Social and emotional learning in middle school curricula: A service learning model based on positive youth development

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ABSTRACT

Service learning is an instructional methodology that may benefit students' social and emotional learning (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Though service learning is not a new pedagogy, there are few examples of how to successfully deliver service learning in school curriculum for middle school students (Gestsdottir, Bowers, von Eye, Napolitano, & Lerner, 2010; Mueller et al., 2011). This article discusses the theoretical basis for and practical implementation of a school-based positive youth development model that utilizes service learning to build the social and emotional skills of middle school students. First, this article presents the importance of social and emotional learning during adolescence. Next, utilizing a positive youth development framework, the possible social and emotional outcomes of service learning are outlined. Lastly, a case study of the Wyman Center's Teen Outreach Program® is presented as an example that integrates service learning, built on a positive youth development framework, into middle school curricula. Challenges of this model, future research questions and implications on practice and policy are suggested.

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1. Introduction

The transition to adolescence is often described as a tumultuous time for youth. Children are faced with the complicated task of navigating social networks, growing expectations of autonomy, comprehending increasingly abstract school subjects, all while managing the stress and confusion that results from the physical metamorphosis of puberty (Serbin, Stack, & Kingdon, 2013). Research on this period of adolescence demonstrates a declining interest in school, intrinsic motivation, and self-esteem (Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber, & Jozefowicz, 1997). All these difficulties can contribute to the risk of depression and disengagement in school (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001).

Interventions delivered during the school day can be an effective method of reaching students who are at the greatest risk of academic difficulties. Educational settings, in particular, have the potential to engage a wide range of young people in opportunities to define their identity and importance (Bird & Sultmann, 2010). Some researchers insist that school-based prevention programming—based on coordinated social, emotional and academic learning—should be fundamental to K-12 education (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Additionally, growing bodies of empirical evidence demonstrate that well-designed, well-implemented, school-based youth development initiatives can influence a diverse array of social, health, and academic outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2003). Social and emotional competencies, such as self-regulation, responsible decision-making, and goal-setting can enhance educational efforts aimed at addressing academic abilities (Lawrence Aber, Searle Grannis, Owen, & Sawhill, 2013). Healthy social and emotional attitudes and skills can also help students feel motivated to succeed, believe in their success, communicate well with teachers, set academic goals, organize themselves to achieve these goals, and overcome obstacles—eventually leading to effective school performance (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Academic abilities are thereby enhanced, rounded out, and improved by social and emotional skills such as self-regulation and coping (Dembo & Eaton, 2012; Lerner et al., 2011). Kress and Elias (2007) indicate that social and emotional skills, in particular, are "best taught when infused throughout the school day in all aspects of a student's experience" (p.596).

Though evidence is building to support the infusion of social and emotional skill development in the classroom (Bierman et al., 2010; Harlacher & Merrell, 2010; Kimber, Sandell, & Bremberg, 2008; McKown, Gumbiner, Russo, & Lipton, 2009; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004), few studies outline explicit strategies that foster the development of social and emotional competencies in school curricula for middle school students (Gestsdottir, Bowers, von Eye, Napolitano, & Lerner, 2010; Mueller et al., 2011). Additionally, current research studies do not address the practical ways to implement these strategies in an everyday school setting (Bird & Markle, 2012).

Given the lack of information on how to implement high quality school-based service learning that fosters social and emotional growth, the goal of this article is to present a service learning pedagogy that builds the social and emotional competencies of middle school students

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through a positive youth development framework. First, this article will demonstrate the importance of social and emotional learning and its link with academic and social adjustment. Next, the pedagogy of service learning is discussed as a way to develop social and emotional competencies through curricula-based programs that incorporate elements of positive youth development. A case study of a positive youth development-based service learning curriculum will be presented. Finally challenges of this model, future research, practice, and policy recommendations will be discussed.

2. Social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process that encompasses a variety of noncognitive or socioemotional skills and traits. Specifically, SEL is the process through which individuals learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Elias, 1997). These competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Zins et al., 2004) (Table 1).

Meta-analyses (e.g., January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011) and systematic reviews (e.g., Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006) of school-based SEL interventions demonstrate that SEL programs can improve academic performance and reduce substance use, aggression, and other antisocial behaviors (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Additionally, efforts to develop these skills in adolescence provide primary prevention outcomes (Harrell, Mercer, & DeRosier, 2008), averting emotional difficulties later in life (Aviles et al., 2006). SEL-related reductions of negative behaviors, such as violence and acting out, can also help schools reduce time and resources spent addressing disciplinary issues, ultimately contributing to a safe and positive school climate. Due to its many positive attributes, SEL has been touted as a pathway to fostering positive youth development (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004), both as a framework and outcome.

3. Positive youth development (PYD)

Similar to the concept of social and emotional learning is a framework called positive youth development (PYD). The PYD framework asserts that every young person has the potential for successful, healthy development as well as the capacity for positive development (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD originates from a strength-based view of adolescence (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Lerner & Lerner, 2006) that is juxtaposed to a deficits perspective of youth. It critiques the common research practice that only measures the problem behaviors of youth and fails to examine the positive behaviors youth also may exhibit (Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002).

The PYD field outlines five constructs that form the Five Cs of Positive Youth Development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005). These Five Cs include competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (or sometimes referred to as 'compassion') (Lerner et al., 2005). An additional construct, "contribution," was added to the Five Cs later after its development. The Five Cs of PYD posits that healthy development occurs if the strengths of youth are systematically aligned with encouraging, growth-promoting opportunities in the institutionalized experiences that youth encounter (Bowers et al., 2010). The following sections describe the constructs that are fostered by PYD as defined in Lerner et al. (2005).

Competence refers to one's ability in social, cognitive, academic, and vocational arenas. Social competence includes interpersonal skills, such as conflict resolution and management. Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities, such as decision-making and problem-solving. School grades, attendance, and test scores comprise the subconstruct of academic competence and vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations. *Confidence* refers to the internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy or one's self-regard. *Connection* depicts positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in mutual exchanges between individual and peers, family, school, and community. Both parties contribute to the relationship. *Character* is the respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality) and integrity. *Caring* is a sense of sympathy and empathy for others. Lastly, *contribution*, the most recent construct added to the PYD framework, refers to the act of contributing positively to self, family, community, and, ultimately, civil society (Lerner et al., 2005).

4. Service learning as a PYD pedagogy to advance SEL in schools

Though a framework for PYD is helpful to set the stage for social and emotional learning, it is through hands-on practice that young adolescents can further ingrain various skills. Emerging biological research on the adolescent brain and its developmental processes confirms what psychological research has already proposed—that an adolescent's development is sensitive to external experiences, supports that are provided to them, and the opportunities they are given (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Scarborough, Lewis, & Kulkarni, 2010). Specifically during puberty, structural brain properties can be modified by experience-dependent behavioral and cognitive activities (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Burnett, Sebastian, Cohen Kadosh, & Blakemore, 2011). In other words, practicing skills during early adolescence, such as participating in a school-based service learning activity, can have lasting effects even into adulthood.

Experts on social and emotional learning agree. Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2007) indicate that the best SEL approaches encourage application of SEL competencies to real-life situations. The researchers further assert that combining SEL and service learning is a productive way to utilize different instructional methodologies to engage students in the learning process (Zins et al., 2007). According to the *Handbook of Child Psychology*, the most successful SEL approaches include a combination of direct instruction in social and emotional skills as well as opportunities to try out these skills in various situations (Kress & Elias, 2007). Participation in student-led service learning is one way to practice these skills.

4.1. Definition of service learning

Service learning experiences have an explicit student learning focus, which is integrated with an equally fundamental community focus

Table 1
Framework for key social and emotional learning competencies.

Social and emotional competencies	Criteria
Self-awareness	• Identifying and recognizing emotions • Accurate self-perception • Recognizing strengths, needs and values • Self-efficacy
Social awareness	• Perspective-taking • Empathy • Appreciating diversity • Respect for others
Responsible decision-making	• Problem identification and situation analysis • Problem solving • Evaluation and reflection • Personal, moral and ethical responsibility
Self-management	• Impulse control and stress management • Self-motivation and discipline • Goal-setting and organizational skills • Coping skills
Relationship management	• Communication • Working cooperatively • Negotiation, refusal and conflict management • Help seeking and providing

(Adapted from Zins et al., 2004).

(Bringle, Clayton, & Hatcher, 2013). These experiences are grounded in a clearly articulated curricular design that emphasizes both learning and service and include intentional opportunities for student reflection (Bringle et al., 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Felten & Clayton, 2011; McBride, Pritzker, Daftary, & Tang, 2006; National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.). For the purpose of this paper, service learning will be defined as articulated by Bringle and Hatcher (1995, p.112):

"*Service learning is defined as a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility.*"

In practice, students follow a service learning curricula that engages them in the process of research, design, action, and reflection.

Though establishing a definition based on what service learning entails is important, it is just as critical to define what service learning is not. Service learning is often confused with *volunteering* or *community service*. While both volunteering and community services are positive forms of service within a community, they do not always include structured educational components for participation. This explicit emphasis on education is a fundamental pillar of service learning. For instance, experiences that entail episodic volunteering, an addition to existing curriculum without incorporation into learning objectives, logging a set number of hours, compensatory service assigned as a form of punishment or one-sided (benefiting only students or only the community) opportunities do not fit the definition of service learning (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.).

4.2. The benefits of high quality service learning

Service learning projects that require collaboration and group work offer unique opportunities for addressing the needs of a community while concurrently enhancing students' social and emotional abilities (Van Velsor, 2009). John Dewey, an American philosopher and educational reformer, supported the experiential quality of learning (Kolb, 1984). His work pushed forward "progressive education," which emphasized learning by doing, a key component in service learning programs. Experiential learning, such as service learning, entails hands-on projects, integrated curriculum, emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking, as well as the encouragement of group work and development of social skills (Dewey, 1938). In Dewey's view, educational settings promoting experiential learning would encourage lifelong learning and social skills to foster attainment of an individual's personal goals and education. Furthermore, participation in these activities transform the impulses, feelings, and desires of concrete experience into higher-order, purposeful action (Kolb, 1984).

Studies on school-based service learning support Dewey's theories. A meta-analysis conducted on 62 studies involving 11,837 students indicated that students who participated in service learning, when compared to controls, demonstrated significant gains in attitudes towards self, school, and learning; civic engagement; social skills; and academic performance (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Individual studies have found that participation in service learning reduced negative adolescent behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, violent behavior, sexual risk-taking, and school dropout (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2006). In addition to the reduction of negative behaviors, several studies have demonstrated the benefits of service for youth in areas of academic and civic engagement (Billig, 2000; Brandenberger, 2013; Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2010; McBride, Johnson, Olate, & O'Hara, 2011; McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Moore & Allen, 1996). Additionally, regardless of whether service learning is voluntary or mandated within a school system, well-structured opportunities to

volunteer can lead to identity development (McLellan & Youniss, 2003) and academic adjustment (Schmidt et al., 2006).

In regard to school performance, multiple studies have found that youth who participated in service learning were less likely to be referred for disciplinary measures and more likely to have increased standardized tests scores when compared to those who did not participate in such programming (Billig, 2000). Additionally, improved grades and grade points averages were found in studies focused on school-based service learning (e.g., Follman, 1998; O'Bannon, 1999; Shumer, 1994). Other studies have shown that school-based service learning increases attendance, academic interest, school engagement, and encourages stronger classroom task-engagement and skills (Schmidt et al., 2006). They can also encourage school engagement by reducing student absences through opportunities to establish supportive relationships with caring adults in and out of the classroom (Bryant, Shdaimah, Sander, & Cornelius, 2013). Some studies have shown that school-based activities that incorporate service learning may be most beneficial for students who are the greatest risk of failure (Allen & Philliber, 2001).

In addition to academic benefits, service learning as a pedagogical tool can provide the real-life practice that is necessary to reinforce social and emotional skills and competencies learned through the classroom. In particular, middle school students who engage in service learning projects are more likely to report increased levels of personal and social responsibility, communication skills, and a sense of educational competence, with males in particular, reporting fewer behavioral problems (Billig, 2000). The hands-on action that is required of service-learning provides opportunities to try out skills, such as effectively communicating to build relationships or empathizing with others, in a context that engages real people and needs in their community.

The reciprocal experience between the community and student in a community context is an important pedagogical element, which may generate specific outcomes (McBride et al., 2006). These real-life experiences differ from school-based activities, such as role-playing, which may feel contrived, and thereby taken less seriously by students. In a study on the role of school-based required community service for adolescents (Reinders & Youniss, 2006), researchers found that service involving direct interaction with people in need led students to conclude that they had made important contributions to the sponsoring organizations, resulting in increased self-awareness for students. In this longitudinal study, causal analyses supported the directional sequence which began with service experiences leading to prosocial behavior, resulting in future involvement in civic affairs (Reinders & Youniss, 2006). The live aspect of service learning, therefore serves an important arena for practice that enhances the school-based learning experience.

Though there are many merits to incorporating service learning within public schools, few report incorporating service learning in their curricula. The percent of public middle schools reporting the use of service learning has decreased from 31% in 2004 to 25% in 2008 (Spring, Grimm, & Dietz, 2008). These decreases even preceded the phase out of the federal program, Learn and Service America, which provided funding and supports to schools for service learning. Additionally, schools are likely not to include all of the components of service learning that are critical to procuring skills in self-management, empathy, self-efficacy and other social and emotional skills. Instead, many utilize service experiences that are mostly adult-coordinated, neglecting components that are critical to high quality service learning, such as student-led planning and evaluation. The lack of wide-scale adoption of service learning is related to the fact that few high quality, positive youth development-based service learning programs are packaged in a way that are not burdensome for administration, teachers, or students (Spring et al., 2008).

5. Integrating PYD, service learning, and SEL

Service learning experiences can be implemented as a strategy within a PYD framework to promote deeper learning and encourage

youth development. As Whitehead and Kitzrow (2010) state, "Service learning leads to PYD and PYD leads to service." (p.2). The two are complimentary. Similarly, developing social and emotional skills, is most likely to occur in learning settings that utilize PYD approaches (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). For instance, the results of a meta-analysis on social and emotional learning programs indicate that the environment is a critical component for producing desired outcomes on social and emotional skills, attitudes, social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Programs that were successful in all six of these outcome areas included practices that 1) use connected or coordinated set of activities to achieve objectives related to skill development; 2) use active forms of learning to help youth learn new skills; 3) have at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills; and 4) targets specific SEL skills rather than targeting skills in general terms (p.410).

In the PYD literature, there are similar findings. The most effective programs intentionally create environments that promote supportive learning; provide opportunities to bond with peer groups, school, community or culture (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002); engage caring and supportive adults (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006); promote competencies both emotionally and socially (Catalano et al., 2002); and provide opportunities for reward (Zins et al., 2007). Additionally, it is assumed that these activities would offer challenging and engaging activities for meaningful involvement (Gambone, Hanh, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoe, 2006). In a study published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, PYD programs led to sustained positive effects on well-being for youth when the programs they participated in were respectful, empowering, and encouraging (Sanders & Munford, 2014).

It is important for schools implementing service learning activities to foster environments aligned with the positive youth development framework for students. Fig. 1 depicts the components of service learning and their relationship between the Five Cs of PYD framework (including the newest construct, "contribution") and social and emotional learning. Though links depict the most prominent relationships postulated between service learning activities, their PYD basis, and SEL skill outcomes, other links may also exist in a variety of directional patterns. For instance, Dewey's view of experiential learning would depict the development of skills as a bidirectional process. There may

be causal patterns that exist in loops of feedback, or self-reinforcing cycles. Though these patterns may exist, Fig. 1 attempts to construct a theory of change model that links each social and emotional learning activity to a targeted construct of social and emotional learning. Empirical research would be necessary to test these links and how they may be iterative or reinforcing across time. The next section will provide descriptions between each link from PYD to service learning activity to SEL.

5.1. Character and caring → Research and immersion in area of interest → Social awareness

The first component of service learning, which corresponds with the PYD components of character and caring, leads students to greater social awareness. This activity, labeled "Research" in Fig. 1, refers to student-led research and discussions on issues of interest. For example, students may be asked to complete a project in a social studies class where they must research and write on an important current event of interest. In a unit on economic systems, students could be asked to examine poverty in America. While providing students with the time and resources to understand the causes, effects, and circumstances surrounding their area of interest, this activity leads to a greater understanding of the civic, political, and social climate of their world or community.

Asking adolescents to think critically using empathy can develop their social awareness. It can also lead them to develop a sense of respect and compassion for the issues and people they are trying to help. This step in the service learning process can foster rich discussions, and with the guidance of a supportive adult, can also procure a greater understanding of related modern-day issues and increased self-awareness. Self-awareness, or the conscious understanding of one's own character, feelings, and motives, can be enhanced from increased social awareness. When one is more socially aware, they can also become more self-aware.

5.2. Competence → Design and development of service project → Responsible decision making and relationship management

The next step in service learning, after researching and discussing a topic of interest, is to have students carefully consider and create a
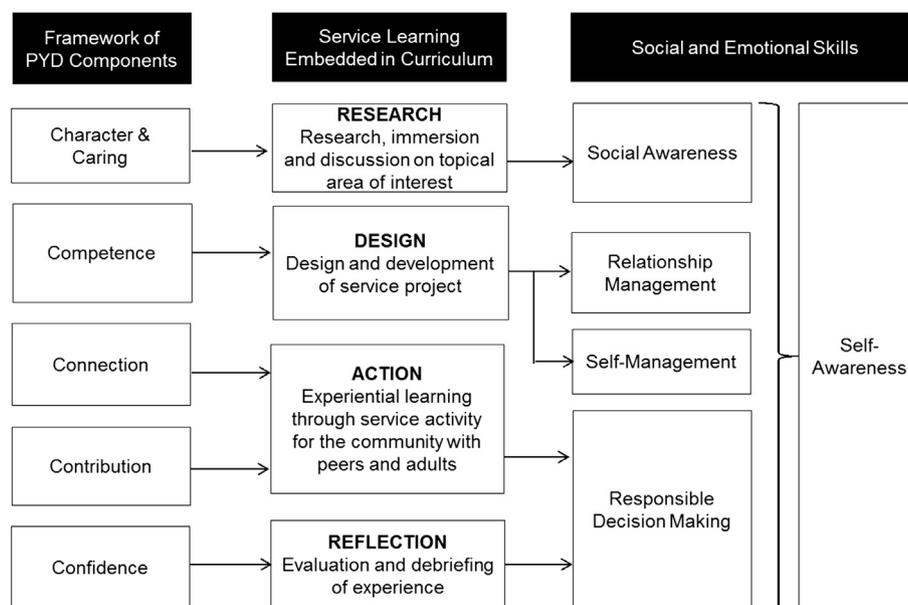

Fig. 1. Links between PYD, service learning, and SEL. *PYD components include the Five Cs and contribution, as described by Lerner et al. (2005). SEL skills are outlined from Zins et al. (2007).

feasible and structured plan to affect change for that issue. Participating in this activity encourages students to develop competence and practice skills in responsible decision-making. Specifically, students set goals, try out skills in problem-solving, situational analysis, and forecasting on the outcome they ultimately want to achieve. In the example from students conducting a project related to the unit on economics, in this phase, students may come up with an idea to work on a related modern-day issue, such as food insecurity for families in poverty. Students might plan an activity for the entire class that would create a food drive or take students door to door to ask for non-perishable goods to donate at the local food pantry. Another plan might transport students to the local food pantry to help stock, organize, and clean. In a class discussion, students weigh out options, the feasibility of these options, and how each activity might make a difference. These activities enhance the students' ability to make responsible choices, manage relationships through planning and productive communication with peers, and ultimately increases the student's self-awareness.

5.3. Connection and contribution → Action–service learning experience → Relationship and self-management

The actual process of executing one's planned service experience exposes individuals to a variety of real-life skill-building opportunities. The natural development of relationships is a service learning outcome that occurs throughout the planned activity. These relationships may be built with classroom peers, adult facilitators, or people in the community they are helping. For example, students have the opportunity to have conversations on the ride to the service learning site or while conducting the service activity. They may discuss their excitement to be out of school or expectations and fears related to the service activity. These individual exchanges during the service experience foster a sense of connection—both at the peer and community levels. The experience also procures skills in self-management, as students must continuously monitor their behavior and how their actions affect those around them. Like the previous step, engaging in these activities helps them practice self-awareness.

5.4. Confidence → Reflection–evaluation → Responsible-decision making

After completing the service, students evaluate their project, including the strengths and challenges of their experience, future changes that they would make, if necessary, and how they could move forward to affect the original issue. The process of evaluation and reflection also incorporates a time of celebration for successfully completing the project. By reflecting on the experience with the understanding that not all plans go as expected, students become more confident and competent citizens who practice making sound and thoughtful decisions. In the example from the previous sections, students who are learning about economics and decide to help at a food pantry may use this part of the service learning process to reflect deeper on their expectations, how their actions affected others, and whether or not it met their goals. Regardless of the outcome, students celebrate the completion of their service learning experience. Doing so helps further their confidence.

5.5. Important points of the model

There may be multiple pathways from one component of the service learning process to multiple social and emotional skills. In fact, the bundle of these activities may build on one another in an iterative fashion. For instance, reflection on the service activity could build self-awareness skills but also heighten one's social awareness in the process. These activities and practices all work together to lead to the development of an adolescent's social and emotional development. Further research could test these links and any dynamic relationships between the activities and outcomes.

6. A case example: School-based service learning through Wyman's Teen Outreach Program

To demonstrate an example of a service learning program embedded in middle school curricula, this next section will outline the design of a school-based version of Wyman's Teen Outreach Program® (TOP). First, an overview of the program and corresponding empirical studies will be outlined. Next, logistical information on how TOP is embedded into school curricula for middle school students will be discussed. Lastly, examples of service projects that have been implemented through school-based TOP will be given.

6.1. Overview of the program

Wyman's Teen Outreach Program (TOP) is a PYD service learning curriculum that has demonstrated efficacy in preventing negative school and life outcomes (Allen, Philliber, & Hoggson, 1990; Chung & Philipps, 2011; Haskins, 2014, December 31). Previous research on TOP indicates that the program is effective at preventing teen pregnancy (Gavin, Catalano, David-Ferdon, Gloppen, & Markham, 2010; Isaacs, 2007; O'Donnell et al., 2002), course failure, school suspensions, and school dropout (Allen & Kuperminc, 1994; Allen & Philliber, 2001; Moore & Allen, 1996).

Though most TOP replications focused on pregnancy prevention, there is evidence that the service learning component of TOP is effective at helping students engage academically, especially for students who are at most risk of failure (Allen & Philliber, 2001). A randomized control trial of successful TOP sites (Allen & Philliber, 1991) along with subsequent studies (e.g. Allen & Kuperminc, 1994; Allen & Philliber, 2001) indicates the following requirements to successfully replicate TOP: 1) a minimum of 20 h of service learning per academic year and 2) weekly, 45–60 minute manualized lessons led by a trained facilitator, delivered over the course of the academic year (McBride, Robertson, & Chung, 2014).

Research on the service learning portions of TOP, indicate that the program is more effective when service learning is more intensively (as opposed to less intensively) implemented at a site and even more effective when there are more (rather than fewer) classroom lesson-based components (Allen et al., 1990). Additionally, the quality of the students' service learning experiences, not necessarily the number of hours worked, has been linked to program outcomes at school sites (Allen & Kuperminc, 1994). Service projects that students helped select, found enjoyable, challenged them to think about goals, and taught new skills that were associated with decreases in school dropout, suspensions, teen pregnancy and course failure when compared to students in the control group (Allen & Kuperminc, 1994). Though data on the service-learning components of TOP are promising, more current research related to issues of implementation, frequency, type, and facilitator-skills are necessary to fully understand how these programs work.

6.2. Overview and design of school-based TOP

6.2.1. Infrastructure of school-based TOP
School-based TOP can be delivered by trained teachers, guidance personnel, or community-based facilitators. Sessions are embedded in normal school classes, such as social studies or communication arts. The intervention is delivered weekly for approximately 45–60 min, over the course of a 9-month academic school year. The classroom engaged in a TOP session is programmatically termed a "TOP club." The size of a TOP club depends on the size of the class, generally anywhere from 12 to 30 students. TOP clubs include the same group of students over the course of the year, facilitated by the same facilitator in order to foster deeper peer relationships and trust.

TOP clubs are interactive in design and encourage rich discussion amongst peers, using a positive development framework based on

trust and respect. Led by facilitators, lessons help teens address key social and developmental tasks, such as understanding oneself, one's values, human growth and development, life skills, dealing with family stress, and social and emotional transitions from adolescence to adulthood (Gavin et al., 2010; Zins et al., 2007). Weekly topics include exploring one's values, modes of communication, understanding peer influence, and how to make responsible decisions (Chung & Philipps, 2011). Following a TOP lesson, teachers are encouraged to link skills and concepts into their regular curriculum.

The service learning component of TOP is implemented during TOP clubs, in close consultation with students, teachers, community entities, and the school administration. Facilitators work as the medium between students and these larger entities to create a seamless integration of the service learning experience into curriculum. Using the ideas that were attained during the lesson planning process, facilitators help direct students to service learning projects that are relevant curriculum topics. Through weeks of discussion and planning, students decide on a topic of interest and work with the facilitator to coordinate with local community agencies, if possible.

To reiterate a previous point about service learning, this type of pedagogy is distinguished from community service by the benefit achieved—not only for the student, but also for the community. Therefore, the collaboration with community agencies can help students address real and present community needs. Facilitators play a pivotal role in ensuring that projects are not self-serving, but ethically sound for both students and the issue they address. In addition to coordinating the logistical aspects, such as the time, space, and transportation necessary to complete these projects, facilitators work with students to create plans that are feasible and work within the restrictions of school protocol.

6.2.2. Example of school-based TOP in St. Louis

All seventh grade students from a St. Louis urban middle school were targeted to receive TOP during their regular social studies curricula. School administrators worked closely with a local youth development organization replicating TOP and a nearby university to ensure that TOP had the support it needed to be replicated with fidelity. Together, these entities designed the program so that teachers would work closely with trained facilitators who were chosen from a pool of qualified MSW candidates at the university. Qualifications for facilitators to work with students included prior experience in working with teens, particularly in the school setting, and completion of TOP facilitation training. MSW students who served as facilitators were awarded university credit towards their required year-long practicum experience.

Facilitators were then assigned a 7th grade social studies classroom at the local partnering middle school. These facilitators worked together with the social studies teacher to build positive working relationships and congruent lesson plans. Facilitators also used lesson plans to help create a list of possible service learning issues to target. These ideas served as starting points for students to choose, create, and plan their service learning activity.

During TOP sessions, the facilitator would trade places with the regular classroom teacher. Chairs and desks were arranged so that students could sit in a large circle together and break out into smaller groups for discussion when necessary. During the first 10–20 min of TOP club, the facilitator asked the students to share about positive or interesting experiences that they encountered throughout the week, perhaps related to the topic of discussion, e.g., life skills. Next, the facilitator would begin the targeted lesson. Though the facilitator uses the TOP curriculum manual to guide their lesson, very few worksheets are given to students. Instead, the TOP facilitator leads discussion by using interactive activities or games, asking youth questions to encourage discussion, inserting commentary, and providing perspective where necessary. Though facilitators pose the questions, they are trained and encouraged to allow students to have a healthy discourse on their

opinions. Their role is not to necessarily teach, but to encourage discussion and youth voice.

To further their own adherence to positive youth development techniques, facilitators were provided opportunities for ongoing professional development and consultation by the local youth development agency. Facilitators worked with students during TOP clubs to conduct research on a topical area of interest, most closely aligned with existing school curriculum units. Through weekly sessions, the facilitator helped and encouraged students to develop a project design, set achievable goals, and think critically about their proposed plans. Possible issues were addressed and plans were modified or changed to address these issues. After the service project was completed, students were asked to reflect on the outcomes of their service and strategize ways it could be improved. After participation and completion of the service learning activity, facilitators worked with teachers to allocate a time for students to celebrate the completion of their service learning activity.

Some of the service learning activities that were conducted through this replication of TOP and other examples are listed below:

- Middle school students learning about proper nutrition and hygiene designed a service learning project to help U.S. troops stationed domestically and overseas. Students coordinated and planned a donation drive that collected hygiene items, such as cough drops and toothbrushes from their community. Donations were collected and sorted into individual care packages sent to U.S. troops (Argarwal, 2014).
- Students learning about civil rights designed a service learning experience that engaged older adults in a local senior residential center. They brainstormed a series of interview questions to ask adults, based on the historical events from the civil rights movement. Students wrote up biographies based on their interviews and presented their reports to the seniors' families.
- In a social studies unit addressing the personal difficulties of immigration, teens worked with a local organization serving immigrant and refugee populations. The agency identified a need regarding their community garden, where new immigrants were given plots of land to plant and grow foods native to their home country. Teens worked together with the agency to prepare the garden plots so they were ready for sowing seeds in spring.

These examples are just a few of various school-based service learning projects that have been implemented through TOP. The next section will discuss school-based service learning resources beyond Wyman's TOP that can be vetted for use.

7. Other programs that implement service-learning in middle schools

Schools that are interested in implementing service learning in schools have a variety of options. Wyman's TOP is just one of a few known prepackaged programs that is based on positive youth development, teaches lessons on social and emotional learning and offers training and support for program implementers throughout the duration of the intervention. Though TOP has been shown to be effective, drawbacks of the program may include the cost of implementation and program attainment. Additionally, the large-scale coordination required to implement the program with fidelity may be challenging for school districts that are limited in staff and community-level resources.

Other options to implement service learning in schools are outlined in sites that include toolkits and information, but may not include the positive youth development lessons or ongoing support and consultation for facilitators. The following resources are included as examples of service-learning programs that can be delivered in middle schools, but may not explicitly include tenets of positive youth development

programming as described in this paper. Though explicit instruction and practice for social and emotional skills are not made explicit, they do provide resources for teachers to implement service learning within classroom curricula.

- generationOn (http://www.generationon.org/educators/programs/ schools-program). generationOn provides resources and tools for teachers to implement service learning into their curriculum. Lessons are provided through Learning to Give, their partner in curriculum development, which is aligned with Common Core State Standards.
- Youth Service America Semester of Service (http://www.ysa.org/ semester). This program is an extended service and learning framework. Teachers engage students in a semester of teaching and learning by addressing problems of local, national, or global importance.
- Learn2Feed (http://lead2feed.com/). This program includes a ten-lesson service learning experience to help students develop skills to solve real-life hunger issues. Curriculum is aligned with the Common Core State Standards and is student-centered.

8. Challenges of school-based service learning

Though school-based service learning experiences built on a PYD framework offer opportunities for student development, there are also a number of challenges that should be addressed. Issues with student engagement, forced versus voluntary service, limitations on project scope, possibilities of creating more harm than good, difficulties with implementation and coordination, and the challenge of dealing with projects that fail are some of just a few of the problems that can arise. This section describes these problems and how well-trained facilitators, schools, and teachers can address some of these issues.

First, there may be difficulties engaging all students in the service learning process, especially those that are most disengaged. Not all students are excited about experiential learning. However, service learning can provide opportunities to engage and highlight the strengths of students whose skills are not normally appreciated in an academic setting. In a previous study of middle school students who participated in TOP's service learning component, students who had increased feelings of alienation at the beginning of the project experienced reductions in alienation during the project (Moore & Allen, 1996). Participants in this same study also experienced fewer disciplinary referrals and behavioral problems (Moore & Allen, 1996), suggesting that service learning can help adolescents stay engaged in the learning process. In some ways, the challenge of academic disengagement can be viewed an opportunity for reengagement for many students.

Beyond the issue of re-engaging disengaged students is the ethical issue of required versus voluntary service in schools. Some may argue that service learning embedded in curriculum could be considered mandated service, as it is tied to the curriculum and in-school experience. Also, it may seem that self-motivated service engagement may have greater benefits than service that is required. Contrary to this belief, however, one study on voluntary versus required school-based service opportunities demonstrated that both types of service reaped the same benefits for youth (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). Though this study examined community service projects (versus service-learning), there are still benefits that can be made from these types of experiences. And although service learning is required when delivered in schools, high quality service-learning offers an opportunity for teens, especially those who may be most unmotivated such as at-risk students, to have a voice in influencing their experience (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008).

In addition to issue of engagement and motivation, other logistical problems may arise with school-based learning projects. Specifically, there may be limitations on the types of service learning projects that can be conducted through the school. Though students may indicate interest in helping solve problems, such as world hunger or cancer, they may have the appropriate resources to solve this issue. However,

a skilled service learning facilitator can work with students to develop plans that target the same issue with a lens of helping, and perhaps not solving the issue completely. Understanding the feasibility of one's goals is one component of successful goal-setting, a skill that is necessary for social and emotional development. The redirection of goals can be conducted in various ways, such as encouraging students to work through existing local agencies that are already addressing these needs at a macro level.

Another limitation that may result from school-based service learning is the possibility of doing more harm than good. This usually results from school-based service learning projects that have been poorly coordinated and implemented. Well-meaning projects can have detrimental outcomes, regardless of its intent. For example, a service-learning project meant to help students experiencing poverty within their school may have inadvertently created an awareness of who is poor, further alienating these students. Skilled facilitation and pre-planning is critical to help avoid these types of issues.

Facilitators can also help address challenges that arise when school-based service learning projects fail. Not every project is successful. However, a positive youth development framework would capitalize on this "failure" as a moment for learning and teaching. Instead of viewing the outcome as a disappointment, facilitators can help students reevaluate their efforts, the nature of the problem that they were trying to target, what went wrong, and how they can proceed in the future. This evaluation process is built into the service learning curriculum. Facilitators can use moments of "failure" as opportunities for learning and skill building. These types of skills are helpful not only in school, but in many other areas of life.

9. Conclusion

Researchers assert that service learning is a productive way to utilize innovative instructional methodologies and engage students in the learning process (Zins et al., 2007). This article discusses the theoretical and practical implementation of a program using a positive youth development framework and service learning pedagogy to build the social and emotional skills of middle school students. By demonstrating the links between PYD, high quality service learning, and related social and emotional learning outcomes, this paper offered a framework and practical examples to procure social and emotional outcomes in middle schools.

Though there are many school community service opportunities for middle school students, there are benefits to providing intentional, structured, and highly integrated efforts to tie service learning to existing curricula. These efforts are more robust than adult-directed, one-time efforts to help an identified need. Instead, the type of service learning described in this paper includes strategic opportunities for students to think critically, plan, design, implement, and evaluate service activities that they believe will make a difference in their community. These types of high quality service learning experiences may offer a critical enhancement of social and emotional skills for middle school students when paired with existing school curricula.

Embedding service learning within the school day requires resources, many of which may be difficult to attain. These investments, however, may reap multiple benefits. For instance, the engagement that occurs through these activities may enhance student learning and participation in school (e.g., Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Allen & Philliber, 2001). All of these outcomes are aligned and positively contribute to the ultimate agenda of educators and school administrators—to enhance positive academic outcomes for all students.

Given the potential of this framework for positive student outcomes, there are a number of research questions that should be explored in this area. Research is needed to understand the perspectives of teachers and school administrators who coordinate service learning projects within their schools. The implementation of these programs (similar to many

evidence-based programs) can be overwhelming and cost additional instructional time and resources. Therefore, understanding how to sustain high quality service learning projects is integral to their adoption and continuation in schools (Maras, Splett, Reinke, Stormont, & Herman, 2014). Additionally, rigorous research studies should examine the effect of high quality service learning on youth outcomes related to personal skills, such as self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and other types of SEL skills. Additional research assessing the effect of school-based service learning on academic learning and school engagement would also provide great benefits to our understanding of how these programs work.

The potential implications of this work affect both policy and practice. At the practice level, the implementation of school-based service learning through a PYD framework requires increased professional development for teachers and school personnel (e.g., school social workers, counselors, and administrators). Information and pedagogical tools related to the implementation of high quality service learning should be disseminated to existing programs. Additionally, schools that are currently implementing service learning should reassess whether they are practicing the pedagogy from a PYD framework. School administrators can also enhance service learning in their school by ensuring youth voice is a central component of their program. Additionally, existing school-based service learning coordinators can use this framework to examine whether they are fully engaged in all components of the service learning process, from research and planning to reflection.

At the policy-level, there are a number of implications for the support of service learning within schools. Along with a number of budget cuts in 2011, Congress eliminated funding for a federal service learning agency, Learn and Serve America, an agency that was dedicated to supporting service learning in PK-12 schools (Ryan, 2012). Though there is little indication that federal funding for service learning in education will be reinstated (Ryan, 2012), many states are moving forward with their own funding streams and initiatives. An examination of state-level policies by Ryan (2012) indicates that by the end of 2011, almost every state had either passed legislation or adopted state board of education policies that encouraged local schools to use service-learning. Ryan's (2012) analysis indicates that states have supported this work by awarding credit towards graduation for service learning; creating policies stating that student engagement is positively affected by service learning participation; allowing schools to offer stand-alone, credit bearing service learning courses; and including service learning as a valuable strategy for at-risk students (p.5). These strategies are helpful, but perhaps not enough. Policies to provide support, such as financial incentives for school districts to adopt packaged service learning programs; funding opportunities for professional development in the delivery of high quality service learning opportunities; and realignment of curriculum standards to incorporate in-school service learning, can transform a student's educational experience.

Most practitioners understand the value of service to one's community. This paper builds on these intentions and offers examples of a practical way to embed high quality service learning opportunities within existing middle school curricula. By offering real-life examples and a delivery framework based on positive youth development, middle schools can help students enjoy the value of service to their community. More importantly, students can reap the benefits of enhanced social and emotional skills—qualities that contribute to a person's success beyond middle school and adolescence.

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