School Based Service Learning Projects and School Counseling Implications

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Abstract

The purpose of this review is to look at pervasive issues in today’s schools including lack of student engagement, over emphasis on standardized testing and inconsistent parent involvement. This review will look at factors that contribute to student’s academic success; student engagement, autonomy and instruction that places learning in context. Research supports the idea that service learning increases student engagement, parent involvement and provides students with hands on learning experiences in context helping them become more academically successful and prepared for real life experiences.

*Keywords: service-learning, autonomy, emotional engagement, transformative learning*
School Based Service Learning Projects and School Counseling Implications

The purpose of this review is to determine what factors play an important role in the academic success of students as well as their overall wellbeing. This review identifies some of the most persistent problems in today’s schools that stand in the way of this and solutions for overcoming these problems. Research identifies student engagement, autonomy and parent involvement as some ways that will help increase academic success of students.

Research also suggests that service learning projects provide these kinds of active learning opportunities to students and their families. One of the most important roles of a school counselor is to be an advocate for their students. Knowing that service learning projects increase factors that are shown to increase student success it is important for school counselors to work to provide these opportunities despite the time commitment involved and the strong push to teach standardized test material.

What Does Research Say Students Need to Be Successful in School?

Previously this review looked at barriers to student’s academic success. This part of the review will look at factors that are identified in order for students to be successful in school including student engagement, autonomy in students and teaching topics in context. Service learning projects contribute to all three of these areas.

Student Engagement

Engagement has been identified as a student’s active involvement in learning, in contrast to superficial participation, lack of interest, or indifference. One of the primary predictors of high achievement in school has been identified by educational researchers as academic engagement (1992). As students become more engaged in topics they start to develop a passion for learning and the thrill of discovery (Newmann, 1992).

Engagement expresses behavioral intensity and active involvement on the part of the students during a given learning opportunity. Classroom engagement is particularly important
because it functions as a behavioral pathway through student motivation, subsequent learning and development. On the contrary, disengaged students tend to be distracted, passive and give up easily in the face of a challenge causes negative emotions to be expressed. Some of these disengaged students fail to plan ahead for future assignments, keep up with monitoring their grades or performance and generally begin to withdraw (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010).

Academic performance as well as overall psychological wellbeing has been linked to emotional engagement in adolescents. Disengaging behavior starts to surface as students do not feel emotionally engaged or invested in their academic life (Park et al., 2012). Emotional engagement refers to students’ affective response to activities and the people involved in those activities (Appleton et al., 2008).

A study by Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder (2001) showed that students who were highly engaged in learning were more likely to have higher grades and pursue a degree in higher education. By doing so the students were also more likely to have higher paying jobs and less likely to have a low socioeconomic status. When students were engaged in learning and higher education they were more likely to be inquisitive about career counseling and guidance as well (Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001).

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a framework that views individuals as engaged in self-regulated and goal-directed actions motivated by a psychological need to feel autonomous, competent and emotionally connected to others (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). There seems to be a significant link between academic autonomy and adolescents’ emotional engagement in schools.

Self-determination theory also suggests that when a student feels more competent about a certain topic, subject or class it can lead to behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. Students with less knowledge and fewer academic skills tend to show lower levels of engagement in class. Academically proficient students reported high rates of
boredom in class than that of students who typically performed at lower levels (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

   Emotional engagement can, however, be considered situation-sensitive. This means that it may fluctuate over time and in connection with specific tasks or situations (Appleton et al., 2008). Some students may be considered by their teachers as emotionally engaged in one subject and not another. This may be related to their level of competency. For instance maybe a student is competent in math and is engaged during class, while in English that same student struggles with reading or writing and is considered to be disengaged.

   This variation suggests that a student cannot simply be labeled “engaged” or disengaged” because emotional engagement is a dynamic, malleable construct. Low achieving students have moments of high engagement, interest and curiosity while high achieving student at times can be bored and disengaged. This shifts the focus from “problem learners” towards finding a way to teach that is encouraging and supportive for all students (Park et al., 2012).

   It is also important to keep in mind the developmental stages of adolescents. Thoughts and feelings can have a broad range over the course of a single school day. Many things compete for their attention throughout the course of a day; school, friends, family and sports.

   Other factors to emotional engagement are the influence of student characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and previous achievement. At all grade levels girls are considered to be more likely engaged in learning than boys. Male role models are becoming more and more needed in the schools, at home and as mentors to young men to help increase their level of motivation, interest and engagement (Tsai et al., 2008).

   **Autonomy**

   The goal that is most associated with the adolescent developmental period is autonomy. Autonomy is defined as the free will, choice or determination of an individual;
distinction from the rest. Fulfillment of student’s need for autonomy is related to their emotional engagement (Park et al., 2012).

When children have an internalized value of school, possibly from parent involvement, they become autonomously motivated. Students become intrinsically motivated for the enjoyment of mastery which is considered to be the highest form of motivation. As skills develop the academic challenges may become pleasurable (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

In some service learning projects students found the freedom to exercise autonomy to be stressful. To some this concept was simply unfamiliar. Instructors offered minimal structure and drove the project with a level of autonomy not likely experienced in a typical classroom setting (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

Autonomy support and structure are often thought of as independent from each other; a classroom either supports autonomy or it supports structure (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010). Jang, Reeve & Deci (2010) show how that school of thought is actually false. The best scenario for learning is when autonomy and structure are used together ((Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010).

One of the reasons why autonomy and structure are thought of as opposing each other is because individuals often confuse structure with control. Structure refers to providing students with the leadership and framework needed to investigate and maintain effort to achieve goals and learning objectives (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010). Control refers to demands, insistences, sanctions and rigid rules which are shown to be detrimental to learning rather than facilitative.

When teachers focus on students’ autonomous needs, such as students interests, personal goals, and preferences to guide classroom learning it supports student engagement providing interesting, hands on, relevant learning activities that are challenging and
meaningful learning goals. This type of classroom combined with teachers that provide high structure by communicating clear expectations, explicit directions and guidance helps keep students engaged and on task. Students that are engaged are more likely to manage problem behavior and avoid chaos during transitions (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010).

Autonomy-supportive teacher’s three main categories of instructional behavior are: nurturing inner motivational resources, relying on non-controlling informational language and acknowledge the students’ perspective and feelings (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010). When teachers nurture inner motivational resources they create opportunities for students to take initiative during activities by building instruction around students’ interests, preferences, personal goals, choice making, and a sense of challenge and curiosity rather than using reward and consequences, directives and deadlines (Pulfrey, Darnon & Butera, 2013). Relying on non-controlling informational language refers to the way students respond positively to explanatory rationales for requested tasks and information; flexible, as opposed to communicating through evaluative, controlling, pressuring or rigid ways. When teachers acknowledge students’ perspectives and feelings they show students that they value their perspectives in learning activities and accept students’ expression of negative affect as a potentially valid reaction to classroom demands, imposed structures and the presentation of uninteresting activities (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010).

Each of these aspects is important because research shows that autonomy-supportive teachers compared to controlling teachers display positive educational outcomes including increased classroom engagement. The reason students benefit so widely (engagement, conceptual understanding, higher grades, and psychological well-being) from having an autonomy-supportive teacher is because it supports students’ perceived internal locus of causality and sense of choice in their educational learning experiences (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010).
Teaching Topics in Context

Experience of a subject or topic enhances learning more so than mere exposure to knowledge, such as listening to a lecture or reading a textbook. Discovery learning is beneficial for students because they began to be excited about uncovering principles and ideas rather than being passive learners as the information is presented to them. When students are able to apply what they are learning in context in the real world they begin to see the value of education first hand (Nemec, 2012).

Adolescent students find it difficult to stand outside of themselves in general and so learning in context helps them critically examine their own assumptions, values and beliefs and the foundation and expectations in which they operate. Transformative learning refers to the dramatic change in where the students have a shift in perspective (Nemec, 2012). The ability to have one’s mind changed can be a powerful thing.

Today’s students have been socialized to expect memorization of discrete bits of knowledge and learning material that will be on standardized tests. Many of these learners lack the inclination and skill for deep analytical exploration as well as the ability to “stand outside themselves” (Nemec, 2012).

Lo (2011) discusses the gap between teaching and learning subject matter in context. The study showed that the interaction between students and teachers is essential. Some teachers may ask the student how they learn best and adapt their teaching style accordingly. The most effective way to encourage students is to ask stimulating questions and critical thinking discussion involving every student without forcing them to (Lo, 2011).

Case study learning and service learning help put topics in context. These methods yield particular educational benefits when compared to the more traditional “chalk and talk” lecture and discussion instructional model. Types of case learning engage students senses in multiple ways and encourage the active teaching and learning approach (Krain, 2010).
Summary

Student’s overall academic wellbeing is enhanced by being engaged in the learning experience, participating in class and developing a thrill of discovery. The most effective way of learning is in context, placing learning objectives within a real environment rather than having the students passively absorb the information by lectures and books and then being expected to be able to apply it (Burke, Marx & Lowenstein, 2012).

One of the primary goals of the adolescent period is autonomy. This sense of free will and choice in the classroom can help students feel in control of their future and increase their engagement (Park et al., 2012). Students tend to thrive when there is a balance of autonomy and structure. Structure provides the walls and parameters of learning, providing a safe place where students are set up to succeed. When that structure is combined with student autonomy, the students feel they have a choice and a voice in their learning environment and this increases engagement and academic success (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010).

Challenges in Today’s Schools

Multiple factors are said to contribute to problems in today’s schools. Some of these factors include lack of student engagement, autonomy in students and teachers, over focused on standardized testing and inconsistent parent involvement. Today’s students are challenged with many things – test scores, state wide standards, pressure at home, sports, fitting in and standing out all at the same time.

Lack of Student Engagement

Student disengagement from schooling has been considered one of the most pervasive problems in today’s schools, in particular high school students. Students who are engaged in learning are less likely to be at risk for underachievement and/or dropping out of school than those who are disengaged. When students are engaged in learning they are likely to achieve
higher grades and tend to enjoy school more than students who disengage (Park et al., 2012).

As students move through the educational system their levels of engagement tend to decrease suggesting that the most immediate and persisting issue in the school is not low achievement, but rather students that are disengaged in learning. It is harder to keep the attention of students as they move from childhood to adolescents. It can be more difficult to engage adolescent students in learning, but if one can facilitate student engagement the chances for real learning, not just memorization, are more likely to occur (Newmann, 1992).

Research repeatedly shows that students with low socioeconomic status (SES) are negatively linked to a wide range of indicators of child and adolescent wellbeing, including academic success. Lower income student tend to have less stable families, greater exposure to toxic environments and violence. Low socioeconomic status students are cognitively stimulated less than higher income students. This includes reading less, being read to less, experiencing less complex communication with parents, limited vocabulary and less access to technology resources such as laptops, internet, and Ipads (Scales et al., 2006).

In preschool even a slight increase in annual income was found to be associated with increased cognitive development; social skills, letter and shape recognition and vocabulary. As children are growing from one to three years old these skills are large contributors to school readiness. In elementary and middle school low socioeconomic status students are less involved in school activities and therefore they and their families tend to feel less connected to the school (Scales et al., 2006).

Students in poverty are twice as likely to attend schools with less-qualified and less-experienced teachers, especially schools where the majority of students are non-white. A disproportionate number of youth from low-income settings are students of color; roughly forty percent African American and Hispanic compared to less than twenty percent White youth. Low socioeconomic status students are often taught using drills, memorization and
other basic instructional methods that are not conducive to engagement or learning and they often suffer from generally lower expectations for their achievement (Scales et al., 2006).

**Overly Focused on Standardized Testing**

Over the past twenty years policymakers and practitioners have tried to raise levels of achievement and decrease traditional achievement gaps through several broad school reform approaches. Recently curriculum standards and its associated yardstick, standardized tests, have become a dominant force in American elementary and middle school education. States have scrambled to raise standards and require students to pass the statewide subject matter tests causing teachers to teach in isolation (Scales et al., 2006).

States have started to evaluable how schools are performing by issuing the schools “report cards”. The school year is being lengthened in some cases to accommodate tougher graduation requirements by the state standards. There has continued to be debate over whether the goal of providing high quality education that meets comprehensive developmental needs is being sacrificed because of the mandate to demonstrate adequacy on a narrowly conceived standardized achievement test (Scales et al., 2006).

This kind of rigorous mandated testing has resulted in a potential overemphasis on structured learning versus play in elementary students, contrary to the research on how to best promote early growth and positive learning abilities. The current standardized testing also fails to measure variables that enhance learning and would indicate whether a student will succeed in school and life. Experiential education, such as service-learning, may help contribute to academic achievement while also being developmentally responsive and improving achievement among low-income students (Scales et al., 2006).

**Inconsistent Parent Involvement**

Although students may receive support from teachers and peers, the role parents play in their child’s education is unique and essential. Evidence supports the idea that parent
involvement is a catalyst to children’s learning and their overall academic achievement. Parent involvement includes helping with homework, attending parent teacher conferences, volunteering in the school, presence at sporting events and other activities (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

The relationship children have with their parents is often the most fundamental and influential in their lives. Parents remain central even as students move into adolescents and their peers become more prominent. This is one of the reasons that it is important to have parents engaged in the students educational progression during their middle and high school years (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

Parent’s involvement increases student’s achievement through its influence on motivation. Student’s autonomous motivation has also been found to underlie the effect of parents’ involvement. Students may become motivated in school to show parents that they are responsible and to help gain their parents approval. This type of motivation increases the student’s engagement and thereby enhances their academic achievement (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

In some cases student’s motivation may come from a focus on trying to avoid punishment, withdrawal of privileges for poor grades or obtaining rewards, money for good grades from parents. This type of motivation focuses on circumventing guilt and anxiety and cultivating pride and self-worth (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

One reason that parent involvement is important is because it emphasizes to students the value of education. When parents dedicate their time to helping their children with homework or meeting with teachers they covey to the child that they believe school is important. As parents get more involved they provide support to their students through their academic endeavors. The stronger the relationship is between the student and their parent the more likely they are to be motivated by parent-oriented reasons (Cheung & Pomerantz,
Research has linked parent involvement to higher grades, students having a positive attitude towards school, and higher test scores. While immigrant parents highly value education, studies find that they are less likely to be involved in their student’s education and school. These parents are less likely to visit their child’s school, participate or attend events at the school, help with homework and talk to teachers or administrators (Turney & Kao, 2009).

There has been a misperception that immigrant parents do not care about their child’s education because of their lack of involvement or contact with the school. However, quite the opposite is true. Immigrant parents hold education in high regard and value their child receiving a quality education even more than United States born parents. Education is also highly valued among immigrant parents because parents may not have had the same opportunity in their native country (Turney & Kao, 2009).

Barriers to active parent’s involvement may include lack of formal education, low English language proficiency, lack of understanding of the school system and time constraints due to work and family responsibilities (Turney & Kao, 2009). This impacts their ability to help their students with homework. In Turney and Kao’s (2009) study they found that lower English language proficiency was linked to lower parental involvement and a barrier to being involved at their child’s school and communicating with teachers and staff. They may feel embarrassed of their language skills making it uncomfortable to participate in their child’s academic life (2009).

Since school systems differ around the world immigrant parents may be unfamiliar with how the United States school system works. In some cultures parental involvement at school is not expected and may even be considered an interference to their education or disrespectful. Thus some parents might not realize they have the choice or opportunity to be involved (Turney & Kao, 2009).
It is possible that immigrant parents may be struggling to fulfill basic living needs and adjusting to the United States themselves. This could limit the amount of time they would be able to be fully engaged in their student’s school (Turney & Kao, 2009). School counselors play an important role in finding ways to engage immigrant parents and working with this potential hurdles.

Summary

Schools today have shifted to a major focus on standardized testing. Standardized testing was developed to illustrate high standards on achievement, detailed feedback to students, parents and teachers and a consistent measure of reliable comparison of outcomes across all test taking students. While the initial idea came from a desire to help students, it seems that schools, districts and states have shifted to become fixed on the results. This had created the effect of high-stakes testing on student, teacher and administrator motivation (Phelps, 2005). This type of teaching does not allow for teacher or student autonomy in the classroom and decreases student engagement.

Parental influence as continued to show as one of the most important factors in a student’s life and academic well-being. By parents being involved it shows the students that they value education and in turn motivates students (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Immigrant parents can often feel insecure about being involved at the school due to factors such as language and cultural barriers, lack of understanding the United States school systems and lack of time or resources to attend school activities.

Service-Learning

Service learning is defined as a teaching methodology where students learn through active participation through organized services that meet the needs of a community, help foster civic responsibility and is coordinated with a school or institute of higher education or community service program. It is integrated to enhance the core academic curriculum of the
student and provides structured time for student to reflect on the service experience. An example of service learning would be high school students partnering with the U.S. Forest Service to conduct an in-depth study of a watershed as a part of their science curriculum (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

Community service, on the other hand, is defined as opportunities for youth to volunteer and provide services that will benefit the community. The primary purpose is to enhance the student’s sense of community engagement and volunteerism (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008). An example of community service would be picking up trash on the side of the road.

Scholars suggest that student centered participation activities, such as service learning projects, provide meaningful to learning experiences and can be empowering and motivational for students. Prevailing policies and practices have begun to suppress teacher’s autonomy in the classroom, leaving students subject to scripted programs, standardized tests and passive learning. These forms of teaching do not support critical thinking or foster a joy for learning (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

Research indicates that service-learning is positively linked to the impact on student’s civic and academic engagement as well as achievement. Service-learning opportunities help students began to develop their role as active members in society who make a difference. It is also a crucial place for student to learn the ethic of service which prompts individuals to assist one another being willing to sacrifice a portion of their time and effort for the welfare of a greater good (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

According to Spring, Grimm & Dietz (2008) while sixty-eight percent of K-12 school principals report that their students are involved in a community service activity recognized by the schools a federally funded study shows that only twenty-four percent are involve in service-learning. Possible explanations for this may be because principals are more likely to
value a service or program that promotes civic behaviors rather than in fostering academic engagement. Schools are faced with budget constraints and state curriculum requirements. Schools may be likely to place service activities outside of the curriculum and use other methods in the classroom (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

Elementary schools are less likely than secondary schools to adapt to service learning in the classroom. Over half of elementary principals who report no service learning activities say because they believe the students are too young (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

Roughly twenty percent of K-12 principals report that their school district has a policy that encourages teachers to integrate service-learning into their curriculum. More than a quarter do not know if their district has a policy on it or not. The likelihood that a principal will implement service learning in their school increases by three times the amount when they know there is a district-level policy that supports it (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

Low-income areas are significantly less likely to have service learning activities than other schools. However, that gap has decreased since 1999. Reasons for this include lack of time, low-income areas having a harder time to find qualified staff, resources and funding to maintain daily demands (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

Service learning field experiences encourage students to interact across racial, cultural, geographic or socioeconomic status to enhance their knowledge. Course instructors can select a variety of learning opportunities such as working with neighboring schools or community organizations to engage people who are culturally/linguistically diverse, homeless, and elderly or in some type of need of assistance (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

In order for students to be active in the learning process they must be given opportunities to participate in their own learning rather than being passive recipients to the experiences around them. Service learning projects provide this type of opportunity for students. They are able to take an active role in their learning; addressing problems posed in
the classroom or the larger society (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

The learning environment provided by service learning projects is built on a student-centered, teacher directed model. This type of learning balances student and teacher voice. Students and teachers are able to investigate, analyze, critique, contemplate and communicate on subjects in an open manner that cultivates learning. This type of student empowerment and dialogue gives the illusion of equality while leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

Some schools refer to service learning projects or requirements as “capstone” projects. Capstone projects connect theoretical and conceptual learning in the classroom with real world practice while demonstrating achievement of competencies. It requires that students apply the tools they’ve learned while working and serving the community. The service experience supports the learning objectives and competencies as it relates to leadership, broadened understanding of community life and civic responsibility (Tapp & Macke, 2011).

Several empirical studies found that students involved in service learning or capstone projects reported improved problem-solving skills, greater levels of self-confidence and increased awareness of the power of collective action. Studies also found that student involvement in these projects also resulted in an improved understanding an integration of social justice, importance of human relationships, integrity and service (Tapp & Macke, 2011).

Deal and Peterson (2009) have a quote that relates to service learning “the web of significance in which we are all suspended.” Service learning is really about creating this school-wide web of personal interactions and communication. Each person is significant and has many things to offer, but sometimes can feel lost in the crowd at a large school. Service learning can be in place to cast out a web and bring everyone in together (Deal & Peterson,
**Adlerian Perspective**

Service learning or Capstone projects incorporate three core Adlerian principals: belonging and contributing, social interest and cooperation versus competition.

**Belonging and Contributing**

The main Adlerian concept I have observed while working in schools is the need for belonging and contributing. Students that have both of these things are among the highest achieving, happiest students. Misbehaving students are often a result of discouragement or feelings of inferiority which come when they do not feel a sense of belonging or contributing. These feelings may cause them to disengage in school, at home or with friends. Those same students show great improvement once belonging and contributing is increased (Adler, 1927).

Service Learning opportunities provide students with a sense of belonging and contributing which are two factors that Adler believed are key to student’s overall wellbeing (Corey, 2009). During service learning, students have an opportunity to be part of a group, working with other students and adults giving them a feeling that they have a place where they belong. By working together towards a goal and hopefully having the thrill of discovery students feel like they are contributing to the group and their overall education, even if they may not realize it.

Galassi and Akos (2007) school-wide positive behavior support is an evidence based intervention that creates a web of support that starts from the very first day of the freshmen year and goes through graduation day. This feeling of community and belonging is another concept Galassi and Akos (2007) focused on. This is also an Adlerian way of thinking. Increase belonging and increase contributing along with social interest and the students will be in the best position for a high achieving high school experience (Adler, 1927)
Social Interest

Alfred Adler was a huge supporter of people working together in cooperation for the greater good of society. His theory emphasizes the importance of social interest and cooperation (Overholser, 2010). His thoughts regarding social interest parallel some of the core benefits that service learning projects provide in the schools.

The phrase that clearly expresses social interest is: “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another” (Griffith & Powers, 2007). The idea that this flame of encouragement is used to ignite others wick is really what social interest is all about; working for the good of others. Not only does society benefit, but individuals themselves increase their optimal mental health when they work together with others in a central role of social functioning (Overholser, 2010).

Adler believed that children should never have done for them what they can do for themselves. Parents or teachers that hover over a child or do things for them that they are capable of themselves rob the student of fulfilling any of the takes or functions they could fulfill on their own (Adler, 1935a). Service learning projects provide students to be able to be actively engaged and learn on their own. Even if the students, by definition, “fails” it is still a learning opportunity and an experience that can help shape the student as much or even more so than if they try and succeed.

In order to help cultivate social interest in today’s youth Alfred Adler thought that it is important to instill in early life the idea of a community and the significance of it (Adler, 1937). He said that social interest will develop in accordance with the individual’s style of self. The style of self arises in students out of their creative power and the way they perceive the world and what they regard the meaning of success to be (Adler, 1957).

Adler (1957) makes a bold claim that all problems of life merge into three social problems: friendships, work and sexual love and that all of these problems can be solved
adequately only by having a certain degree of social interest. He said that all failures (problem children, alcohol and substance abuse, psychotics, criminals, etc.) are failures because they lack the feeling of social interest. Individuals who are struggling do so because they are approaching the problems of friendship, work and sex with the confidence that those issues can be solved through cooperation (Adler, 1931).

One of the purposes of service learning projects is to involve teachers and students in service, not as charity, but as a vehicle for social change and the betterment of all. Service learning projects hold a promise of providing an authentic learning experience with knowledge and skills that enable students and teacher to contribute actively in the transformation of their community (Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012).

In a study done by Lemberger & Nash (2008) they analyzed data that supported a hypothesis that American School Counselor’s Association members and possibly the entire school counseling profession is influenced by a sense of social interest. In the study school counselors overwhelmingly reported a desire to make a positive impact in the lives of students. This motivation to connect with cultural, personal and social-emotive needs of students can be likened to Alder’s social interest – to contribute to health and responsive communities. The school counselor therefore serves as a metaphoric manifestation of social interest in the school community by virtue of the nurturing and accommodating design of their services. The results from this study seemed to indicate that school counselors are drawn to the field because of values or personal histories that correspond to Adler’s spirit of social interest (Lemberger & Nash, 2008).

**Cooperation Verses Competition**

Today’s students seem to have an inordinate preoccupation with competition and superiority; class rank, most valuable player, prom king and queen. That mindset, however, is counterintuitive to the essential skill of collaboration that leads to success beyond high
school. Collaborating with other students and teachers to create something requires strong communication skills, basic verbal and written skills as well as the ability to be open minded (2012). This idea is based on the notion that the potential for a group exceeds one individual’s contribution, essentially Aristotle’s quote “the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Tucker, 2012).

Adler (1927, p. 119) said that “a person who does not join with others, who does not have a true social feeling, is the one who stops, hesitates, fights, escapes when he comes to a new situation… striving for superiority and being lacking in courage they turn from the useful side of life to the useless side”. As previously stated Adler (1931) believes that cooperation is the key to solving all problems in life emerging from the three social problems of friendship, work and sexual love.

Striving for superiority and social interest are innate parts of our human nature (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). Adler (1931) said that we should never call anything worthwhile unless it is worthwhile to all of mankind. He said that if people expect something from others without giving anything to them they are nothing more than objects (Adler, 1935b).

Service learning projects provide an atmosphere where students are able to work together in cooperation. They are allowed to put aside any form of competition and immerse themselves into society as an equal member along with their peers. Students can have a genuine interest in someone other than themselves and that will increase their own mental health and wellbeing (Adler, 1931).

This type of collaboration also requires student engagement because students need to be actively engaged in the learning process in order to work together as a team. This might be a new role for some student, who are used to sitting on the sidelines when it comes to projects or sitting quietly in class passively consuming information (Tucker, 2012). Collaboration provides these students the opportunity to stretch and grow beyond their comfort level.
Adler (1935a) said that only the individual who is socially prepared for cooperation can solve the social problems that are going to emerge in life. If individuals have not been cooperative, have not been interested in helping others, have made no contributions to the whole than their lives have been futile and they will disappear and leave no trace behind (Adler, 1976). The only worthwhile achievements of man are those which are socially useful (Adler, 1928).

Technology and online collaboration is also important in today’s fast moving global business world. Learning to collaborate with someone who may live or work on opposite sides of the globe can prove highly beneficial for students in understanding communication and technology. Online discussions and written communication teach students how to correspond in a respectful, supportive and substantive way. Sometimes educators assume that students are digital natives, because they spend so much time on social media sites, e-mailing and texting, but they rarely see the impacts of their words first hand. In order to be prepared for our rapidly evolving global economy it is critical that students learn to effectively communicate orally, in writing, in person and online (Tucker, 2012).

School Counseling Implications

What is Still Needed?

The problems in today’s schools remain; students who are disengaged in learning, inconsistent parent involvement, in particular immigrant parents and schools being overly focused on standardized tests.

Counselors can play an important role in engaging parents, especially immigrant parents by creating a welcoming environment. It is important for teachers and other school staff to develop positive relationships with parents. Immigrant parents will feel more connected and welcomed at their school if they know and trust someone at the school. Making an effort to communicate with parents will go a long way (Sobel & Kugler, 2007).
Showing interest in diverse experiences of students and their families helps foster a healthy relationship. Parents and students are often interested in sharing their personal experiences and this gives staff an opportunity to build their own awareness and understanding of the diverse backgrounds of their student population. It is especially important for immigrant parents who lack proficiency in the English language because often they feel their voices will not be heard (Sobel & Kugler, 2007).

Why is it Not Being Done?

Even though a majority of schools continue to believe that the public education system has a responsibility to promote youth awareness and value being an active citizen, most schools look to community service to fill this responsibility. Schools without service-learning have stated reasons such as; lack of funding and state curriculum requirements not allowing time for it. Since both community service and service-learning are viewed as beneficial in fostering students civic and social participation it would be reasonable to conclude that when faced with budget cuts and state curriculum requirements service-learning programs might be discontinued while community service activities remains supported (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

Despite the current research for the benefits of service-learning the field lacks the rigorous evidence that would compellingly demonstrate to principals the academic benefits of service-learning. Without this evidence it would be a challenge to convince teachers and principals to introduce service-learning to the curriculum, especially if there is no district policy that supports it (Spring, Grimm & Dietz, 2008).

In order to achieve transformative learning through service learning projects time must be set aside by teachers and students for exploration and dialogue (Nemec, 2012). The learning experience may extend over days, weeks or months. Teachers have to make sure their students are prepared to pass the standardized tests and finish the curriculum in place for
the school year. Those demands may have some teachers strapped for time which would
make a service learning project that would extend over days, weeks or months out of the
question.

**Implications for School Counselors**

As a school counselor two of the most important things to do for students is
courage them and be advocates for them as well as teach them how to advocate for
themselves (Galassi & Akos, 2007). Since service learning projects are shown to increase
students engagement and parent involvement which in turn increase grades, test scores,
internal motivation and overall wellbeing it seems that school counselors should play a role in
advocating for more service learning opportunities for students.

School counselors can help organize and promote capstone and service learning
projects and provide research and evaluations to determine the success of the programs.
Some schools already have capstone or service learning as part of their graduation
requirements and school curriculum. School counselors, educators and other administrative
staff can analyze the data and benefits from these programs. School counselors could also
help facilitate a trial service learning opportunity to help determine the potential benefits to
the students.

Since parental involvement is very influential for students of all backgrounds,
counselors may want to focus on ways to connect parents and school staff to come together
for the best interest of the students (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Counselors can help
facilitate open house nights for parents, especially immigrant parents that may feel
disconnected or unfamiliar with the school system in the states. Another idea is to have a
language liaison for immigrant parents to help them feel more comfortable and able to be
heard and understood (Turney & Kao, 2009).

Adler (1929) believed in the power of encouragement for students and adults. He
thought that counselors should always try to increase an individual’s courage to meet the problems in their lives (Adler, 1929). Adler (1956) said that we should never deviate from the path of encouragement. School counselors are no exception. A school counselor should always work from a child’s strengths and encourage them to overcome the challenges set out before them.

As a new school counselor it could be overwhelming to think of initiating a school wide program such as service learning. It can be a lot to take on, especially in the early stages of one’s career. Some other alternatives may include starting with a small group of students, delegating leadership and making sure to have effective ways to measure the progress of the program.

Starting out, it may be easier to target a handful of students identified as “at risk” to be part of the service learning projects. Having a smaller group might be easier to manage. If the school counselor does not have the time to be fully involved in the service learning project they can team up or find other staff in the building that share the same passion as they do and are on board with the idea that service learning would positively impact the students and in turn the school.

Lastly, it is always a good idea to be able to measure the progress of a group in order to provide results to others; principal, other administrative staff, parents, outside agencies. For example, if the counselor started out a service learning project with five to ten students that were struggling with truancy and matched them with other adults, mentors or even their friends studies show that they are more likely to show up to school. Attendance is an easy thing to measure and getting students to school is the first step in helping them in their education. Principals of urban, high-poverty, or majority nonwhite schools are more likely to judge service-learning impact on attendance to be “very positive” (Scales et al., 2006).

Since school counselors have a wide range of community resources and networking
skills it is only fitting that they play a leadership role in the service learning projects. This does not meant that they have to carry the weight of the project on their shoulders, but rather that they are able to research community needs or be more connected than others. School counselors could also have individuals from the community come into the schools or again on a smaller scale, classrooms, as guest speakers. Student could then have a voice in choosing which topic or individual they felt most connected to and would be most likely to be involved in if it were offered as a service learning opportunity.

Another program that is popping up in schools is called BestPrep. This organization is designed to connect students with individuals in the workforce. Counselors or teachers can partner with this organization to connect any population of students (from at risk to high achieving advanced placement) with a company and their employees to help mentor and foster relationships through e-mail as well as in person (Nelson, 2013).

BestPrep can be done by semester or quarter connecting students with working employees through weekly e-mail. After about a month of exchanging e-mails the students venture to the company’s workplace to meet their e-mentor for lunch, interact with ice breaker activities and take a tour of the workplace. At the end of the celebration students are able to have the opportunity to stand up and speak to the group on what the program has meant to them.

This program helps connect students to a volunteer adult that can help answer student’s question on their job, how they got there and what it takes to be successful after high school. It incorporates written communication via e-mail which is becoming increasingly important in the advancing technological world (Tucker, 2012). It also challenges students with their social skills when meeting their mentor for the first time (shaking hands, eye contact and taking turns talking). Students also have an opportunity to speak publicly in front of their peers and as well as a group of educated adults.
The students, teachers and employees have continued to rate this program highly beneficial in survey’s conducted after the mentorship has ended (Nelson, 2013). The survey consists of questions such as: Did you feel this mentorship helped you have a better understanding of what it’s like to have a full time job? Did you learn something from your e-mentor about what it takes to find a job? Do you have an increased desire in pursuing secondary education after discussing the importance with your e-mentor?

Written reflections after meetings help the school and the organization collect data analysis (Nelson, 2013). Through surveys and forms the teachers are able to see what have been successful and less successful aspects of their interactions. Students and teachers are able to identify the expectations, how they responded to the expectations, what barriers they encountered as they tried to respond to expectations and how they would have to grow or change in order to meet the expectations in the future (Lawrence & Butler, 2010).

**Final Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that contribute to problems in today’s schools, identify potential solutions and the role that school counselors play in all of it. Key factors that were looked at in depth included lack of student engagement, autonomy in students, teachers and classrooms, schools being over focused on standardized testing and inconsistent parent involvement.

The research indicated that student’s grades, internal motivation and overall wellbeing was increased when students were more engaged in the learning experience. Service learning opportunities have been shown to provide a type of atmosphere where student engagement is increased and a thrill of learning and discovery is instilled. During service learning opportunities the students have a chance to display a sense of autonomy while remaining in a structured learning environment.

Students often ask how learning a certain topic applies to their lives or their future.
Service learning projects help take topics that are taught in the classroom and put them into real life situations and contexts so that students are able to relate better. This type of learning promotes critical thinking skills rather than just memorization, learning chapter material for a test or meeting standardized testing criteria. It also helps shift the focus from how does this benefit me to how does this benefit everyone (Lawrence & Butler, 2010).

Service learning projects often have a positive impact on student’s understanding of the complexities of the field and their ability to problem solve and think critically. These experiences have been identified as ways to help candidates make personal connections with people unlike themselves, adult mentors and disenfranchised communities, which align with the goals of multicultural education (Lawrence & Butler, 2010).

Parents play a role as the most influential person in the majority of student’s lives making it vital that parents are involved in their child’s learning experience (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Counselors can help provide opportunities for parents to be more involved at the school or host parent nights to provide more information to parents, especially immigrant parents, minority parents or English language learning parents that may be hesitant to reach out on their own for additional support for their students.

Parent involvement could potentially increase with service learning projects. Parents could be invited to participate in the project together with their students or teachers. This type of activity would help give the parents a sense of belonging and help them feel as if they are more of a part of their child’s academic life. Parents may also be involved in the community and know of places that would allow service learning opportunities for students. This type of connection could be of great help to teachers or other staff trying to coordinate service learning events.

Service learning projects incorporate many Adlerian principles including the power of encouragement, promoting social interest, the importance of belonging and contributing and
cooperation over competition. When students work together in a cooperative manner for the good of a community Adler believed it increased mental health and wellbeing (Overholser, 2010). When students work together and discover a thrill for learning they develop a sense of belonging and contributing as a byproduct.
References


the 119th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association,
Washington, DC.


