Doctor, 1992).

The camp in this study, staffed completely by volunteers, is open to any child in the state who has suffered a severe burn and has spent at least four days in either of the state's two burn units. It was established in 1992 by the state firefighters' burn foundation, a grass-roots non-profit organization comprised of firefighters from around the state who work year-round to raise the money to fund the camp as well as organize and facilitate the camp activities. The nationally recognized camp has grown to serve over 100 children annually and is staffed by nearly 150 volunteers. The volunteer community is primarily male and comprised of mostly firefighters or emergency service workers (EMT), with a smaller group of individuals who are medical burn unit personnel, a few adult burn survivors, and other interested individuals above the age of 21. While some of the burn camps are rehabilitative in focus, just as many are exclusively recreational, as is the one in this study (Doctor, 1992). At this

camp, at least, there appears to be a culture of distrust of social workers, who are perceived as wanting to focus on the psychological problems of the children rather than allowing the children to have the opportunity "to just have fun."

Participants

The total sample (N=31: 28 females and 3 males) of students was comprised of rising second year MSW students in the same cohort. Twenty-five (25) students were Caucasian and six (6) students were of African origin and ranged in age from 21 to 43 years old ($\underline{M}$= 27.1; SD= 6.7). From this sample of 31 students, two self-selected samples were compared: service-learning group (n=22) and classroom group (n=9). There were no statistically significant differences between these groups with regard to demographics or pre-test scores on the dependent measures.

Service-learning group. Students in the service-learning group voluntarily signed up for the course in the fall semester, their first as MSW students, prior to summer school. Of the twenty-two students, three were African-origin and nineteen were Caucasian. None of the participants indicated that they had any prior experience with the burn-injured population. Five of the students were in the community-empowerment (macro) track of the program and 17 were in the family-centered (micro/mezzo) track. All of the students signed up for the course based on publicity they had received about the course either through formal presentations or word-of-mouth from students from the previous year's course. Approval for this study was obtained through the university's Institutional Review Board, and all the students who signed up for the service-learning course agreed to participate in the study. The students understood that their grade was not affected in any way by their participation in the study, and all signed consent forms.

Four participants were assigned the role of counselor by camp staff, based on prior camp counselor experience, while the remaining students were assigned support staff duties.

Support staff duties included photography, fluid distribution, maintenance, security, activity set-up, set designs, and general labor. The four counselors worked in teams and were assigned to different adolescent girl cabins. The rest of the students were housed in cabins based on job assignments along with the other volunteers at camp. The camp paid for room and board for all volunteers for the entire 8 days.

Classroom group. Students taking summer courses were from the same cohort as the service-learning students. All the students had completed their first year in the MSW program. Students in the classroom group were enrolled in the following courses: Theory and Practice with Families and Groups, Assessment and Psychopathology, and Civil Rights. Theory and Practice with Families and Groups, a required foundation course for all first-year MSW students, focuses on roles, values, ethics, and diversity in the formulation of intervention strategies that social workers use in practice with families and small groups. Assessment and Psychopathology, a second-year elective in the Family Centered concentration, provides an overview of social work assessment methods applicable to family-centered clinical practice and as well as basic training in the use of the *DSM-IV*. Civil Rights, a second-year elective in the Community Empowerment and Program Development concentration, explores human behavior, policies, research, and practices in relation to the organized movements for social justice in the U.S., focusing on the Civil Rights Movement in the period between the 1930s and 1960s and the roles of social workers, legal advocates, and the functions of social activists in this movement.

Procedure and Design

This study employed a pre-experimental, two group, repeated measures design to compare differences in perceived self-efficacy between two groups of MSW students before and after participating in either a service-learning experience or a classroom experience.

Service-learning group. Students were required to attend two pre-camp orientation sessions sponsored by the camp, attendance at camp for the entire eight days as well as two class meetings prior to camp and a de-briefing session one week after camp ended. The student participants signed a consent form and all students who signed up for the class agreed to participate in the study. The participants represented a non-probability sample, as all volunteered for the class. The service-learning group were administered the instruments during the first pre-camp class meeting with the primary investigator in attendance. The first class additionally consisted of group development, course overview, and social work skill development relevant to practice with burn-injured children. The second class took place at the Burn Foundation office where they received an overview from medical personnel, firefighters and burn survivors about the process of burn recovery. Following the service experience, the students received and completed the post-assessment during a debriefing session also conducted by the primary investigator and research assistant.

Classroom group. Students enrolled in the classroom courses described above attended a summer school schedule in which the courses were offered in four-hour blocks over an eight-week period. Courses followed a syllabus that combined lecture, readings, exams, written assignments, and classroom discussion. Packets were left in student boxes of the students who were identified as having signed up for a summer course by the school registrar. The packets contained an explanation of the project, consent forms, a demographic form, and three instruments. Only those students who returned the packets with completed instruments were included in the study.

Participants in both groups were provided with a randomly generated subject number that was used to code both the pre- and post-assessments. This number was used instead of the students' names in an attempt to maintain confidentiality. The primary investigator and research assistant administered the dependent measures described below to all participants at both the pre- and post-assessments to

help reduce random error. All of the measures were scored after the post-assessment was complete and all instruments were accounted for to help control for possible experimenter bias.

Instruments

Three dependent measures were used: 1) The Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale (SWSES) (Williams et al., 2002); 2) The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1979); and 3) The Self-Efficacy Scale (SES) (Sherer et al., 1982). The RSE and the SES were primarily employed in the study to test the SWSES for construct validity, and all three measures were administered at pre and post.

Social Work Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale. Quantitative data was gathered using a scale constructed to measure the perceived self-efficacy of social work students at the Master's level. Adopting a method suggested in the professional literature by Koob (1998), content was drawn from the list of core competencies for social workers at the Master's level as mandated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 1994). Because self-efficacy theory asserts that expectations of personal mastery are specific to a target behavior (Bandura, 1997), each item on the scale reflects a relevant social work skill or task that are reflected in the course objectives of the courses offered in the curriculum.

The Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale is a 47-item self-report measure (see Appendix A). Each item is scored Yes or No, indicating whether the respondent uses the skill or not. For each item scored as Yes, a 0-100 rating is provided indicating the respondent's perceived confidence performing the skill. Higher ratings indicate a higher degree of perceived confidence. The ratings are then totaled and divided by the number of items answered as Yes, with higher scores indicating a higher degree of perceived self-efficacy.

The development of this scale was primarily theory-based, and, due to the small sample size, no attempt to assess internal consistency by calculating alpha coefficients or determine test-retest reliability was made. In an attempt to measure validity, however, the scale was tested for correlations with two standardized measures: the Self-Efficacy Scale (SES), (Sherer et al., 1982) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1979).

Self-Efficacy Scale. The SES (Sherer et al., 1982) is a 30-item instrument that measures general expectations of self-efficacy employing a 5-point Likert scale. It consists of two subscales: general self-efficacy and social self-efficacy. It is scored by eliminating seven "filler" items, reverse scoring negative worded items, and then summing the 17 items that comprise the general subscale, and the 6 items that comprise the social subscale. Higher scores indicate higher self-efficacy.

Reliability tests resulted in an alpha of .86 for the general subscale, and .71 for the social subscale. The SES demonstrated good criterion-related validity by predicting that people with higher scores would tend to have more success in their lives than those with low scores. Construct validity was determined by correlating the *SES* with other standardized measures of similar intent (e.g., Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale).

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale. The RSE (Rosenberg, 1979) is a 10-item Guttman scale that measures self-esteem in children and adults. Although it has variations on its scoring, for the purpose of this study the RSE was scored by reverse scoring the negative worded items and then summing the ten items, one method suggested by the designers of the scale. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The RSE has a Guttman scale coefficient of .92, and test-retest reliability of .85 and .88. Tests of validity have included positive correlations with instruments that should correlate well with positive self-esteem (e.g., self-efficacy), as well as negative correlations with instruments that should not correlate well with positive self-esteem (e.g., depression).

Tests of validity. Pearson's product moment correlations were run to test whether pre SWSES scores would mildly to moderately correlate with the pre SES and the pre RSE scores, due to some shared similarities in the constructs. The social self-efficacy subscale correlated positively with the SWSES, r (30) =.39, p=.03. The general subscale, and the RSE, however, did not correlate with the SWSES. Construct validity, therefore, has only marginal support, indicating that the SWSES measures a somewhat conceptually different construct than self-esteem or general self-efficacy.

Limitations

There are three main limitations to this study. The first is the small sample size. While the findings of this study indicate that service-learning offers a viable alternative to traditional classroom courses in terms of perceived self-efficacy, the sample size utilized for this project was small, threatening the validity of all the results. The size of the comparison group was especially small since only those students who returned the packets with completed instruments were included in the study. Because the sample size is small, power is diminished, increasing the risk of a Type II error. Feasibility constraints limited the researcher to relying on available subjects, and, therefore, great caution should be exercised in generalizing from these results.

The second limitation is the possible threat to independence. Because the students participated in the conditions as a group, individuals in the different groups may have affected the scores of others in that group. The third limitation is the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments. Although the SES and the RSE have documented psychometric properties, there is little data was available on the validity or reliability of the SWSES, which threatens all the findings in this study.

<div align="center">Results</div>

A two-way Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was conducted to test whether the two groups (i.e., service-learning and classroom) would differ with regard to perceived self-efficacy

following their respective involvements in the two conditions. The current study, in contrast to the earlier pre-experimental design, employed a two-group, pre-experimental, repeated measures design to compare differences in perceived self-efficacy between two groups of MSW students before and after participating in a service-learning or classroom experience. This study (n=30) investigated two groups of a self-selected sample of MSW students: students enrolled in a service-learning course (n=22) and students enrolled in a classroom course (n=9). The students in the service-learning course volunteered to live and work for an intensive week at a camp for burn-injured children while the students in the classroom group attended social work classes in a traditional classroom setting and format.

Findings revealed no statistically significant differences between these groups with regard to demographics or pre-test scores on the dependent measures (i.e., SWSES, SES, and RSE). While both groups increased in their perceived self-efficacy scores from pre to post, $F(1) = 17.0$, $p < .001$, there were no statistically significant differences between groups at post in perceived self-efficacy, indicating that both groups increased in their perceived self-efficacy scores from pre to post regardless of whether they were involved in service-learning or classroom experiences.

Although the SES and RSE were primarily employed in the study to test the SWSES for construct validity, both of these measures were also administered at pre and post to determine if there were any differences between the two groups. Three Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance were conducted on the SES general subscale, the SES social subscale, and the RSE scale. No differences were found between the groups at post on any of the three measures. There were no significant findings to report from pre to post on these three scales.

Discussion

This study is a follow-up to a previously published pilot study (Williams et al., 2002) in which the effects of a service-learning course on master of social work students' perceived self-efficacy

development was explored. In the initial study, social work students attended a camp for burn-injured children in an intensive, cultural immersion experience as volunteers and the results of that study indicated significant increases in the students' perceived self-efficacy pre to post as measured by the Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale. This instrument was developed based on the goals and objectives of the CSWE accredited MSW program.

The current study occurred in year two of the course with a different group of students. A comparison group was added comprised of cohorts from the MSW program who were taking traditional courses during the time that the service-learning students were at burn camp. Additionally, two instruments were included to help assess the construct validity of the SWSES. The results from this study are consistent with the findings from the pilot study in that the perceived self-efficacy of the participants again increased significantly. However, the same appeared to be true of the comparison group of students who took traditional classroom courses. Thus, the students who volunteered in year two of the service-learning course demonstrated a significant increase in perceived self-efficacy related to social work practice skills and tasks following participation and this mirrored the similar gains that their cohorts experienced who were enrolled in traditional classroom courses. The results from this study are consistent with the research question of whether participation in a service-learning experience can positively affect the perceived self-efficacy of social work students, in that a link was made between a significant increase in perceived self-efficacy of the MSW students before and after participating in a service-learning experience. The findings from this study also repeated similar outcomes as the pilot study conducted the year previously, the first time the course was offered, in which students evidenced significant gains in perceived self-efficacy on the mezzo and macro levels of social work skills and tasks (Williams et al., 2002).

The service-learning course described in this study, "Social Work with Burn Survivors," presents a "real life" experience where students did not have the safety of an identified social work role to provide structure. This forced students to depend on their own innate ability to adapt to a lack of role clarity and an unfamiliar environment with new populations. The experience could well be considered a cultural immersion experience with a population of children whose injuries were initially somewhat intimidating to the students coupled with a large volunteer community of primarily emergency service workers such as firefighters. The students worked side by side with the other volunteers whose values, beliefs, and behaviors were at times very different from that of the social work students. In fact, the firefighters as a group held many misconceptions of the social work profession and presented challenges for the students as they attempted to integrate into this tight-knit community. This experience provided the students with an experiential way to learn about working with individuals and small groups within a community setting – mandatory skills for all social workers. Additionally, this "hands-on" educational experience provided the students with an opportunity to heighten their perception of their self-efficacy, with the potential accompaniment of positive impact on their self-esteem as they prepared to begin their field practicum during the next semester following completion of the course.

Social work's emphasis on service, one of the core values of the profession (NASW, 1994), promotes the social worker placing a high priority on the needs of the community. A service-learning experience that supports a critical reflection process enables students to experientially grasp a deeper understanding of the values that undergird the profession (Williams & Reeves, 2002). From the perspective of the community, there has been evidence of a high degree of community satisfaction with the contribution of student volunteers (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Agencies involved in such programs were able to expand the level and quality of services provided to their communities largely

because of the increased personnel and resources associated with service-learning activities (Kozeracki, 2000). This reciprocity can result in improved community relationships through the students and, by association, the university's enhanced sensitivity to specific community needs. While the findings from studies on service-learning approaches in social work education are encouraging, there is a need for further evaluation

Directions for Future Research

Further research is needed to replicate these findings and to ascertain whether the successes are significant enough to merit implementing the use of service-learning more widely in social work curricula. The use of larger sample sizes would augment the robustness of the results and would give a clearer picture as to the utility of service-learning as a method of instruction in social work. Also, adding an additional comparison group of MSW students not taking any courses might illuminate other aspects of education important to the success of service-learning in social work Additionally, conducting a follow-up study with students in field practicum who have participated in service-learning in contrast to cohorts who have not might provide information on the unique role a service-learning course can provide in preparing students for their practicums. Finally, further validation is needed for the SWSES as well as sample sizes large enough to investigate the reliability of the measure.

Conclusion

Service-learning coursework in social work education such as the one described in this paper can and should play a substantial role in furthering the ideals modeled by social work icon, Jane Addams. Through the service-learning experience with burn-injured children described in this paper, students developed new levels of understanding of group and organizational dynamics, enhanced their networking skills, were exposed to opportunities that facilitated a deepened appreciation for cultural

differences, practiced conflict negotiation, and developed new competencies in working with the burn-injured population. In addition to potentially reinforcing theory and practice skills learned in classroom instruction, experiential courses such as this can facilitate the development of students' perceived self-efficacy through social work values-based community practice.

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Appendix A: The Social Work Self-Efficacy Scale

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