

Developing a Social Justice Professional Identity: Academic Service Learning in the Roles and Functions Course

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Abstract: There is little guidance in the literature regarding how to develop a social justice professional identity of preservice school psychologists. The purpose of this manuscript is to begin to answer this question: How can a social justice professional identity framework be used to infuse social justice into a school psychology course for preservice school psychologists? To answer this question, this manuscript (a) describes the course design to illustrate how a social justice professional identity framework combined with experiential learning components was used to infuse social justice themes into the introduction to school psychology course for preservice school psychologists; and, (b) presents the findings of the course's evaluation efforts using an embedded case study. The framework based on research was used to design the course, which specifically included multiple opportunities for self-reflection and the practical experience of service learning (SL). Students perceived SL positively, that it influenced learning outcomes and was beneficial to themselves and profession. The community partner perceived the relationship as helpful and useful.

Keywords: social justice professional identity, preservice school psychologists, course design, roles and functions course

Social justice is a significant contemporary issue in school psychology (Shriberg & Clinton, 2016), as social justice goals have been recently adopted by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and incorporated in the strategic plan of the American Psychological Association (APA). The NASP definition of social justice states:

Social justice is both a process and a goal that requires action. School psychologists work to ensure the protection of the educational rights, opportunities, and well-being of all children, especially those whose voices have been muted, identities obscured, or needs ignored. Social justice requires promoting non-discriminatory practices and the empowerment of families and communities. School psychologists enact social justice through culturally responsive professional practice and advocacy to create schools, communities, and systems that ensure equity and fairness for all children and youth [Adopted by the NASP Board of Directors, April 2017] (NASP, n.d.).

A key issue in this agenda is to infuse social justice into the preservice training of school psychologists (Moy et al., 2014). More specifically, incorporating social justice into the professional identity of school psychologists-in-training may be particularly useful. However, there is little guidance in the literature regarding how to develop a social justice professional identity of preservice school psychologists. Doing so may have significant effects on school psychology practice by enhancing the motivation to practice in socially just ways for example (Beijaard et al., 2004;

Moy et al., 2014; Scherer & Lau, 2016).

The purpose of this manuscript is to begin to answer, how can a social justice professional identity framework be used to infuse social justice into a school psychology course for preservice school psychologists? To answer this question, (a) the course design is described to illustrate how a social justice professional identity framework combined with experiential learning components was used to infuse social justice themes into the introduction to school psychology course for preservice school psychologists; and, (b) present the findings of the course's evaluation efforts.

Professional Identity

As an aspect of one's personal identity, professional identity can be defined as the beliefs, values, and commitments one holds about being part of a particular profession (e.g., school psychologist) (Beijaard et al., 2004; Klaczynski & Lavalley, 2005). There are four defining features of professional identity that have been identified empirically. Professional identity is an ongoing, dynamic process of interpretation of one's professional experiences; it includes both person and context; it includes sub-identities (e.g., school psychologist who does counseling); and, it answers not only, "Who am I?," but, "Who do I want to become?" (Beijaard et al., 2004; Scherer & Lau, 2016; Woo et al., 2014).

Professional Identity in School Psychology

Interestingly, while the literature on the professional identity of school psychology is small, it has had

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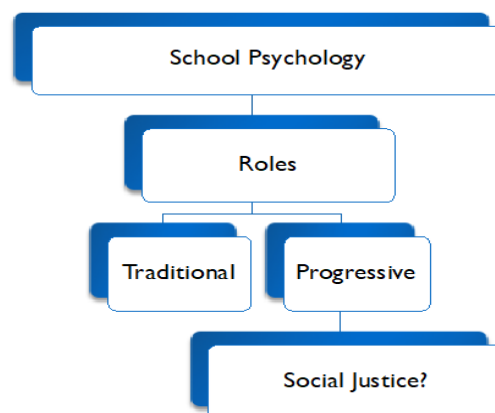
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a history dating back to the 1960s (Bardon, 1968). Bardon was particularly curious about professional identity as he revisited the topic in 1976 and, yet again, in 1983. Bardon's focus was in figuring out the role of school psychology, which then led to a discussion about the profession's transition over the years to a more defined role, and later, the conversation continued about explicit roles, future trends, and graduate training (Bardon, 1968; Bardon, 1976; Bardon, 1983). While the term 'social justice' is missing from Bardon's literature, he does mention a school psychologist's commitment to respond to the needs of the world. For example, he says, "Gradually, and to many of us imperceptibly, we school psychologists found ourselves in a larger world, and the problems of this world become ours" (Bardon, 1968, p. 187). Then, later he mentions that "the most impressive trend in school psychology is the degree to which practice has been influenced and shaped by sociopolitical factors" (Bardon, 1976, p. 788). These snapshots show the history of complexities within our profession and the budding ideas that hint at a social justice professional identity.

Since then, most of the literature on the professional identity of school psychology discusses various roles and functions of school psychologists arguing for school psychologists to expand their views of themselves to incorporate ecological systems change (Gutkin & Conoley, 1990) or health care practice to name a few (Nastasi, 2000; Reynolds, 2011). Indeed, professional identity in school psychology is important to the field, as there have been, and continue to be, special issues on the topic and entire conferences dedicated to encourage the development of school psychology's professional identity to be more responsive to future needs (e.g., Harrison, 2019; Jarmuz-Smith et al., 2013; Song et al., 2019). Integrating social justice into this traditional view of professional identity is depicted in Figure 1 in which social justice is simply an add-on to other roles and functions. Bruss and Kopala (1993) provide research that emphasizes a psychologist's graduate training as an appropriate time and space for them to develop their professional identity. It is suggested that faculty from graduate training programs are able to help direct and facilitate this development. Although the importance of the environment and experience

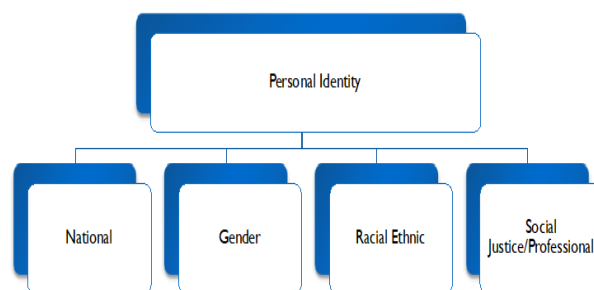
has been shown to influence professional identity (Short & Rosenthal, 1995; Solari, 2017), specifics on exactly how to integrate this into pre-service training is not discussed. This is a gap in the literature on school psychology training. Indeed, no articles define professional identity as a personal identity.

Figure 1
Traditional Professional Identity



This gap in the literature is rather surprising given the extensive literature on professional identity development in other professions in which professional identity is viewed as part of one's personal identity (see Figure 2; e.g., Beijaard et al., 2004; Klaczyński & Lavalley, 2005).

Figure 2
Social Justice Professional Identity as Part of Personal Identity



Note. Figure 2 modeled from Beijaard et al., 2004 and Klaczyński & Lavalley, 2005

Liddell and colleagues (2014, p. 81) assert that student affairs graduate programs which emphasize collaborative work norms, common learning goals, and experiential learning (i.e., practicum) significantly contribute to the development of professional identities in students. Meanwhile, a study found that counselor education training programs can foster

professional identity and community among students through the use of technology-based collaborative activities (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2013, p. 568). No studies have examined professional identity development using academic service learning (SL) as the experiential learning component of a course. Service learning is defined as a pedagogical tool that integrates academic knowledge and meaningful community service to enrich the learning experience and support the community in tangible ways (Kaye, 2010).

In sum, while professional identity development is important to the field of school psychology, more work needs to be done on this topic. More specifically, there is a lack of work that conceptualizes professional identity as part of one's personal identity and how to promote a professional identity in graduate training. Finally, there is little work on how to promote a social justice professional identity in graduate training.

To address these limitations in the literature, as the first study to address this gap, an exploratory study was conducted to begin answering the question, how a social justice professional identity framework can be used to infuse social justice into a school psychology course for preservice school psychologists? An embedded case study (Yin, 2015) was conducted to (a) describe the course design illustrating how a social justice professional identity framework, combined with experiential learning components, was used to infuse social justice themes into the introduction to school psychology course for preservice school psychologists; and, (b) present the findings of the course's evaluation efforts.

Course Design

School psychology training programs are required to teach a class that is an “introduction to the field” incorporating history and systems, roles and functions, and professional issues (NASP, 2010), which is typically taught in the beginning of the training sequence (hereafter referred to as “Roles and Functions”). The Roles and Functions course is the identified single case in this study.

Social Justice Professional Identity Framework

The course was designed according to a model of social justice professional identity (SJPI) formation,

which was based on the definition and four defining features of professional identity discussed previously (Beijaard et al., 2004; Klaczynski & Lavalley, 2005; Scherer & Lau, 2016; Woo et al., 2014). A SJPI is defined as the social justice beliefs, values, and commitments one holds about being part of a particular profession, (i.e., school psychologist). Figure 3 depicts this model and Figure 4 (next page) shows how to form a social justice professional identity.

Figure 3

Social Justice Professional Identity Framework

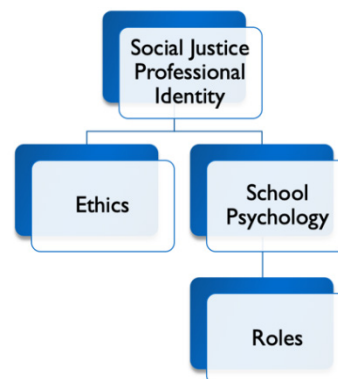


Figure 4

How to Promote a Social Justice Professional Identity in the Classroom



Note. Based on Beijaard et al., 2004

The model has four components and hypothesizes that if a course (a) includes professional education and social justice knowledge, (b) provides opportunities for reflection and consideration of the content's relevance, (c) allows for expression and integration of material that is personally relevant knowledge, and (d) gives opportunities for social justice action;

then, a social justice professional identity is more likely to be formed.

Course Activities

A variety of course reading materials targeted both professional education about school psychology and social justice knowledge, totaling 21 readings (i.e., one book on social justice in school psychology, another book on a social justice school reform initiative, ten articles on school psychology knowledge, and eight articles on social justice in school psychology). A variety of reflections (written, small group, and whole-class) provided students with opportunities to think on the material, the relevance of the content, and for expression and integration of material that is personally relevant knowledge.

Small group and whole-class reflections occurred in weeks one, four, and seven during which students were asked to answer how the information they were learning was relevant to school psychology and families, and whether they thought it was relevant to their own lives and future practice as school psychologists. A written assignment further required students to consider the course content's relevance and integration of material that was personally relevant called the "Philosophy of School Psychology" paper in which they answered these questions: Who am I and Why do I want to become a school psychologist? How will I practice as a school psychologist, and why? What is your vision of school psychology practice in the future?

Academic Service Learning (SL) Project

Students were required to complete an SL project that consisted of a minimum of four hours at an urban Head Start program assist with observations, two written reflections, a community-based research (needs assessment) project, and feedback to community. The needs assessment was developed collaboratively with the community partner and consisted of these components:

1. Identifying a need through collaboration with community. Students answered these questions to identify the need: How can Head Start teachers best support their children? Who is their community? What is their community? Who are their teachers? What is their organization (mission, resources, challenges)?
2. Researching the need to identify potential empirically supported practices.
3. "Something Useful" creating a concrete product that the community can use the next day in their class based on their findings from the previous steps.

Course Evaluation

Course evaluation efforts were conducted as part of the embedded single case design study (Yin, 2015). Students as an aggregate and the community partner were the units of analysis and provide depth of understanding to the primary research question: How can a SJPI framework be used to infuse social justice into a school psychology course for preservice school psychologists? These additional exploratory action research questions were these: What are the class' perceptions about the service learning project? What are the community's perceptions of the service learning project?

Class Participants

There were 23 students in the course (96% female). They were all first-year students and consented to participate in the course evaluation. The study obtained approval by the university's institutional review board.

Measures and Procedures

Multiple data sources were collected to provide a breadth and depth of understanding. First, a grading rubric item, "social justice and ethics are integrated throughout the paper," for the Philosophy of School Psychology paper was used to assess the extent to which social justice was integral into their philosophy and vision of school psychology. Second, a focus group interview was conducted on the last day of class. Volunteers were asked by a neutral faculty member (i.e., not the instructor) to participate in a focus group interview that lasted 37 minutes. The course instructor was blind to the participants. Four students volunteered to participate. The focus group questions were these: What were the top beneficial outcomes of your service learning, both either for you or for the community? Was the service learning project effective for you in learning about social justice in school psychology, and if yes could you describe how that occurred? What can the role of a

school psychologist be, in terms of social justice? How did the service learning project shape your sense of professional identity as a school psychologist in training? If you were to give advice to a prospective student of school psychology about taking a course with or without service learning, what would you say to that student? Anything else that you would like to add that I haven't asked about? The transcriptions were transcribed by a research assistant who was outside of the department.

Third, the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991) was administered in the beginning of the term and at the end. It is a nine-item scale on a seven-point Likert (strongly disagree to strongly agree) that assesses the degree to which a person believes that the world is just (e.g., "People get what they deserve."). This scale has been used widely and has good psychometric properties (i.e., coefficient alpha = .80, established validity) (Lipkus, 1991). Fourth, stakeholder responses were collected via survey.

Findings

First, as part of the overall course evaluation of student learning, the instructor graded the "Philosophy of School Psychology" paper using the assignment grading rubric. One component of the rubric is "social justice integration" that expected students to integrate social justice in the paper on a scale of one to ten. The findings were that 100% of the students scored an eight or higher out of ten indicating proficient to mastery levels of social justice knowledge and integration into their philosophy and vision of the field.

Focus Group

There were three experienced independent coders of the transcripts: one faculty member and two advanced graduate students. Initial independent readings and code generation occurred. Then the coders met for discussion. They followed a recursive process until full agreement was reached on codes and themes (Creswell, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Five themes were identified in relation to the service learning in the course and the relation between social justice and school psychology:

Awareness of School Psychology(ists) Role and Functions Related to Social Justice. The data reviewed suggested that students' awareness of the

roles and functions of school psychologists were related to social justice. For example, a student believed that school psychology and social justice are essentially the same:

I mean I think school psychology is really sort of like social justice in practice, cause I mean, that's basically our job as school psychologists, to make sure that all kids have equal access to a good education, which, I mean I think is a huge part of social justice, so, there's a really strong relationship between the two.

Positive Emotional Response. The data reviewed suggested that students experienced positive emotional responses from engaging in service learning. Students reported on the impact of their strong feelings:

Just physically being in the classroom and doing observations was very powerful for me because it allowed me to start to imagine what my career will be like, because this is something that's going to be a huge part of my professional practice, is doing observations and assessments, and so, it was, it was very, very powerful for me. It felt like the beginning of something. And it really, like, it does, it like lights your fire, because, like, gosh, can you imagine just having to wait until your second year to go into a classroom and do an observation or a shadowing assignment? Which was another thing we did for this course, and it was, it was so important. For me, it got me- it, I, I, I was also made very passionate about this, my career. Not like I wasn't before, but even more so.

Knowledge Gained. The data reviewed suggested that students gained unique and in-depth knowledge from the service learning. Students reported what and how they learned:

Yeah, it really drives things home, like, we were, I know, one thing that it really drove home for me is we were talking about, a, implementing change and having to do it, you know, taking small steps, and this really, a, this really drove that home for me.

[Another student said,] It's a first-hand experience of systematic change over time, to kind of introduce you to the field, and, just, a, it'll make the course easier because the first-hand experience makes you understand it on a totally different level. I think all the papers were easier to write, probably, having that experience.

Collaborative Action. The data reviewed suggested that the service learning gave students a tangible experience of collaborative action with a community partner. A student reported this insight:

...but then also we were able to provide the community with a sustainable resource. And I think also, a, this particular service learning, um, included a lot of aspects that our career is gonna, we're gonna deal with as school psychologists. You know, we had to deal with collaboration and observation and, a, working as a group and looking out into the community for different

resources, which is all stuff that we're gonna have to be doing so, um, getting that experience in a little bit of a different way during our first quarter, I think is something that was really useful.

Service Learning and How It Was Done (or Taught). The data reviewed suggested that more service learning experiences should be integrated into the university curriculum and especially a university that purports to have a social justice mission. For example, a student reported

Um, I just think that it's really important that service learning be done in as many classrooms, or, excuse me, in as many classes as possible because [university] has such a consorted mission for social justice, and I think it just really, um, you know you can talk about social justice in the class and how it pertains to the topic, but I think actually doing it and integrating it into your coursework is such a natural fit for this university, um, that I really hope that it's replicated in more classes.

The class means of the Belief in a Just World scale showed a decreasing trend from pre-and-post measurements (2.8; $SD = 1.2$ to 2.6; $SD = 1.13$), respectively). Although not part of the main finding, for exploratory purposes, an interesting finding was revealed on one item on the scale, "People with misfortune have brought it on themselves," showed an increase in the percentage of the class that "strongly disagreed" with this statement from pre-post measurement (37% to 60% respectively). This indicates that after participating in the course, a higher percentage of students disagree with the statement that "People with misfortune have brought it on themselves."

Finally, stakeholder responses were gathered. Feedback from the community partner was primarily gathered on the last day of class during which the students presented their service learning projects to the Director of the preschool, a staff member, and a teacher. The feedback was positive during the presentations and it was reported that several of the "something useful" tools were being implemented or would be implemented at the level of the organization (e.g., brochures on the Somali culture would be used for all teacher and staff orientations). Student responses were also positive in that several voluntarily presented their service learning projects at a university conference. One student reported in course evaluations that the course, "It changed my life." Teaching evaluations for the course were quite high and exceeded a 4.0 on a 5.0 scale for the overall course, which was an

increase from the previous year.

Discussion

How can a social justice professional identity framework be used to infuse social justice into a school psychology course for preservice school psychologists? The framework based on research was used to design the course, which specifically included multiple opportunities for self-reflection and the practical experience of SL. Students' perceived SL positively, that it influenced learning outcomes and was beneficial to themselves and the profession. The community partner perceived the relationship as helpful and useful.

Although specific hypotheses were not examined, the embedded case study approach did allow for an exploration of a hypothesis. All indicators were consistent with this hypothesis: academic service learning influenced the class' professional identity formation as a school psychologist who works towards social justice. Linking school psychology professional identity with social justice appeared to be accomplished. However, social justice as part of personal identity was not examined.

Preservice school psychologists should and can work toward social justice (identity, knowledge, skills) in their graduate training to be consistent with the field's direction (Song et al., 2019). This study was the first of its kind to address a unique gap in the literature on how to promote a social justice professional identity in graduate training.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are important to note. This study was a qualitative case study with descriptive, exploratory, and illustrative purposes. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable and should be interpreted cautiously within the context of exploratory work. The small sample size limited the quantitative analyses and they should be interpreted cautiously. Moreover, it is possible that only the most motivated and satisfied students volunteered for the interviews, and multiple raters were not used to assess the paper. Future research may evaluate the course in a more rigorous manner by addressing these concerns.

Implications and Recommendations for Trainers of School Psychologists

A social justice professional identity framework

may be used to develop additional courses in a school psychology curriculum and even the entire curriculum. The critical ingredients are social justice knowledge, self-reflection activities, and social justice experiential activities. Suggested readings and self-reflection activities that could be integrated into a syllabus are provided in the Appendix.

1. Although a number of readings used in this course directly integrated social justice and school psychology, not all readings addressed both, which is important to highlight, as other programs may already have course readings set in place. A modular approach may be used in which a few readings on social justice knowledge are integrated into existing courses (see Appendix for readings).
2. A variety of self-reflection activities should be used throughout a course: written, small group, and whole-class. These reflections should require students to consider what course concepts (e.g., social justice and school psychology roles) are seen in the service learning experience and how they relate to these new understandings on a personal and professional level (see Appendix for self-reflection activities).
3. Service learning experiences are excellent opportunities for students to learn social justice concepts and their relation to school psychology. While it does require more work on the part of instructors and students, the payoff for students and community partners appears to be worth the effort. Many universities have resources that help instructors integrate service learning experiences into their courses (e.g., Center for Community Engagement).

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Appendix

Readings and Reflection Questions for Social Justice Activities

Books & Book Chapters

- Doll, B., & Cummings, J. (2008). Why population-based services are essential for school mental health and how to make them happen in your school. In B. Doll and J. Cummings (Eds.), *Transforming school mental health services: Population-based approaches to promoting the competency and wellness of children* (pp. 1-20). Corwin Press in cooperation with the National Association of School Psychologists.
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Reflection Questions

- Why did you want to become a school psychologist? What positive change are you wanting to achieve in society by becoming a school psychologist? [Discuss as a class. Summarize. Typically, themes will emerge that are consistent with a social justice vision and goals.]
- Does social justice add to why you want to become a school psychologist? [Use this reflection after social justice lesson is taught.]
- Discuss your experiences with the service learning project thus far. Answer the questions below within five pages of text. Be sure to make specific references to class materials such as readings, activities, etc.
 - a) Describe what you did and how you felt about it.
 - b) What concepts learned in class or readings did you experience or see in practice? Be sure to integrate all relevant readings by citing them.

- c) Explain why your activity was important to do. You may integrate all relevant readings by citing them.
- d) Propose what you might do next in relation to your service learning project.
- e) At this time, how do you see social justice and school psychology related? Be sure to integrate all relevant readings by citing them.
- What is your philosophy of school psychology? How will you practice as a school psychologist and why?