

Developing leadership and cultural competency through service exposure attachment program

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Abstract:

Background: Seventeen pre-service teachers from The Hong Kong Institute of Education involved in a service education project during the summer vacation in 2008. They spent seven weeks in an orphanage and a commune in Vietnam to provide various services for disabled children and to help constructing a house for the poor villagers respectively. They learned how to cope with challenging environment through developing service leadership, problem solving and communication abilities in a different cultural context.

Aims: To reveal what respondents have experienced, reflected and gained through involving in the cross-cultural service exposure project and how such fruitful learning experiences can be enhanced.

Sample: All seventeen pre-service teachers involved in the project.

Method: Content analysis was conducted on service-learning journals, day logs and writings prepared by the students after the service-learning experience.

Results: The analysis based on respondents' reflective writings revealed that the development of genuine relationship among participants through mutual care, their generic skills, leadership abilities and cultural competencies are enhanced while they work collaboratively and support each other to overcome difficulties.

Conclusion: As a multicultural service-learning co-curricular activity, participants can acquire new knowledge, change attitudes and develop constructive behaviors through a genuine and caring environment and reflection. They are perceived to attain gains in leadership abilities, cultural competence skills and professional commitment.

Keywords: service-learning, cultural competency, leadership ability

從服務體驗實習計劃中培養領導及文化勝任能力

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摘要

背景：在2008年的暑假，十七位來自香港教育學院師資培訓的學生，遠赴越南參加了一項為期七個星期的服務學習計劃，他們分別在兒童院為有肢體障礙的孩童提供服務，並為貧困村民修建房屋，同學在過程中學習面對種種環境及文化差異上的挑戰，從而鍛鍊出服務領導才能、解決困難和溝通能力。

目的：作者透過參加者的文章以描述他們在這異地服務計劃中所得出的經驗，從而總結出如何更有效地推展此種在文化差異環境中的學習經驗。

調查對象：十七位參加該服務學習計劃的師資培訓學生

調查方法：作者以內容分析方法，從同學們的學習日誌及反省文章中探討他們的學習經歷。

調查結果：從參加者文章中反映出學員間在合作和支持解困的過程中，能建立起彼此照顧的誠懇關係，以促成共通能力、領導才能及文化勝任能力的培養。

總結：學生在參加不同文化背景的服務學習聯課活動中，透過相互關懷和誠懇相處環境和反思過程，學習到新知識、改變生活態度及培養出正面行為，更在領導才能、文化勝任能力和專業投入感等各方面，自覺有所裨益。

關鍵詞：服務學習、文化勝任能力、領導才能

Introduction

Volunteer service becomes one of the core values for Hong Kong people. Students, housewives, elderly and employers appreciate the volunteer efforts people have involved to help those in need. But, for university students, volunteer service means much more than just community service. It is an integration of *service* with *learning* – an integral part of whole person education. Service-learning integrates community service with experiential learning, an effort to develop leadership and organizational abilities, enhance professional knowledge and promote social justice (Lai, in press; 2009b). In brief, it connects meaningful community service with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility (Lake & Jones, 2008).

Service-learning as Co-curricular Experiential Education

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2009) defined service-learning as a “teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” It is an evolving pedagogy that incorporates student volunteering into the dynamics of experiential learning and the rigors and structure of an academic curriculum (Hinck & Brandell, 2000), a way to apply theory and knowledge to local problems and to improve relationships between campus and community through addressing public perception that higher education exists for its own good (Stavrianopoulos, 2008). The hyphenation of the terms *service* and *learning* suggests a codependent relationship between achieving learning goals and service outcomes (Zlotkowski, 1998). In other

words, service and learning are of equal importance throughout the practicum period and students are encouraged to approach the learning experience with an open mind and an open heart, together with a desire to serve. This echoes Dewey’s (1938) theoretical work focuses on education that is not simply for the sake of intellect but education that is tied to social action and progress.

So, it is generally assumed that this learning strategy is *academic* service-learning based in coursework. However, the value of non-course-based (co-curricular) learning that includes a reflective component and learning goals (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p.5) should not be overlooked (Keen, 2006; Vogelgesang, 2004; Keen & Hall, 2009). For instance, in a longitudinal study, Astin et al. (2000) compared the effects of classroom-based service-learning and other forms of community service demonstrated that students who participated in one or more service-learning classes and community service experiences which were enhanced by opportunities for reflective dialogue were more likely to evidence personal and academic growth that lasted through the end of the senior year than were students who participated only in academic service-learning (p. 41-42).

Through service-learning activities, university students are believed to attain various personal, social, career development, and academic learning outcomes, including increased student engagement, improved atmosphere for making ethical decisions and enhanced moral reasoning, promoted critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, increased awareness of community problems and challenged social inequalities (Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Eyler, Giles & Schmiede, 1996; Furco & Billig, 2002; Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999; Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles,

1999; Cutforth, 2000; Lai & Chan, 2004; Baldwin & Buckanan, 2007; Meaney et al., 2008). It also contributes to professional enhancement through increasing students' perceived competence as instructors (LaMaster, 2001), improving teaching skills and increasing use of varied instructional strategies (Kahan, 1998; Watson et al., 2002; Freeman & Swick, 2001; Verducci & Pope, 2001; Lake & Jones, 2008). In brief, it facilitates students to develop their generic skills, especially collaboration, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving and self-management (Lai, 2009a). These are important attributes of leadership ability.

Besides, multicultural service-learning allows students learn through engaging in experiential and reflection-oriented approach that addresses social issues and community needs, with special reference to its cultural context. It emphasizes reflection, equality, mutual reciprocity and empowerment. Numerous service-learning programs have documented decisive influence on university students' cultural competence skills and even increased their perceptions of competency in dealing with diverse populations, as a result of participating in service-learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Flannery & Ward, 1999; Alexandrowicz, 2001; Domangue & Carson, 2008; Meaney et al., 2008). The purpose of this paper is to analyze students' learning experiences from daily and weekly logs and writings and examine how generic skills, leadership abilities, cultural and professional competencies are developed.

Service Exposure Attachment Program

Service Exposure Attachment (SEA) is a multicultural service-learning program that enhances students' learning through real life experiences while serving the community. This is one of the co-

curricular student development activities organized by the Student Affairs Office of The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED). Students are engaged in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development, especially on their service leadership abilities and cultural competence.

Partnership Organization

Although foreign investment in Vietnam has been growing very fast in the past years, the wealth distribution between cities and rural areas is extremely uneven. Education for children above 11 years old is not free. Some poor families are facing difficulties to support their children to attain basic education. There is great demand for volunteers to render community services for villagers and residents in need. The Volunteers for Peace Vietnam (VPV) is a non-profit, voluntary organization founded in 2005 with the aim to promote voluntary service as a means of cultural and educational exchange, and to develop peace and friendship among volunteers and host villagers. VPV is a full member of the UNESCO's Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service and of the Network for Voluntary Development in Asia (NVDA). It is also a partner of the Alliance of European Voluntary Organization and the International Cultural Youth Exchange Federation. It is a great honor that VPV serves as the host organization for the Institute's SEA Program.

During the summer vacation of the academic year 2007-08, seventeen pre-service teachers from the HKIED participated in a 7-week community service-learning activity in Vietnam in which they could develop their service leadership abilities, build teamwork skills, enhance problem-solving

and communication abilities in a cultural context that they were unfamiliar with. They need to cope with difficulties and challenges in the primitive living environment and to assimilate themselves into different cultures through interaction with local as well as foreign volunteers of the work-camp and native villagers. Throughout the activity, participants had to work in two different project sites.

First Project Site – Ha Tay Orphanage

The first site is the Ha Tay Orphanage which is located at Ba Vi District of Ha Tay Province. It is a centre with accommodation facilities specially built to serve 300 disabled children, both mentally and physically, together with over 100 staff who are teachers, doctors and nurses. Children are taught some basic subjects and self-management skills. For the mentally disabled children, teachers cultivate their emotional-controlled abilities through music, painting, and games in class. The physically disabled students are divided into primary and secondary levels for attending English and Mathematics classes. Except the dormitories, the centre also provides some basic facilities, such as a library, a computer room, rehabilitation hall, sports facilities and television. The participants are engaged in tasks, such as cooking, washing, gardening, teaching, and helping children in the rehabilitation hall.

Second Project Site – Ban Pheo

The second project site is the Ban Pheo, Hy Cuong Commune of Viet Tri, Pho Tho Province. It is about 150 km north of Hanoi capital. Participants stay there for 4 weeks. The commune is peaceful and tranquil with fascinating scenery. Community facilities include a temple, grocery, market and sugarcane stores. Families are in a poor living

condition and VPV supports those poverty-ridden families by helping them to build houses. The students are involved through clearing the work site, transporting building materials, and constructing the house under the guidance of local workers and volunteers. During leisure time, they lead games with local children and teach them English. Participants are sub-divided into four groups, each with a Vietnamese volunteer, to complete assigned tasks in rotation, namely, house construction, English teaching, cleaning, washing and cooking for the host family.

Method of Study

Content analysis is conducted to analyze students' learning experiences reflected from the logs, learning journals, and the book published by the students themselves. The most obvious advantage of employing this method is its unobtrusiveness – the presence of the observer does not influence what is being observed and the author does not need to enlist the cooperation of subjects or get permission to do the study (Ary et al., 2006). However, as a respect to the concerned students, the author formally requests for the students' consent to read through and transcribe from their writings they have submitted to the Student Affairs Office for this study.

Students are required to keep a learning journal. Journaling is an informal and expressive form of writing, and a way to actively engage students and promote learning (Connor-Greene, 2002). It provides students with the opportunity for reflection, self and subject matter exploration, and most importantly for making links between the service and personal experiences. The learning journal consists of three main parts. The first part includes a description of the major service activities, achievements accomplished

and suggestions for improvement for every week. The second part includes a series of worksheets for students to complete to describe the nature and mission of the service agency and the work of their respective team that provides the service-learning experience, to reflect on what the students have learned from their immediate supervisor and peers, to assess the extent of application of classroom knowledge in daily work, and to give suggestions on how performance can be improved. The last part outlines some reflective questions for students to answer, such as how to be better prepared for service exposure experiences in future, learning experiences gained, effects of such experiences on views towards cultural diversity and global citizenship, plans for self-advancement after the service experience, etc.

On top of the learning journal, all pre-service teachers and local volunteers are invited to contribute a piece of reflective article to consolidate their experiences. The students also describe their experiences in the form of weekly reflective narratives and compile them into a book called *The Seven Wealthy Girls in Vietnam* (Student Affairs Office, 2008). All these documents constitute the data source for the study.

Besides describing the experiences with the local volunteers and service recipients through written daily logs and weekly reflective narratives, participants also share such experiences in group discussion sessions regularly and the debriefing and evaluation sessions among themselves as well as with the SAO staff. Representatives of the project also conduct a presentation to new students at the Orientation Camp. The content of such presentation and sharing sessions helps the author to specify the phenomenon to be investigated and how the documents can be analyzed. The three perspectives

identified for the study are leadership ability, cultural competence and professional competence as they are most frequently expressed by the participants in discussions and presentations, and thus, the author assumes that they have relatively important meanings to the participants.

Since the sample size is only seventeen, the author decides not to employ a systematic data coding procedure to develop themes and abandon the counting of frequencies and calculating the percentages in categories. The text is simply analyzed and interpreted mainly from the above-mentioned perspectives identified by the author. The focus of the analysis is on how these three areas are developed and the process of change is the essence of what the data reveal. Through searching and examining the content of the students' writings, it is hoped that the study can reveal how fruitful learning experiences can be gained through this co-curricular activity.

The Learning Experiences

Kolb (1984) defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p.38). In order to transform the service experience into a learning process, learners must be provided with sufficient opportunities, space, and guidance to reflect upon the service experience. In other words, the key pedagogical ingredient for service-learning is thoughtful reflection, whereas the goal of reflection is for students to construct meaning out of their experiences (Horwood, 1995, p. 227) and transform their experience into learning (Schon, 1987). Group meetings are conducted before, during monitoring visits and after the completion of the service-learning tour by the student affairs staff. Group discussion and reflection helps students process their experiences

while recognizing that their peers share similar experiences (Hilligoss, 1992). Student reflections on service-learning projects usually express satisfaction with their experience and the difference they have made in the community. However, it should be aware that the study cannot report everything recorded and also, the students may selectively report what they experience. All these directly affect the credibility (accuracy or truthfulness), transferability (generalizability), dependability (trustworthiness) and confirmability (objectivity) of the study (Ary, et al., 2006).

Developing Generic Skills and Leadership Abilities

According to Howard Prince, leadership is “a process of reciprocal influence among members of a social unit intended to help members of that unit achieve a shared goal that matters to more than one person” (Johnson, 2002). What is striking about this concept of leadership is its interactive nature that requires “reciprocal influence” among members. This happens when all students become increasingly engaged in a process and develop confidence in their ability to experiment with new ideas, improve their skills, and consequently, speak out on issues that influence on the achievement of “shared goal”. Although charisma, determination, focus, and “rugged respect for principle” are important to attributes of leadership (Wills, 1994), some basic generic skills are the pre-requisites for the transformation of leadership abilities.

Interaction with local people Nearly all participants report that the most salient aspect of the Service Exposure Attachment Program is the daily interaction with the local volunteers and the children. One student admitted:

“I treasure most is not those learning, but the friendship we have built during these seven weeks with both local volunteers and the seventeen of us. The days are harsh but really treasurable. It’s hard to explain and I feel warm and close while staying together with them. Another student shared that: We call them mummy, daddy, papa and mama and this in fact makes our relationship really close.”

In fact, a participant initiates to visit the local volunteers again during Christmas time after five months and at her summer vacation one year later. This reflects how close friendship can be developed after staying with them for nearly two months. One student said: “We have a great time. It is a pity that she has to leave us. We miss her very much.” Another one reflected: “During the journey, I face various problems. Cultural shock and sickness has made me feel frustrated. But, I am not alone!”

Building genuine relationship There is an “unforgettable cultural exchange night” in which volunteers from local villagers, Hong Kong, and other countries share among themselves through songs, dances, games and performances. Farewell parties and evaluation meetings are held at the last two weeks in which camp fire is organized at night and the students enjoy the “wonderful” sunset scenery over the top of the mountains. They have a very “warm” dinner with “papa” and “grandpa” and they would not forget what “papa” said: “Though we may not have another chance to meet again, this is your home in Vietnam.” In the weekly log as described in *The Seven Wealthy Girls in Vietnam*, they wrote: “We will never forget that we have Papa, Mama, grandpa and grandma in Vietnam, and they also have 17 daughters from Hong

Kong.” Some participants cry when they say goodbye to the local volunteers at the airport. They said: “We know that our friendship can last forever.” Another one added: “These seven weeks in Vietnam are built up of laughter, friendship and reflections. I will store this precious memory carefully in my heart.”

Reflections from Vietnamese volunteer

Besides the daily and weekly logs, all local as well as the Hong Kong participants write short articles to share their feelings and experiences throughout the trip. A Vietnamese volunteer expressed her appreciation on two Hong Kong participants:

“Although this is my last voluntary trip before I will work for another company, the passion for doing voluntary work comes up again when I see them at the airport. We have the same feeling and same thought about the work. It is great to share and understand each other. I feel so relieved that they understand me. I feel so lucky to have such good partners and friends. We are sad to say goodbye to such a memorable place, but also looking forward to the new project site. I am impressed by the Hong Kong volunteers as they can draw, sing, play music, and are very active – so amazing. I am so happy and so proud of them.”

Another local volunteer wrote a poem and drew a picture to express her feelings:

“When the sun rises, marking a special day... Seventeen beautiful Hong Kong girls, seventeen smiles dedicated the day... The second of July, it was just the first of a chain of shining days... of joys and friendship, smiles and warm hearts, and cheerful tears. We have gone through the sunny and rainy days.”

Building a strong team Service-learning fosters close bonds among students and it is this genuine relationship that builds up their self-confidence through mutual acceptance, support and caring. In fact, participants gain a lot through eating, sleeping, laughing, dancing on sticks at the Vietnamese cultural day, playing shuttlecock and chess, taking shower together and “there seem no secrets among [them].” One revealed: “We learn to work collaboratively as a team. It requires mutual understanding and consideration.”

Develop personal competence Besides friendship, students have developed their personal competence and maturity through overcoming hardship and difficulties. They also find that service-learning has enhanced their understanding of themselves. One student described:

“I am the first person who feel upset, and I cry and want to go back home. I express my gratitude to all the people and deeply appreciate their tolerance of looking after me. Now, I find out that this is really a meaningful journey and an unforgettable lesson in my life.”

Another girl expressed: “Thanks for giving me the chance to explore and learn to be more independent! One of them got such feeling: The happiest thing is that I know more about myself. I see my toleration, potential and limitation.”

Through the organization of the cultural exchange night, parties and leading meetings to review learning experiences, students have developed genuine relationship and through enhancing mutual support to face challenges and difficulties, collaboration and problem-solving skills are developed. At the same time, from what the

writings have reflected, these girls have become more independent and learned a lot on self-management. The weekly log is concluded by the following sentence: "After these 49 days in Vietnam, we realize that we've gained a lot."

Promoting Cultural Competence through Genuine Relationship

Stuart (2004) defined cultural competency as "the ability to understand and constructively relate to the uniqueness of each [individual] in light of the diverse cultures that influence each person's perspective" (p.6). To become more culturally competent, one must gain a significant understanding and appreciation for cultural differences relative to one's personal identities, values, and beliefs (Wachtler & Troein, 2003).

Interacting with the local volunteers and the children has changed many of the participants' knowledge and beliefs. For instance, one participant shared her experience of relating to a 'naughty' girl:

"I used to hate her when I see her keep bullying a boy cruelly. But, after sharing with Tina, I try to spend a lot of time to cope with her and we have a good relationship very soon. She behaves much better now. This reminds me that friendship and love is about to give not to take. I will keep reminding myself to treat my students in a fair and tolerant way in future."

Providing experiential opportunities

Multicultural service-learning provides students with the opportunities to actively and experientially participate directly in the environments that develop their cultural competency and learning while meeting the needs of disadvantaged or underrepresented

communities (Flannery & Ward, 1999). Throughout this process, the participants are influenced to tolerate and accept the differences in people, pressed to go beyond the boundaries they have set for themselves, and pushed to see people and the world from a fresh and enlightened perspective. Besides, it also provides a challenge for pre-service teachers to reflect on their assumptions, prejudices, or beliefs about students of a different ethnic background and to develop more positive view toward the diverse youth they will be expected to teach (Wade, 2000).

Impact of environment on learning Working in the children's home is the first time that many participants have a firsthand experience with people from a low socioeconomic background. This imposed environment, an orphanage in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, forces the students to process, interpret, and react to challenges. In fact, social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) underscores the impact one's environment may have on the learning process. That peripheral integration serves as a starting point for gaining deeper insight into the children's lives and opens the participants' eyes to the resiliency necessary to survive the day-to-day struggles of poverty, care and love. As one student claimed:

"I think I am confident and qualified to travel abroad to provide service during the first week, but it is the toughest time in my life. Most of the girls in our team cannot accept the great passion of those disabled children and the low living standard in that centre. But, I am deeply touched as girls do not give up. We support each other. After three weeks, those children become our very good friends and we call ourselves 'Vietnamese'."

Another student said: “It is useful for us to communicate with local villagers and experience the Vietnamese culture.”

Learn to appreciate simple life style Through interacting with local people, students start to adapt and appreciate the beauty of Vietnamese culture. In the weekly journal, one student wrote:

“We grasp every opportunity of knowing more about Vietnamese culture. We even join a local wedding party where we are invited to join their lunch together with the family. To show our gratitude, we sing several songs for the new couple.”

Another one claimed:

“I do not expect I can get so much in this journey as I think this would be like providing community services in Hong Kong, but just in another country. Apart from the new experiences, I’m glad that we have the chance to live with the local people and explore Vietnamese culture, which we can seldom do so when we travel. Comparing with Hong Kong, their lives are simple, or even poor, but you can see more smiles on people’s faces. People there maintain a good relationship with their neighbor, and also with guests like us. Their sense of mutual care among people and hospitality are maybe what Hong Kong people are lacking of nowadays.”

Similarly, another one added:

“The villagers are living simple lives. They do all works by hands. It seems that their lives are hard and boring but I could see peaceful smiles on their faces. Why? How can they live without technology and the

internet? What makes them happy? When I see the rainbow in the blue sky and the green fields under the golden sun, I know the answer. I feel sad of what our city has sacrificed for her development!”

Reflections after exposing to a different cultural setting From the students’ writings, the author believes that they have learned a lot from reflecting what they have perceived after genuine involvement and interaction with the local villagers and learned to appreciate the cultural differences and the livelihood of the native population. The participants report that their interaction with the local volunteers and the children has altered preconceived stereotypes of underprivileged minority groups, their home environment, and their motivation to learn. One student wrote:

“The children of the village have neither PSP nor i-Pod, but they enjoy and find lots of happiness in lives. Being simple is sometimes the happiest. No electricity and water supply unexpectedly, with insects everywhere, but the whole team supports each other. I am now more able to cope with adverse living environment. I can accept running out of electricity, and understand the importance of saving energy. From the happy faces of those lovely children, I understand they are no longer deprived.”

To echo this feeling, another one added:

“We learn to be strong and tough, to treasure what I have now and know how fortunate we Hong Kong people are. What impresses me most is their attitude towards learning. Even though they are suffering from illness, they are always active learners and are so eager

to learn new things. Although the children are physically disabled, unsatisfied living environment cannot stop them from learning. I can feel their passion and eagerness to learn in my lessons. How about the children with excellent study and living conditions in Hong Kong? Do they treasure what they already have? How about myself?"

There are more and more literatures emphasizing the need to prepare prospective teachers to be multicultural competence (Barrett, 1993). To the author, the first step in developing cultural competency is to learn how to appreciate differences in lifestyles. If the student affairs offices have to provide opportunities for students to reinforce their cultural competency through service-learning, they need to demonstrate their own global competencies in order to best serve the diversity of students (Bresciani, 2008; Lai, 2006).

Enhancing Professional Competence through Interaction

With the rapid development of the globalized community and internationalization of education, service-learning programs embedded within teacher education curriculums are founded on the premise that the pre-service teachers' interaction in an energetic educational environment enhances learning and impacts their pedagogical behaviors while simultaneously meeting specific needs within the community or expectations from a culturally diversified learning environment. As a co-curricular service-learning activity, the SEA Program hopes to enhance these pre-service teachers' insight into the needs of culturally diverse students, assist in breaking down stereotypes, and increase the participants' cultural competency skills. From the day-logs and

reflective writings, the participants have reflected to have gained through developing instructional strategies and teaching skills, through the use of a culturally relevant language in their daily interaction with local volunteers, villagers and children. Using language that promotes an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere is paramount to nurturing a culturally responsive curriculum and fostering mutual respect between students and teachers (Meaney et al., 2008). Such learning experiences are believed to be very useful to prepare these pre-service teachers to develop their career in future education jobs which require teaching in classes that have a significant ethnic minority population.

Learn to apply skills not taught in class The SEA Program provides pre-service teachers a real-world setting for actively applying and understanding the course material in a powerful and authentic way. Students learn skills not taught in classroom and the values of being a teacher through serving others. One student revealed:

"We learn many children songs and international songs; we learn how to communicate with the deaf and dumb people; we learn how to play with disabled children; we gain experience in classroom teaching."

Another student wrote:

"I think teaching is the most meaningful work in Vietnam. We play games and use our limited teaching aids such as drawings and songs to teach them. I love those deaf and dumb children most because they are very sensitive to my feelings. They use their own way to make me happy. Through interacting with them, I can learn some teaching skills."

One of the participants revealed: “After working in the orphanage, I understand the special needs of these children more and eliminate the misunderstanding towards them.” Another said: “It gives me great satisfaction to teach the hearing-impairing class. I draw pictures on the blackboard to teach new words with the help of sign language. This proves to be effective.”

From these reflections, the author confidently believes that non-formal co-curricular experiences can also bring about fruitful learning experiences for professional enhancement. It would even be more effective if the service-learning component can be integrated with the formal curriculum.

Develop teaching competencies Students’ evaluations and final “write-ups” at the concluding remarks of *The Seven Wealthy Girls in Vietnam* echoed: “What we have encountered in Vietnam equip us to be an all-round teacher in the future. Through cooperating with our own team members and the Vietnamese volunteers, we have realized our own strength and weaknesses. The understanding of ourselves allows us to shape our images as teachers. With ‘patience’, we treat everything as a learning opportunity. We are sure that it will be extremely useful when we apply ‘patience’ in our future teaching. We will no longer be narrow-minded and will try to promote this idea to our future students too. This trip has also strengthened our dedication to teaching in deprived areas when we become in-service teachers. We strongly hope that more and more HKIED students would have got such experience before they enter the field of education.”

Content analysis of the daily logs, weekly reflections, and the booklet published by the students themselves tend to support the notion that daily

interaction with the disabled children and local volunteers has broadened participants’ understanding of underserved children, changed their preconceived stereotypes, improved their language and communication skills, and impacted future teaching expectations.

Future Development of SEA Program

After completing the 7-week SEA Program, 9 out of 17 participants volunteer to take up mentoring roles for students who have enrolled for SEA programs in the coming semester. In view of the positive feedback and response from fellow students, the Student Affairs Office expanded the Program to cover service exposure attachment sites in the Philippines, Mongolia, Nepal, India, and Japan on top of Vietnam for the academic year 2008-09 during Christmas, Easter and summer vacations. Experienced participants who have joined the SEA Program last year are invited to serve as mentors to take up leadership roles for these newly developed project sites.

Besides, initiatives to incorporate service-learning component in a General Education module on *Humanitarian Services for Developing Countries in a Globalized World* was launched starting from the second semester of the year 2008-09. Students enrolled for the above-mentioned module were required to complete a 10-day service-learning practicum in Vietnam during the Easter holidays.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is a first attempt to examine the learning experiences gained by pre-service teachers after engaging in a service-learning program. The content analysis of the day-logs and reflective

writings reflects how knowledge, attitudes and behaviors have developed among the pre-service teachers, especially in leadership abilities, cultural competence skills and professional commitment.

The author must admit that the lack of a systematic assessment of the outcomes related to the program limits this investigation. Students' self-reporting data that lack any sort of triangulation cannot become an evidence to support a conclusion that they have gained specific competencies. Students may tend to report positive perceptions of their gains. Since the total number of students involved for this study is small, the author has not adopted more systematic method for analyzing and interpreting the qualitative data to identify emerging themes through coding, developing, defining, layering and interrelating themes (Creswell, 2008), but focuses on the change process through interpreting the text data. It is suggested that more systematic approach, such as formulating exhaustive and mutually exclusive coding categories, and synthesizing data after counting the frequency of specified words, can be employed for student writings of all overseas service exposure attachment activities throughout a number of years. To enhance the credibility, transferability and dependability of the findings, triangulation, member checking, audit trail, peer debriefing, negative case sampling and code-recode methods (Ary, et al., 2006) can be employed in future researches. For instance, replicating and extending these findings to include perceived benefits and outcomes by the service recipients and the community would significantly contribute to the literature on service-learning programs.

Besides, more sophisticated evaluation approaches by adopting validated instruments to measure changes in students' level of competencies

before and after the service-learning experience can be considered to supplement the qualitative analysis in future. Such quantitative measurement can provide more concrete evidence of how students' generic skills level and cultural competencies shifts over a prolonged period of time.

Additionally, examining individual differences in pre-service teachers' levels of leadership abilities and cultural competence, that might influence perceived benefits and outcomes, is not investigated. Future studies may include interviewing all participants before any involvement in the service-learning program in order to establish a baseline viewpoint of the participants' perspectives on leadership abilities and cultural competency. Furthermore, a focus group design may allow researchers to gain an enhanced understanding of the role of service-learning in developing students' generic skills, leadership abilities and cultural competency. Future service-learning investigations should be designed to address these limitations.

Conclusion

The 7-week service-learning experience provides students an opportunity to develop their constructed environment and nurtured their behaviors that Ladson-Billings (1994) identified as important characteristics of culturally competent teachers: gaining respect for cultural differences; understanding that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds possess the capabilities and desire to be successful in school; and adapting language and communication patterns to be culturally sensitive. At the same time, with the development of genuine relationship through mutual care, their generic skills, leadership abilities and cultural competencies are self-perceived to be enhanced while they work collaboratively and support

each other to overcome difficulties. The fruitful and ever memorable learning experience of exposing these pre-service teachers to notable situations further develop their confidence to become effective teachers after their graduation.

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